

# Leather Artisan

Publication of the Association  
of New Zealand Leather Artisans  
(Te Roopu Kai-Mahi Reera O Aotearoa)  
ISSN 0112-3831 (Print) ISSN 2253-4881 (Online).



No. 154



March/June 2015

Sandy's revitalization of unfinished piece



Flowers painted in a salvage attempt, failed, but better than the final results!



After boiling for about 30 seconds.



Straight into the gallery



Ana Caldas.....Na Rota do Amor

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## Leather Embossing in the Feminine Heritage

(Part 1)

### The art of Maria José Viegas.

*Article written by*

Franklin Pereira - Portugal

In Europe, since late 19th to early 20th century, leather work was amidst the many crafts women of wealthy families developed, besides cooking embroidery, embossed tin, painting on glass, velvet and canvas painting, needle work, etc. There are quite a good number of published materials on leather art between 1890 and 1950, in Germany, France, Spain, UK, USA and Portugal - leather was a considered material for artistic developments.

From Paris and the “Artisan Pratique”/Practical Artisan magazine, many ideas, patterns and technique arrived to Portugal in printed medium. The magazine also published ads relating to fine arts and craft shops, so the possibility of buying materials by mail also existed. The Practical Artisan magazine was a multi-media craft magazine, and its aesthetics, besides the traditional ones, also embraced the brand-new “Art Nouveau” style.

In 1914, in Portugal, a lady called Luiza de Sousa published a book on leather and metal work; incision, carving, modelling, tooling and embossing (both using the French names) are explained; she adds that embossing, being in fashion, is the best hobby of the foreign high society, to which ladies and artists dedicate their best working hours; embossing was a very common way of ornamenting pillows, portraits, book covers and the like. In fact, embossing is quite attractive, being a soft and silent technique. The breath given by “Art Nouveau” style and a renaissance of former historical styles (including medieval ones) helped to insure the quality of leather art by then.

In early 20th century, in Portugal, there was a magazine, “Jornal da Mulher”/Women’s Journal, published every 2 weeks. Amidst several crafts, ladies from a more cosmopolitan and wealthy society could develop their skills in leather art and craft.

Several issues of this Portuguese journal of 1911 have a series of articles of leather art techniques, not signed but seeming to come from Luiza de Sousa. In a paragraph she says that industry took over art in the name of fast production, but what a difference with hard work done by dedicated artists, being the result the destruction of art by ruthless machines, and cheap work - quite contemporary words, I must say!

In another paragraph, she refers that leather art was cultivated by German artists some 30 years back, and arrives nowadays to Portugal, after enchanting Sweden, Norway, Austria, England and Holland. Thus we can settle this rise in the 1880’s, in Germany.

