

# LEATHER

## Introduction

Man has used leather throughout the ages to serve numerous purposes. Not all hides are the same since they come from many different animals and are treated or tanned in many different ways. The following provides a general outline to aid in the care of leather artifacts.

## General Care

1. Keep work area spotlessly clean. Handle artifacts with extreme care, using a padded work surface. Be sure that leather goods are free from infestation as insects, moths, beetles, etc. will cause extreme damage if left unchecked.
2. Always assure adequate ventilation to dry out and prevent mold growths on the objects. Avoid having the leather in contact with strong fumes from industrial waste, sulfurous gas, coal gas, etc. These fumes may chemically react with the leather and cause it to powder.
3. Avoid extreme heat. Do not place leather goods near a direct source of heat. This will cause the leather to become brittle and hard. Avoid the combination of heat and moisture. This will not only harden the leather but in the case of rawhide turn it into glue. Make sure that water from hot water pipes, etc. never comes into direct contact with the leather.
4. Untreated leather that is dry and flaking should be handled with extreme care. Rough handling can lead to serious or total destruction of the artifact.
5. Oil of cloves can be applied to wet leather to prevent the spread and growth of mold. The oil of cloves should be applied with a soft brush before the leather is dressed.
6. Keep old leather out of direct sunlight at all times.
7. Check leather for splitting seams, tears, stretching, and creases and cracks on the surface, especially in belts and straps. If an artifact has leather buttons, thongs, straps or ties, handle them with extreme care since these can easily be torn or broken. Check leather goods where any metal is attached, especially around buckles, straps, buttons, studs, etc., and look for signs of stress and tears that may need repair. If a leather bag or cartridge box has a hinged lid, do not attempt to lift the lid if it offers even the

slightest resistance. Forced lifting can cause the lid to break into two pieces. It is best to treat the leather from the outside of the box and then, if it becomes supple enough, lift the lid. If a leather box is lined with a wooden block or tin, or both, leave these in place because they could be holding the box together.

8. Note if any part of the leather item is missing and make sure that all parts of the same item are stored together.

9. Make only the gentlest attempts at cleaning and treating leather articles that are in good condition.

10. Do not attempt to restore “powdered,” water-logged, or extremely damaged leather without the advice of a trained conservator.

11. Most leather items in good condition can be cleaned by removing surface dirt and dust with a vacuum or soft brush and then applying saddle soap with a lint-free cloth. The saddle soap is then wiped off. This should only be done under the supervision of a trained conservator.

12. Soaps such as Ivory Flakes or Lux Flakes may be used to clean leather in place of saddle soap. Make a thick solution with the flakes and water and use exactly as saddle soap is used. This should only be done under the supervision of a trained conservator.

13. Avoid the use of detergents on leather, especially the heavy duty types. They will harden the leather.

14. Never use water to clean old maps or drawings made on parchment or vellum. Water will only cause a stiffening or shrinking of the object. Never use oil or soap dressings either.

15. Objects of rawhide should never be cleaned with water, oil, or soap dressings. Oil and soap dressings cause severe softening when used on parchment, vellum, or rawhide.

16. For cleaning untanned, leathers, it is best not to try to remove stains but stick to simple surface cleaning. For this type of cleaning the use of an art gum eraser is recommended. For removing stains, an expert should be consulted.

19. Many military straps and accoutrements are made of “buff” leather. This type of leather has a suede type of finish on both sides and is tough and thick. If buff leather is twisted out of

shape, do not attempt to bend or straighten it while it is dry. Never oil buff leather or dress it in cool water to which a small amount of soap has been added. While it is still wet it can be laid out flat and allowed to dry slowly. Never apply heat or try to speed up the drying process. When washing buff leather be careful not to remove any stampings. Always make careful note of any stamps before wetting the leather. After the buff leather is dry, it can be worked with the fingers until it begins to soften and becomes flexible.

20. A good general dressing for tanned leather is a commercial product called "Lexol." This may be used to clean leather in place of saddle soap. It is an especially good dressing for leathers that are brittle or hard. Lexol is also an appropriate dressing for hinged areas such as are found on saddle bags, cartridge boxes, shoe flaps, etc. For especially hard areas, a good soaking is required, perhaps several soakings.

21. For any serious leather problems call in a trained conservator for instruction or treatment.

#### Storage

1. Keep the relative humidity at about 60%.
2. The storage area should be well ventilated!
3. Leather should be kept in areas that are not subject to water damage from leaking pipes, sweating walls, etc.
4. Insect damage can be guarded against by spraying the storage area, but not the leather goods, with an insecticide such as Black Flag, Larvex, Flit, etc.
5. Storage areas must be kept as moth free as possible.
6. If individual objects are stored in tight containers, moth flakes may be added to the container if the temperature inside it is above 70 degrees so the flakes will gradually turn into a fumigating gas.