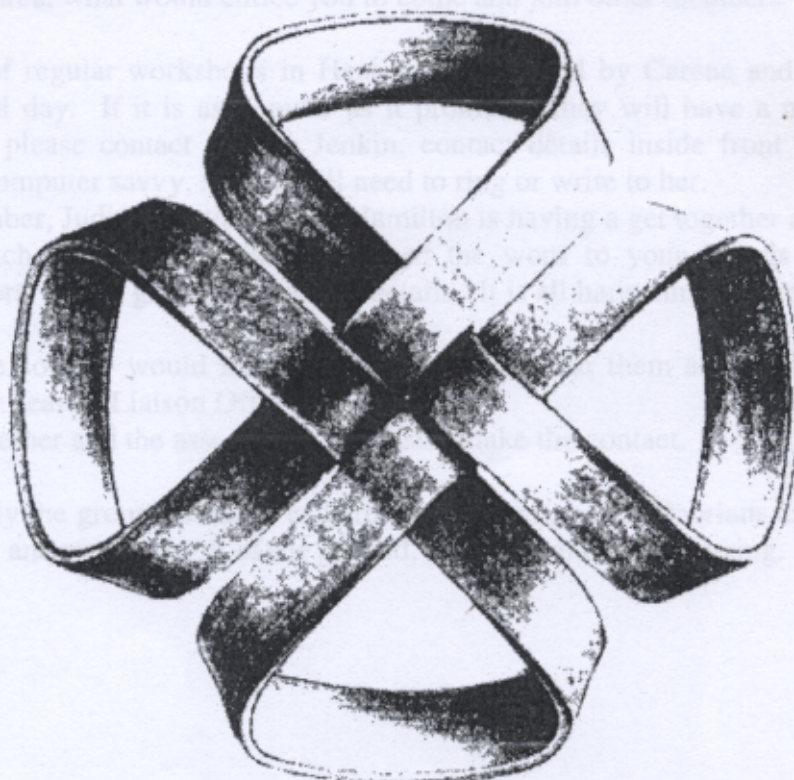


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Leather, gold foil, semi-precious stones, silver:

Recreations in three-dimension artifacts

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A couple of years ago, during a visit to an exhibition on ancient Greek vessels, I imagined how would it be if the main material was leather, with the pegs in stylized animals' shapes and in silver; few books on Islamic pottery also spurred the imagination in the same direction, as well as the very few data on pre-historic leather vessels, used to warm water, hanging above a fire place.

I also get inspired by the legacy of Islamic times of Iberian Peninsula, mainly the Caliphate years (10th-11th century), when Cordoba was the capital. The very few documents, dated from the 9th century, state that Ziryab, expelled from the Islamic court of Baghdad, reached al-Andalus – most of the Iberian Peninsula under Islamic rule – and introduced new fashions of dressing, new musical instruments and, leather plates to eat on. One probably will never know how were such plates, or bowls; there's the possibility of being made in cowhide, wet moulded and dried to get stiff and as solid as wood; the ornament – linking the owner to one culture and one faith – would have to be on the outside.

My idea was to use leather, whether covered with silver or gold foil, as the material for containers, expecting that silver findings were possible to get fixed into it. I've learnt the Old Portuguese technique of non-sharp chisel carving, as well as the way to fix silver and gold foil to leather, may it be sheepskin or cowhide. I had at hand 4 millimetre thick cowhide, not that soft; as a last, I've used a plastic container and a long wooden one. Both were used to form my first bowls, with carvings done in the inside, before the moulding.

This time I turned to Iberian Muslim architecture and its ornaments, in particular the ones found at the city of Madinat al-Zahra, close to Cordoba, and in ruins since the civil wars of the 11th century that marked the end of the Caliphate and the division of al-Andalus into kingdoms. So the utilitarian leather plates of Ziryab times were turning into decorative ones. The patterns, drawn with compass and ruler, followed the rich heritage left in Iberia.

After the carving is done, I proceed to the moulding phase. Again, leather has to have the correct wetness to fit as much as possible into the wooden last. I let it remain there for a couple of days, in a warm room during the cold season, or by the sun, which has only to dry for a couple of hours.

After the moulding, I apply a dye of brown colour, or leave it in the natural leather colour.

