



**QUALITY AND DURABILITY GO HAND IN HAND WHEN IT COMES TO FINE LEATHER FURNITURE**

BY DEBRA MCGAUGHEY

Not too long ago, leather furniture was the dominion of unreformed bachelors, avant-garde artists in inner-city lofts and lovable Bohemian couples who equated nubuck leather with a back-to-basics effort befitting their casual decorating style and fashion nonchalance.

*ABOVE: Minimalism and comfort unite with Ted Boerner's Theater Sofa for Design Within Reach, designed with a gently angled backrest, full-seat depth and elevated armrests. Made of full-grain Italian leather, the sofa retails for about \$3,500.*

*BELOW: The leather headboard adds a luxurious touch to the Wilshire Blvd. Collection platform bed by Bernhardt Furniture Co. Leather accents continue with the buttonless tufted leather bench at the foot of the bed. Suggested retail price for the bed, \$2,100; \$530 for the bench. Accents Fine Furniture, Ladco Inc. and Noel Furniture are local Bernhardt dealers.*

And then the rest of us woke up and realized these folks were on to something.

**THE BEST OF ALL WORLDS**

Leather furniture is, to say the least, one of the most comfortable, durable, beautiful and hard-working pieces in the furniture galaxy. That leather sofa purchase your forward-thinking friend made three kids and 20 years ago still looks pretty darned good. Why? Because leather is a truly natural substance, cowhide, that actually gets better as it ages. It remains the same temperature as your room. Experts say it will outlast upholstered furniture 4 to 1.

"The natural characteristics of leather make it an ideal solution for Houston and the Gulf Coast's hot, humid environment," says Beth LaPenna, ASID, of Interior Reflections. "Unlike imitation leather, genuine leather breathes, which makes it comfortable year-round. The softness of leathers available today is far superior to products offered just a few years ago, and they are just as durable as stiffer leathers."

Yes, because the world has discovered the practicality and pleasure of leather, the choices to make when buying it are dizzying. Do you buy only Italian leather or can China do the job? Should you go with the eight-way hand-tied support system or the "S" coils? And just what is semi-aniline leather anyway?



THE LEATHER CONNECTION



**ABOVE:** The Wren Sofa from Baker Furniture's Bill Sofield Collection features a 15-button tufted back and arms surrounding three loose seat cushions. The exterior back and sides are finished in a framed panel design, expertly outlined in welt. Find the collection at Baker Houston. The suggested retail price starts at about \$9,100.



**BELOW:** Fresh from this spring's Milan furniture markets, the Privé Big Island by Philippe Starck for Cassina in quilted leather invites sitting down, stretching out and even curling up. Privé consists of armchairs, chaise lounges, sofas, big and small islands and ottoman in black or white leather or upholstery. The Privé Big Island is about \$11,100-\$13,700, depending on leather grade. Sunset Settings is a local dealer of Cassina products.



**ABOVE:** Handsome in a leather/fabric finish, the Altavista Stationary Sofa by Bradington-Young includes meticulous eight-way hand-tied custom coil construction reinforced with a steel-banded matrix to prevent sagging. Leather Furniture Shoppes is a local source for Bradington-Young furniture.

**BUYING BASICS**

Let's start with the most important basics. Country of origin? Your leather piece's birthplace is not important. What is critical is what part of the leather you're getting and how it's constructed.

A cowhide, by its very nature, is too thick to use in full, so it is split into thinner layers. The two most popular layers are called top grain and split grain.

Top-grain leather is just that. It's the upper most layer of the cowhide. It is the strongest, supplest and most tear-resistant leather available because it doesn't have consistent fibers running through it. Split-grain leather comes from the bottom of the hide. It's stiffer and less durable than top grain because fibers run in one direction here. It's still good, but it is susceptible to tearing and cracking.

Next, you should ask how the leather was dyed. The Cadillac of leather dyeing is called "full aniline." That means your leather was placed in a big, rotating stainless-steel drum filled with translucent dye. The dye is absorbed into every pore and fiber of the leather's being. It doesn't have a surface finish, so it ages with exceptional grace and glowing patina. This kind of leather also is "uncorrected" because it has unique scratches and features. It's like a fingerprint.

If your leather is semi-aniline, it means it, too, was dyed in those huge vats. But a light top coating of pigment is added to even out the hide's top color. The good news is semi-aniline leather is more soil-, stain- and fade-resistant than full aniline. It also comes in a wide variety of colors and maintains good softness.

