

Tips for Creating Your Dream Home

by Sara Shragal

Leather 101 – A shopper’s tutorial

Who doesn’t love the look, feel and smell of leather? And when it comes to furnishing your home, there’s nothing that gives a room an air of dignity and modest elegance than a leather chair or sofa. Yet before you purchase a leather piece of furniture, knowing a little bit about leather can help you make a wise purchase and avoid any surprises down the road.

To really understand leather, you have to go back to the source: the animal from which it came. How the animal was handled, the environment and simple genetics all affect the look and texture of the hide. That’s why if you look really closely at a large leather couch, which are typically made from about five hides, you’ll notice that the colors and textures are not 100 percent identical, but rather they blend and compliment one another.

Much in the same way the environment affects the hide of the animal, the leather upholstery in furniture reacts and adapts to the environment of your home. It breathes and ventilates – adapting to the temperature – so it will not become hot and sticky in the summer, or cold in the winter. Consequently, the way your piece of leather furniture looks and feels the day it’s delivered will continually change over the course of your ownership. And that’s not a bad thing. The leather will become softer and more comfortable. And in terms of durability, your piece of leather upholstery will outlast fabric several times over.

To truly become a leather furniture connoisseur, however, requires some understanding of the differences between the basic types of upholstery leathers. The kind of leather used on an upholstered piece greatly determines the cost and will give you a sense of how long the piece of furniture will retain its initial beauty and how long it will last in general. Again, that requires going back to the beast.

As part of the upholstery leather preparation process, suitable animal hides are split into a top layer (the one that had hair on it) and a thick lower layer. The top layer, also called top grain, can either be processed into full grain leather which is not buffed and sanded and shows the natural grain of the leather; or into corrected or embossed grain leather that has had the surface markings altered by buffing and sanding. Full grain leather is considered to be of greater beauty and higher quality than corrected grain leather and that’s why it costs more.

Here are some of the most common types of leather you'll encounter when shopping for furniture:

Suede Split & Coated Split Leather

Back to how a hide is split, the lower layer of hide can be further split and processed into suede split or coated split leather. Coated split leather is somewhat stiffer and less durable than top grain leather. It is sometimes used to cover upholstered sides and backs of sofas and chairs that do not need to flex or move very much. Typically, these leathers are heavily pigmented or coated and embossed with a less-natural uniform grain pattern.

Aniline Leather

Aniline leather, sometimes called premium select leather, is a product that has a clear protective coating but no applied pigmented surface coating (finish). This is the best quality and most expensive leather. It is made from hides having a minimum of natural markings that have not needed to be grain corrected, embossed, or coated with pigment. This leather may receive a clear protective coating, but not a pigmented coating. Natural characteristics of the hide show through and the surface is soft and supple. Only a small percentage of hides are good enough to be converted into pure aniline leather.

Semi-aniline Leather

Semi-aniline leather describes full grain leather containing only a small amount of surface coating (finish). This is a premium product that allows most of the natural character of the leather to show through.

Protected aniline Leather

Protected aniline leather is less expensive and more common than pure aniline or semi-aniline leather. Its coloration is more consistent because it has been coated with protective pigments making the leather's natural markings less noticeable.

A leather piece of furniture can be the defining addition to a living room, study or even a master bedroom. It can also be a significant investment. By taking a little bit of time to learn about the leathers available, you not only get the most bang for your buck, but can select a piece of furniture that will look great for the long haul.

Sara Shragal is a staff writer for DirectBuy. For more information or other helpful tips for your home, visit www.directbuycare.com. You can send suggestions for future columns to questions@directbuycare.com.