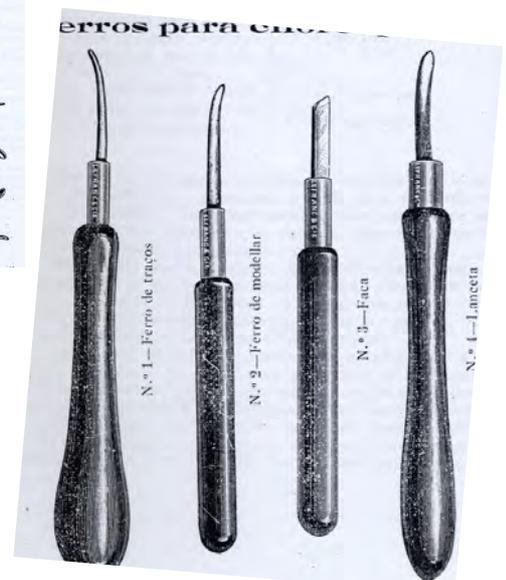
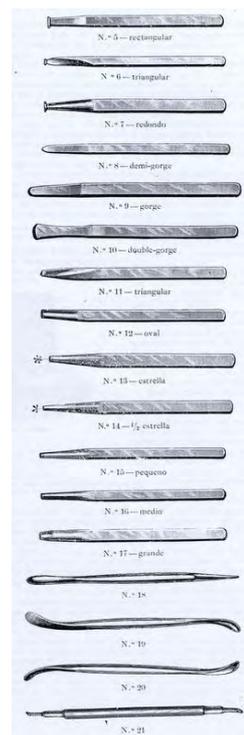
In 1890, already in its 5th edition, there’s a German book, by Gustav Fritzsche, “Anleitung und Verlagen zur Herstellung geschnittener und gepunzter altdeutscher lederarbeiten mit 128 Originalzeichnungen nebst einem Vorwort von Dr. Adolf Weiske”/Instructions and Patterns for the manufacture of ancient German carved leather, with 128 original motives, with an introduction by Dr. Adolf Weiske; it shows plenty of tools, patterns and finished pieces. The patterns show a powerful expressiveness, whether in the drawing of foliage, birds or helmets - I would say quite German, and away from the aesthetics of the Portuguese magazine. This book shows the techniques of modelling, incision, embossing, tooling, and pyrography (also shown on wood). My visits to the German Leather museum in Offenbach, and to the collection of René Berends, in the 1990’s, allowed me to see several amazing pieces from German masters of late 19th century mainly. In Portugal, there’s a magnificent screen signed by Hendrik Schulze; I came to find that he had been a disciple of the leather master Georg Hulbe (1851-1917), which has a page in Wikipedia. I’ve already written about this screen (German leather art in Portugal - the work of Hendrik Schulze. UK: The Tool and Trades history Society Newsletter, no. 122 - Autumn 2013, pages 16-20).

Back to the Portuguese magazine, Iberian techniques as gilt leather and chisel-carved cowhide are not explained in this series of articles; it explains the use of gold-foil, mosaic, pyrography, and dyes; aesthetically speaking, it embraces mostly ‘Art Nouveau’, and has patterns for wallets, frames, book covers and pillows. Such instructions considered skins to be used for incision, modelling and embossing. Several times this Portuguese magazine use the French word “repoussé for the embossing, and “matoirs” for tooling stamps;

This shows the connection with France; dyes and tools were also imported from France; the magazine sometimes showed catalogues (formerly published in the French “Practical Artisan”), adding the address of fine arts shops where such materials could be bought. Tools for leather work were sold in elegant small wooden case (figure 1 and 1A), having the essential for a home craft, including instructions and dyes/anilines. The incision knife (common in European leather art since the Gothic times of the 14th - 15th century) is shown in figure 1B as no. 3; tooling stamps - shown in figure 1C - are part of the delicate work of the 19th - 20th century; no. s 8,9 and 10 are non-sharp chisels and similar to the one used by Portuguese leather carvers since early 17th century; being only three, their limitations are obvious in carving motives, as the full collection has some 40 chisels, in different lines and curves, from 5mm to 4cm, thus allowing deep carving in 4-5mm thick cowhide for upholstery. In figure 1C, the tooling stamps no.s15, 16 and 17 are dots/balls (in three sizes), engraved into the metal and producing a relief/convex ball in leather. Modellers' no.s 18 to 21 are a must - as the label shows - for modelling drawings in the skin, with a minimum of relief; their actual variety is much more than the three simple ones show in figure 1B.

In 2013 I had the chance of giving a talk in the Arts and Crafts School in Vigo (northern Spain), which also has a leather craft course since its beginning about a century ago; amidst the listeners, I've spoken to a lady, aged 84 (and still a student at the school), that once in a while meets other women to do leather craft - the same feminine lineage developed in Spain. My teacher in Cordoba, Carmen Bernier - with whom I've learnt gilt leather in 1990 and 1991 - also learnt from her father, one of the artists that give breath to a renaissance of gilt leather in the city, in early 20th century.

