

Chatham County 4-H Leatherworks Club

The Basics of Adding Color

Richard Harber

While natural leather is beautiful on its own, adding color to your works is another way to enhance the beauty of your carving or stamping.

An essential thing to understand is that this takes time, most of it waiting. So, patience is a critical virtue.

The first and simplest way to add some color to your leather pieces is to add oil (neatsfoot is my preference, but some use olive oil-don't waste the extra virgin olive oil on leather), then put the piece out in the sun for the day. This will darken the leather some. You can then seal the leather.

In mainstream leatherworking, there are three principal agents to add color to leather pieces: dyes, stains and acrylic paints. You can also use inks (colored sharpies), and watercolors.

Dyes are pigments dissolved in a liquid medium and penetrate into the leather. The liquid medium can be either solvent (alcohol based) or water. Water based dyes are easier for clean up since it only requires water. Dyes will come in a number of colors and can be mixed to form other colors.

Stains are also pigment based, but don't penetrate far into the leather, so they are more a topical color. The most common stains in leatherwork are antiques and highlighter, both of which are used to accent tooling. Antiques come in gel and paste forms. Gel antique can be used as a general coloring agent.

When antiques are used to accent tooling, a sealant (resist) is applied to the tooling to seal the leather and block the stain from absorbing into the leather. When applied correctly the resist keeps the stain away from the leather, but lets it settle into the nooks and crannies created by the stamping and tooling, thus helping your stamping or tooling "pop" off the leather.

Acrylic Paints also sit on top of the leather with minimal absorption. Mixing water with the acrylics will help them flow over the leather and may help a bit with absorption. When using acrylic paints, the best strategy is to apply multiple light coats (allowing drying time between coats) to develop a more vibrant color. You don't need a special acrylic paint for leather, any acrylic paint from any art supply store will work. The only difference will be the amount of water you need to add so that the paint will flow.

When working with vegtan leather, the wetting, stamping and tooling can remove the fats and oils that were added to the leather during tanning. Thus, it is frequently wise to add oil to the leather after working it. As mentioned above, I prefer neatsfoot oil, but olive oil can also be used. The timing of adding oil depends on how you are adding color (more later). In general you will want to spread a coat of oil without creating puddles. This will darken the leather. Leave it overnight and the oil will balance out through the leather.

After color and oil have been added a sealer is applied to protect the leather and to help prevent the color rubbing off on clothing. (Pigments may be left on the top of the leather and these are what can rub off. It is wise to buff/polish the leather with a soft cloth or sheep's wool to remove such surface pigments. Sealers can be wax based (e.g., TanKote from Fieblings); acrylic based (e.g. Supershene or Softsheene from Tandy, or Leather Sheen from Fieblings), or lacquer based

(e.g., NeatLac, SaddleLac or WyoSheen. The choice of sealer is often a personal choice, but if you have a project that needs to be flexible or bend a lot, it's better not to use a lacquer based sealer. If the project is likely to be exposed to a lot of weather, a wax based sealer may be preferred since it will let you "dress." i.e., clean and oil, the leather over time.

Order of Application

So you have all these options...in which order do you apply them?

In terms of the color itself, you use dyes first, then stains, then acrylics. The rationale for this order is that dyes need to be absorbed by the leather. Stains and especially acrylics prevent this from happening. Since a resist is usually applied prior to a stain, dyes must be applied before a resist. Acrylics are purely topical, so they go on last.

The big debate is when to apply the oil. Some people will argue that oil (if you're going to use it) should be applied before any color work is done. Some will argue that this opens up the leather and allows especially dyes to absorb more easily. Since oil can darken the leather slightly, applying it first provides a better idea of the end result as you add your color. The opposing side of the argument is that the added oil can block the absorption of the dyes.

No matter which side of the debate you come down on with respect to oil and dyes, oil should be applied before stains and acrylics since these tend to clog the leather and limit oil absorption. Remember, once the oil is applied you need to wait 12-24 hours for the oil content to balance out throughout the leather before applying anything else.

Once all the color and oil have been added, it's time for the sealer. This can be applied with daubers, pieces of sheeps wool, sponges, aerosol cans, or some form of air spraying (Preval or an airbrush). For the first coat apply lightly (less important if you have a single color), let that dry and apply a second heavier coat.