

VEGAN LEATHER SURPRISING TRENDS

Ginger Burr



'Ideal Home' chair upholstered in Pinatex with a Pinatex cushion, designed by 2LG . Photo: Megan Taylor

Decades ago, after I had stopped eating red meat, I remember someone asking me if I was still going to wear leather. I'm sure I looked at him like he was deranged. What would one wear for shoes and handbags if not leather? Sadly, he didn't say more, or perhaps I would have learned about veganism forty years ago!

Fast forward to 2021. Not only do we know more about the brutality and myths of the animal-leather industry, but vegan options are easier to find as remarkable alternatives to traditional leather are developed.

Until recently, vegan leather was limited to PVC (polyvinyl chloride), polyurethane-coated cotton, and plastic. As a result, one of the biggest criticisms of vegan leather was that it is essentially a form of plastic and therefore environmentally unfriendly. As

more bio-derived options come into play, this criticism has less merit.

Sugandh Agrawal, founder of GUNAS handbags¹, has been determined to prove the vegan-leather detractors wrong. "I have experimented with all sorts of vegan alternatives to leather such as apple leather, silicone leather, Polyurethane, PU coated canvases, and pineapple leather. While using these fabrics I discovered that they aren't 100% plant-based. They still have a huge component of plastics in them."

As Agrawal researched viable plant-derived leather alternatives, she was thrilled to discover Mulbtex. "It was being used in the apparel industry and I found great use for its application within the handbag industry." Mulbtex, made from 100% plant-based

mulberry tree-leaf pulp and mixed with silicone (which is essentially made from sand) instead of plastics, is durable, flexible, lightweight, and extremely strong. Because, at this point, it only comes in black, GUNAS uses it exclusively for their men's collection.

Leather is also widely found in many aspects of home decor. Aline Dürr, author of *Vegan Interior Design*, helps her clients find alternatives to animal leather.² She shares, "The most commonly used alternatives are often still polyester or PU-based which, even though no animals were killed for it, still affect our environment and all creatures in it because it is harmful and unsustainable."

Wearing vegan leather shoes is one thing, but using it to upholster a chair is another thing altogether. In Dürr's experience, "Some bio-derived leathers are great for fashion and smaller items like cushions but are simply not strong or thick enough to be used for upholstery." It is therefore essential that you or your interior designer choose the best vegan-leather alternative for each application to avoid disappointment.

As awareness of animal suffering and the environmental impact of using animal leather grows, fashion brands and sustainable-leather manufacturers are searching for viable alternatives. Nicole Rawling, Executive Director of Material Innovation Initiative³, has done studies in both the U.S. and China to determine where consumers stand on purchasing alternatives to animal leather. The findings are encouraging.

In the U.S. (Sept. 2019), 47% of consumers said they would switch to vegan leather because of the animals, 29% due to the environmental impact and, in general, 55% of consumers would prefer purchasing a leather alternative.

Chinese results (August 2020) are equally impressive: 47% of consumers would switch because of the animals and 41% because of the environment while 66% would prefer purchasing a leather alternative. With these statistics it's clear where the future of leather is heading. It is also clear that consumers want another option to animal leather, and they prefer it to be environmentally friendly. Dürr says that, "There has been a lot of

progress on the mushroom (mycelium)-leather and fruit-leather fronts and while they are not necessarily widely used yet, some very upholstery-friendly, sturdy, and affordable options have come to the market very recently."

Interior design is not the only place we are seeing mushroom leather being used. *The New York Times* recently reported that "Fashion rivals including Stella McCartney and Lululemon are joining forces to back Mylo, a new mushroom leather."⁴

Bentley is using vegea (made from wine industry leftovers—the stalks, skins, and pips of grapes) in its concept cars to show the company's future.⁵

The list of bio-derived leathers does not stop there. Washable-leather paper, 'Fleather' (made from upcycled flowers)⁶ and Pinatex, derived from the waste leaves of the pineapple plant are a few of the most promising options while leather products are also being created from kombucha tea leaves, soy, teak leaves, cork, and coffee grounds.⁷



Sustainable Luxury Cork CONVERTIBLE Backpack/ Shoulder Bag⁸ Photo: Kriqpics Photography

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As the world of bio-derived leather flourishes, *Vegconomist* magazine reported, “New research from market research firm Infinium Global Research predicts that the vegan-leather market will be worth \$89.6 billion by 2025.”⁸ LiveKindly recently reported that “the demand for sustainable and cruelty-free materials is pushing the leather industry to an all-time low.”⁹

The sustainable fashion movement is keeping pace with customers’ awareness of what materials are used in their fashion choices. Demand for transparency is driving the industry to explore new options to animal leather and vegan leather derived from plastic. While many of the plant-based leather options are still reliant on some amount of plastic-derived materials to make them viable, it is clear that the vegan-leather industry is thriving and adapting at all levels of the fashion industry.

Rawling says that she has been approached by top French luxury brands that are exploring bio-derived leather options and

notes: “The top luxury brands have survived for hundreds of years because they predict fashion trends.” Since these fashion houses want to be on the cutting edge and because there is currently pressure on the fashion industry to be more sustainable, vegan leather is one of the leading trends at the moment. She goes on to say, “thirty-seven out of the forty top luxury fashion and automotive brands Material Innovation Initiative has met with are actively looking for next-gen replacements to animal-based materials.”

What a different world it is from forty years ago when I wondered what I’d wear if not animal leather. Watching the vegan-leather movement gain momentum and rise to meet consumer demand is exciting. GUNAS is a perfect example of where the industry is headed. Agrawal shares, “GUNAS as a brand is 100% committed to staying vegan and constantly working towards raising our environmental standards in fashion.” This is the future of leather.



GUNAS NEW YORK¹

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¹ gunasthebrand.com

² veganinteriordesign.com

³ materialinnovation.org/

⁴ nytimes.com/2020/10/02/fashion/mylo-mushroom-leather-adidas-stella-mccartney.html

⁵ vegeacompany.com/bentley-chooses-vegea-for-the-interiors-of-the-new-exp-100-gt/

⁵ en.reset.org/blog/vegea-eco-friendly-vegan-leather-wine-industry-leftovers-05212018

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⁷ petaasia.com/living/fashion/see-ingenious-way-designers-making-vegan-leather/

⁸ ecoluxeaus.com.au/

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