In the spring of 1990, a leather craftsman told me about an exhibition starting at the Military Museum in the city of Oporto; I was amazingly surprised by the natural sceneries, bookbinding, book covers, portraits, in embossed leather, and made by mother and daughter. I left my address, waiting for some contact.



Few days later I got a call - and few days later still I met at a café Mrs. Maria José Viegas. Our first meeting took 8h. around the table..... Maria José Viegas, now aged 86, tends to be the last survivor of the art of embossing - leather was, like other decorative arts, one of the crafts of wealthy women at home; working with soft skin was one of those crafts, mostly using embossing, cutting and stamping, in Renaissance and Art Nouveau styles; such economic and cultural situation changed dramatically in the last 30 years in Portugal, therefore the crafts scene almost disappeared.

Only in very few does craft creation melds so much with private life and activity as with Maria José; her wealthy family living provided a solid formation into drawing, having private classes during school days; as a child and teenager, her determination of crafting with her own hands was already pulsating within, few examples of leather done at the age of 14 are enough proves of 'having the feeling'; at high-school, plenty of book-covers were done for her collages - and the embossing are so clear and of high quality!

Leather art was passed to her mother, while Maria José started a hand - embroidery business of high class designs, and moving into challenging fields; new dimensions of needlework, relief, shadow, and the ever-present clearness and outstanding beauty. In 1974, the embroidery business faded away; she was back to leather embossing, 3 years before the exhibition in 1990. Leather turned again to be the medium for creativity - where her rich life experiences, the sad and happy times, all is bursting out into her art; our many meetings, the humour, the straightforward positive life-attitudes, all is a honour for me; sharing around leather craft is part of this.

Her works are mostly on sheepskin, embossed without plug; a thin surface of plasticine provides the background for modelling and embossing the wet skin. Then there are some amazing tools as the fridge; the plasticine to hold the design, or to be modelled (covered with skin), needs different temperatures-so the fridge makes it harder for some parts of the works. To push out the embossed surfaces are those ball - modellers, or the fingers and the "wooden egg" (an egg-shaped piece of wood was/is a common "tool" for stitching some parts of the socks).

Also few incised work is pre-set, done with the "mother" of the swivel-knife, a tool with so many centuries in the leather art in Portugal and Spain. Some framed portraits include pyrography, and "peeling-out"; the very thin skin surface is cut around the drawing, or within it, and then peeled out, leaving a rough surface. Some bookbinding include embossing, as well as the main work done at home; stitching the pages, gold-foil covering the pages borders, and so on.



*Maria José Viegas at the working table*

The water-based dyes played the final role; she uses "vieux-chêne" (pine bark powder), writing inks, caustic soda (for some burning effects),.....Another invention is the liquid of boiled cod-fish tail with pine bark powder - a perfect brown sticking dye. Isn't it that a craft, developed through the centuries, is an experience field for new effects and its own growing?

In the gallery of inventive and outstanding leather artists, Maria José Viegas has a place for sure.....

Franklin Pereira - Portugal  
frankleather@yahoo.com    www.frankleather.com



Dentro e Fora Do Magma

## Africa Inspiration – Wearable Leather Art

*by*

**Ana Caldas (Portugal)**

Several years ago, during my return to jewellery, I've found leather as a material for artistic expression; its softness, pliability and easiness to be worked upon metallic tools, all helped for the making of several pieces of mine, published in this Newsletter (“Leather, gold foil, semi-precious stones, silver; recreations in three-dimension artifacts”).

Leather Artisan, no. 136 September 2010, pages 8-11; “In the Path of Love: a sculpture in leather, silk brocade, silver jewellery”.

Leather artisan, no. 147 June 2013, pages 16-17). Amidst earlier leather work were few necklaces that, in mid 2014, became the foundation for further developments.

Last year I was about to participate in a Design Fair in Lisbon, and its theme was Africa; I was born in Angola, and such theme inspired me: I took from the shelf former essays and unfinished structures, and, along with books, magazines and few sites, I've recreated leather body ornaments rooted in Africa culture, mainly Angola.