I proceed to glue the covering on the outside part, which is the flesh side of the cowhide. For elegance and good looking, I've chosen goat skin, after applying a brownish dye on it "batik". This Far East technique is used in textile, with fantastic effects, which are mostly out of the maker's control. On leather, it's needed a soft skin, which has to be slightly wet with a sponge. When the natural colour is about to return, I apply a warm liquid, made of bee wax and candle wax; the wax has to melt, not directly over the flame, but inside a boiling water pot. The wax is fixed to the skin with a brush, each stroke by the side of the former one.



Using a full goat skin, it may be needed to have it wet once again in few parts, as it dries at different pace. I keep it on a large cardboard, and carefully cover it with the warm liquid wax, in light strokes. Only next day do I pick up the skin, and move it slowly, making the surface wax to break and create channels. In case a piece of wax comes out – due to over wetting -, I need to wet the spot once again, melt the wax and cover the bare skin. After covering the full skin with beeswax, it is at this stage that it's possible to have a bit of control over the breaking wax; the longer and narrow the channels are, the better will look the dye applied. Having all the goat skin with breaks, I use a brown spirit dye and, with a brush, cover with it the whole skin. As soon as a brush stroke touches the broken wax covered skin, the dye gets into the channels and covers the skin surface underneath; where they don't exist, simply remains on the wax, and dries out. Only in the next day do I remove the wax, shaking and twisting the goat skin with both hands; the breakable wax comes out like flakes, and slowly the skin emerges with plenty of veins and channels in brownish tones.

Its touch is a bit greasy, and taking the wax out makes it full of wrinkles. I wet it all, and leave it to dry as much as much flat as possible, under a carpet. Afterwards, I cut the goat skin according to the bowl size, leaving 2cm more of the goat skin piece, making it cover the flesh/outside of the cowhide bowl; I apply white glue for sticking the skin. All this work asks for a place where it's possible to make some mess, to be cleaned afterwards.

Both hands are needed to push the skin into the wrinkles of the bowl; it should not have any spot without being glued. Finally, I use plastic or wood cloth pins to fix all the borders of the bowl, and let it remain like that for a couple of days, until cutting the extra skin at the bowl's border.

With a metal compass, I trace an 8mm line in the bowl border; that is where the holes will be made, 1cm in between, for the lace. To punch such holes one may need an extra hand, as the bowl won't lay flat on the plastic punching surface, particularly if it has ornamental wrinkles. For the lace, I've been using dark brown thin cowhide, whether vegetable or not I cut the lace with the lace cutter, getting an even one for the bowls; up to now I've been using double cordovan stitch, that asks for plenty of lace (near about five times more). To avoid dealing with several meters' lace in my hand, I stitch with near about a meter and a half, having to glue another lace when it finishes, I do my best to avoid the fixing of a new lace being seen, for such matter I skive the lace end and the beginning of the new one, and glue both on the finishing piece just under a stitch. Prepare yourself for several hours of stitching!

One more addition to the leather carvings are several semi-precious stones (agate, lapis-lazuli, bronzite, sodalite); to have them fixed to the leather, I have to mark their borders, and cut with the swivel knife 5mm inside; then.....

.....I beveled all the cut lines, followed by a precise work with the under cutter stamp – the peel of the leather should cover some mm's of stones' border. Finally, a plain backgrounder tool is used to flatten the leather where the stone is going to rest; besides the outside covering of the peel, I also use a paste of white glue mixed with marble powder. After drying, the peel holds the stone (with a flat back as much as possible) in place. I only glue the stones at the very end of the bowl's work; up to this phase, I only need to have their fixing place undercut and beveled.

Moulded, carved (with undercuts for the stones), and stitched, the bowl can have the patterns gilded.

Gilding is a patience work, asking for some hours, and having no breath coming into the work – silver or gold foil are very very fragile specially the more pure ones. In leather art history, gilding was used in book binding, and sometimes in luxury boxes and footwear. Included in Moorish fashions, gilding expanded into wall screens with patterns in large borders and the field with figurative motives (coat-of-arms, daily noble life, Christian figures, etc).



