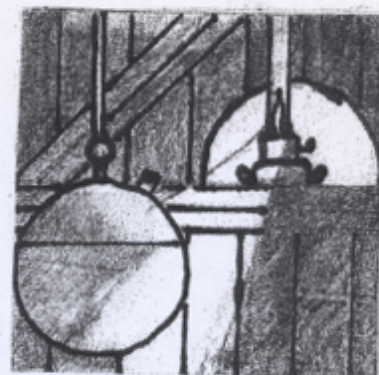


The Euro*pean.....

Leather, Shoe and Hide

A independent magazine about

Leather, shoe, hide, art, craft, culture, trade and idustry



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Ana Caldas,.....

portuguese crafts,... european art !.

Leather,gold foil, semi-precious stones,silver; recreations in three-dimension artefacts.

Text and photo;Ana Caldas
Editorial: LSaH

The idea for these series of bowls comes from several exhibitions and history studies; Greek and islamic pottery and architecture, as well as the very few data on prehistoric leather vessels; I also get inspired by legacy of islamic times of Iberian peninsula, mainly the caliphate years. (10th-11th century), when Cordoba was the capital.

I imagined how it would be if the main material was leather, with pegs in stylized animals' shapes and in silver.

I had at hand 4 milimetre thick cowhide, not that soft ; as a last, I used a plastic container and a long wooden one. Both were used to form my first bowls, with carvings done in the inside,before moulding. I wanted deeper bowls,thus I bought a larger and deeper wooden bowl to use as a last.

With this last,there were wrinkles formed in the wet cowhide circle (46 cm diameter). The wrinkles were organized to become a seven-part division of the initial leather circle; between each wrinkle, there was the chance to carve.

This time I turned to Iberian Muslim architecture and it's ornaments. 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 chooser goat skin, after applying a brownish dye on it's «batic». 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 spronge. 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 goatskin,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 again,melt the wax and cover the bare skin. After covering the full skin with beewax, 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 you look the dye applied.

Having all the goatskin 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 in to 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 goatskin 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 flat as possible, under a carpet. Afterwards, I cut the goatskin according to the bowl size, leaving 2 cm more of the goatskin piece,making it cover the flesh/outside of the cowhide bowl; I apply white glue for sticking the skin.

All this work ask 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 8 mm line in the bowl border; that is where the holes will be made, 1 cm 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 veg-tan or not. I cut the lace with a lace cutter,getting an even one for the bowls ; up to now I've been using double cordovan stich, that ask for plenty of lace (near about five times more).

To avoid dealing with several meters' lace in my hand, I stich 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 new lace being seen; for such matter I skive the lace end and the beginning of teh new one, and glue both on the finishing piece just under a stich. Prepare yourself for several houers of stitching.

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One more addition to the leather carvings are the several semi – precious stones (agate, lapis-lazuli, bronzite, sodalite); to have them fixed in the leather, I have to mark their borders, and cut with the swivelknife 5 mm inside; then, I bevelled all the cut lines , followed by a precise work with the undercutter stamp – the peel of the leather should cover some mms of the stones' border. Finally, a plain background tool is used to flat the leather where the stone is going to rest; besides the outside covering of the peel, I also use a past of white glue mixed with marbel 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 bevelled.

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

Gilding is a patience work,asking for some hours, and not have a break coming in to the work – silver or gold foil are very very fragil, specially the more pure ones.

Gilding of large surfaces asks for full silver foils, whereas for the carved patters 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, am I using a small brush to cover them with a special varnish to stick metal foil to leather. The golden foils come in small thin books of 12+12 cm; some foils are cut to get over the patters, using a special knife on a flat leather cushion (with sides raised, to avoid spoiling the foil).

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 seems it like the whole piece is coming out of the forge, so raw the golden patters 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 14 cm 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.

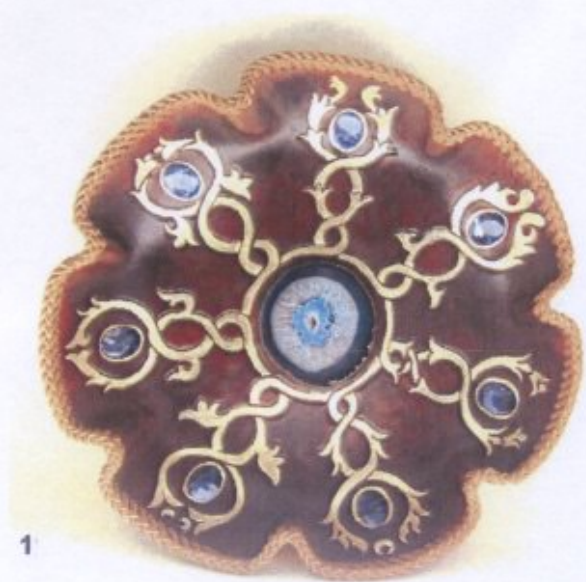
Having already moulded several bowls I thought of another one, but as a box.

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 the top, hinges, closing system, pegs, and «legs» underneath.

It became a patience micro- architecture exercise. As leather does stretch a bit, former pencil marks on both the flesh sides did get out of order. They had to be re-done in the rounded inside as it was truly needed to know where to fix – by glue and by tiny silver wire-made rivets – all the silver parts.

I won't give in this article many details about silversmith, pattern making, soldering, cutting, polishing, fixing tiny wire-made rivets, stone setting (as pegs) as took many hours to do. The 12 sided pointed star had to receive, in its centre the tiny sanctuary in an exact place to be soldered. I had over both horse-shoe arch doors the first line of a poem engraved. It's from an 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 star were flattened and bended inside the top bowl. The same happened with the ones coming from the silver spheres that became the « feet» of the bowl. Both inside surfaces were covered with brown batik goatskin. Except where the hinges were fixed as well as the closing system and two side pegs, all is silver. The borders of both bowls were stitched in double cordovan. This time I bought the brownish lace and the cuts were made with a facing chisel. Once again, an extra hand was needed to hold both bowls in place. The box was finally completed and I called it «Iberian Treasure». It entered a craft competition at the annual Craft Fair in Lisbon in 2008 along with a poster about its inspiration.



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About the photos.

- 1. Bowl < Madinat al-Zahara>, with gold foil lapis-lasur and agat.**
- 2-3-4. Box/ reliquary < Iberian Treasure>.
Photo 4 showing the box open and the "batik" goatskin.**
- 5. Bowl < Al- Sahla> with gold foil and turquoise.**
- 6. Ana Caldas with the bowl < The gates of Silver> with gold foil and lapsis-lasur.**