For some necklaces I've used 2mm veg tanned cowhide, cut in a large circle, with few cuts made with a knife (pieces no. 5, 6, 7 and 8) or by means of a sharp Gothic arch chisel (pieces no's 1 and 3); wet, the circle allows to get rounded, and the cuts can stand above its base. Holes for the braids to hold leather buttons were done beforehand, as well as the braided stitches that hold the medallion in place, having a small strip of leather behind it (piece no. 1); the medallion of this piece is carved by means of non-sharp chisels – used in Portuguese upholstery since early 17<sup>th</sup> century – and covered with gold foil (three layers). In pieces no's 3, 5, 6 and 8, there's a strip folded over the necklace, having a braid on it; being long, it gets glued in the back of three leather circles, holding them in place. The three veg-tan circles were wet-moulded inside a ceramic bowl, having a jar on top to remain in place for a day. The three-circle medallion in piece no. 3 are plain, where the other ones are ornamented; the ones of piece no. 7 were creased in parallel lines inside a triangle, which I've also repeated in the large circle (all holes were done while the cowhide was flat and dry).



No.1



No.3



No.4



No.5

The front piece is 2mm cowhide, worked upon its flesh side. The creased lines were done following the shape of a rubber “snake”, used in architecture drawings. The round leather button was put in the end; the holes were done with an electric drill.

In piece no. 4 I've used fake panther fur, chrome-tan reddish leather, straw, and leather lace; the beads, looking like old bone, were bought in a shop. A 4-lace braid holds the medallion.

Piece no. 10 follows the shape of a face; I've used 2mm veg-tan cowhide, working upon its flesh side. The holes in the “face” were done with a 5mm punch; other piece of leather was covered with gold foil, and punched as well; the 5mm gold covered tiny circles replaced the ones made in the “face”; thus gold dots seem engraved in the leather, previously covered with black acrylic in its flesh side, and sand-papered as well. Underneath it I've put sheepskin; its borders were cut with a sharp round chisel with tiny waves; all along the border I've stitched small shells taken from other African necklace. The upper three-strip braid was bought in a leather shop.

In piece no.5 I've also used the flesh side of cowhide, again engraved with gold foil covered leather dots; round punches are easy to work upon in engraving, whereas, when it comes to triangles, one has to be very secure while cutting them off and putting new ones: any tiny mistake means the new triangle won't exactly fit. This medallion also has gold foil covered cinnamon, fixed to leather by a strip; on top I've used turquoise round stones, fixed to leather by a tiny brass “needle”. The medallion was wet-moulded to make the upper “tube”, to get fixed in the leather thick strings, bought in a leather shop.

Piece no.9 was done using cowhide, again worked upon the flesh side. The inner line of the eyes has cuts and, after modelling the eyebrows, the wetness allowed to emboss them. After drying, I've used a torch to give the shades of burnt brown. The back side was covered with sheepskin, and gold foil was fixed in the space seen by the opening of the eyes. Sheepskin borders were cut by a sharp round chisel, and holes of 1mm were done in all the “waves” of the border; again, dry straw – in Portugal it's easily found in drug-stores – was used, and I've kept it as long as it comes in the bundle. The upper part of the medallion makes a loop, where a braided strip – bought from an artisan in the street – gets fixed.

All these pieces were on show during the Design fair in Lisbon, in October 2014; as it hosted a show with models for the ones who were exposing body ornaments and fashion, I had the opportunity to show my jewellery pieces, other gilt leather necklaces – material for a future article – and piece no.9 worn by a black woman; photos no. 11 and 12 are of this model with the referred necklace. This model show and photos can be seen in my face book page.

[www.facebook/ana.caldas.joalhararia](http://www.facebook/ana.caldas.joalhararia).

*Thank you Ana for sending in a most interesting article giving our members a chance to see what inspires multi media artists in you part of the world.....may it encourage our members to forward their own journey...Ed*