Such wall covering were common in rich palaces of the 14th – 16th century in Portugal and Spain, new Renaissance fashions put such uses aside, and gilding and its artisans – gilders, or “guadamecileiros” – simply vanished in late 17th to early 18th century in Iberian Peninsula. These wall coverings – and also devotional paints, saddle cloths, high cork-sole women shoes, altar fronts – were silver foil covered, receiving a special varnish, so that parts of the silver looked like gold; therefore, its label became “gold leather”, but gold was rarely used. Besides the paints, the artisans used decorative stamps – points, balls, circles with balls or tiny points, arrows or V's in a line – to give different shining to the surface. In bookbinding, gilding uses a hot stamp, whereas, in large surfaces, the complete foil gets stuck to leather with a particular varnish. Gilding of large surfaces asks for full silver foils, whereas for the caved patterns I use, there's only the need of small metal foil pieces, or using the gold foil scraps to gild other parts or make a restoration whenever needed.

Back to the bowl, I cover the patterns with shellac; the next day, a small brush covers them with a special varnish to stick metal foil to leather. The golden foils come in small thin books of 12x12cm; some foils are cut to get over the patterns, using a special knife on a flat leather cushion (with sides raised, to avoid spoiling the foil). This technique is very delicate, as the metal foil can easily be turn away and break with a breath. After a couple of hours, I use a soft large brush to remove the foil from the leather which had no sticking varnish. The tiny scraps are kept in a plastic box, to be used once again. Every time I clean the gold foil, it seems the whole piece is coming out of the forge, so raw the golden patterns look. I apply three layers of gold foil, so it looks thicker and more attractive. The tiny scraps are used, especially in parts where the initial foil didn't get into.

As sometimes the varnish brush touches outside the pattern, I've to use an x-acto knife to carefully remove any gold foil stuck outside the carved design. All this asks for many hours and plenty of patience. Finally, to avoid the bowl just lying flat on a surface, I had a dark metal support made, enough to hold the bowl almost vertical.

Another work was more complex, in spite of its small dimension: only 14cm diameter of the moulded leather.

Looking for ways to express my ideas, I happen to come across a study on the early sanctuaries in late Muslim Iberia. Those buildings look like a cube, having a half sphere as the roof; they served for a holy man, or Sufi, to live in, or marked a sacred place, a ground of worship. Being of the same religion, other similar buildings exist in many other countries under Islam, or where Islam keeps believers. Therefore, other books do show such sanctuaries in Morocco, Tunisia, Syria and India – just by chance I happened to travel to India in 2008, and attended a 5 night music festival in the village of Miraj, taking place at the large courtyard of a 15th century sanctuary of a Muslim saint, a sanctuary following the basic structure of the ones of Iberia, later turned into churches.

Having already moulded several bowls, I thought of another one, but as a box. Two small circles of cowhide were moulded inside ceramic soup bowls, and did come out quite stiff, enough strong to hold the silver pieces: sanctuary on top, hinges, closing system, pegs, and “legs” underneath.

I made some sketches, and thought of a box out of two half spheres of leather, having the silver sanctuary in the centre of a 12 sides pointed star, in silver as well. The silver hinges could be fixed in the leather, as well as the pegs (silver and stone) and the closing system; such box would rest on three silver spheres, to be fixed underneath. It became a patience micro-architecture exercise. Having the leather to stretch a bit, former pencil marks on both the flesh sides did get out of order; they had to be redone in the rounded inside as it was truly needed to know where to fix – by glue and by tiny silver wire-made rivets

I won't give in this article many details about silversmith; pattern making, soldering, cutting, polishing, fixing tiny wire-made rivets, stone set in (as pegs), took many hours to be done; The 12 sides pointed star had to receive, in its centre, the tiny sanctuary, in an exact place to soldered. I had, over both horse-shoe arch doors, the first line of a poem engraved; it's from Iberian Sufi poet, Ibn al-Arabi, of the 12th – 13th century; it says (both in Portuguese and Arabic) “My heart is open to all the forms

The tiny four wire rivets under the 12 pointed stars were flattened and bent inside the top bowl; the same happened with the ones coming from the three silver spheres that became the “feet” of the low bowl, both inside surfaces were covered with brown batik goat skin. Except where the hinges were fixed, as well as the closing system and two side pegs –all in silver- the borders of both bowls were stitched in double cordovam; this time I bought the brownish lace, and the cuts were made with a lacing chisel; once again, an extra hand was needed to hold both bowls in place. The box was finally completed, and I canned it “Iberian treasure”; it entered a competition on crafts at the Annual Craft Fair in Lisbon, in 2008, and goes along with a poster about its inspiration