Pigmented leather is drum dyed, and then tanneries coat it with pigments or a protective coating such as urethane. The surface is lightly sanded, buffed and embossed to give it a uniform grain. A bit harder than full aniline or semi-aniline leather, pigmented leather is the perfect choice for active people or families. These leathers also are considered "corrected."

"People should be aware of what went into their leather furniture," says Mike Anderson of Zealie Fine Furniture. "Some leathers, you go two months you start seeing cracks in the corners. The problem is how it was dyed. It's drying out and the dye didn't get into the hide."

**THE FRAME & CLEANING**

The crucial factor beside the leather itself is the frame. Cheaper leather pieces will have a soft wood frame. The "S" coil, or zigzag type of seat support, is not as long-lasting or comfortable as the eight-way hand-tied platform. Bottom line: Look under your leather sofa to see what frame and support you're getting.

Luckily, cleaning leather is the easy part. "Regular dusting and vacuuming is all that's needed to keep it clean," LaPenna says. "Resist the urge to use saddle soap, oils, furniture polish or other chemicals to clean leather."

"It's a big issue for us because you do want something constructed well on the inside," says Jim Winkler, owner of Leather Furniture Shoppes. "Generally, your domestic furniture will be built better; that's the rule of thumb. The domestic manufacturers make a better frame. The frame is hardwood framed, corner-blocked, double-doweled and screwed and glued. That's very important."

Buyers should then consider what suspension system they're getting. Winkler says the pecking order for seat suspension is as follows: Webbing is at the bottom and the least desirable; then "S" spring or "no-sag" springs; then drop-in-coils, which are below the cushion and consist of springs wired together a spring platform; and then finally, the best suspension is eight-way hand-tied, which features taller, bigger springs built from the bottom of the frame rail.

"Then there are the cushion issues," Winkler says. "People should check to see if they're getting high-density foam in the cushion. The best is high-density foam with springs inside the foam."



**ABOVE:** Pull up a Coco chair designed by EOOS for Matteograssi and dine in comfort. The transformation of soft leather or coach hide is the main feature of the Coco chair. The leather or hide is cut into three pieces and sewn together with one single seam over a steel frame. Price available upon request. Find Matteograssi furniture at Kuhl-Linscomb.

**FOR ALL SEASONS, ALL TASTES**

And as for decorating with leather, there is a style for every taste, from traditional to transitional to contemporary. “For clients who prefer traditional design, we recommend leather colors in the earth-tone family such as caribou chocolate, forest moss, burnished saddle and golden chestnut,” says LaPenna.

Contemporary-seeking clients get a different recommendation. “We encourage clients to add one or two leather pieces that add a splash of color, whether it’s cardinal red, kiwi lime or Indian turquoise,” LaPenna explains. “The correct use of bold colors makes the difference between a ho-hum room and a ‘Wow! I love it!’ room.”

RESOURCES

**ACCENTS FINE FURNITURE**  
7075 Southwest Freeway  
713.541.3555

**BAKER HOUSTON**  
1111-05 Uptown Park Blvd.  
713.627.3235  
www.kohlerinteriors.com

**BOCONCEPT USA**  
4302 Westheimer Road  
713.877.1900  
www.boconcept.us

**BRANDON'S**  
8648 Glenmont Drive, Suite 100  
713.785.7888  
www.brandon-furniture.com

**DESIGN WITHIN REACH**  
1956 W. Gray, 713.522.3609  
www.dwr.com

**INTERIOR REFLECTIONS**  
281.580.7775  
www.interiorreflections.com

**KUHL-LINSCOMB**  
2424 W. Alabama, 713.526.6000  
www.kuhl-linscomb.com

**LADCO INC.**  
7900 Washington Ave.  
713.868.2828

**LEATHER FURNITURE SHOPPES**  
4321 W. Sam Houston Parkway  
Suite 180, 713.785.6011  
www.leatherfurnitureshoppes.com

**LIGNE ROSET**  
5600 Kirby Drive, 713.629.7722  
www.ligne-roset-houston.com

**MAXIMUM FURNITURE**  
11330 Northwest Freeway  
713.957.0003

**NOEL FURNITURE**  
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713.874.5200  
www.noelfurniture.com

**SUNSET SETTINGS**  
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