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Shell Cordovan pieces are only some 2.5 to 3.0 sq ft in area so two are normally needed for one pair of shoes.

CREDIT: JOSEPH CLAYTON & SONS

Shell Cordovan

E*quus ferus caballus*, more normally known as the horse, has been around for a long time: between 45 and 50 million years in fact. During that time it has evolved from being a small multi-toed creature into the large single-toed animal we know today. It is thought that man first began to domesticate the horse around 4,000 years ago after which it became an indispensable factor in human existence until the advent of the internal combustion engine at the turn of the 20th Century.

While horses were primarily used as a means of transportation, they were also a source of protein and remain so today in a number of countries, especially in Asia. However, the slaughter of horses for human consumption is often frowned upon and is a frequent target for animal rights protesters. Nevertheless, they do need to be slaughtered for various reasons and, as with cattle, the ensuing by-products can be processed into a variety of items. The most important is the hide which yields a variety of products including jackets, belts, gloves, leathersgoods and shoes.

In the latter instance, only the 'shell' of the hide is used and this is what makes Shell Cordovan so special.

DEFINING THE SHELL

Over most of its area, an equine hide is essentially the same as its bovine counterpart, comprising the grain surface or epidermis and the corium layer that lies underneath it. Towards the rump end of the horse, however, there is a change in the fibre structure that runs within these two parts and a much denser and more compact fibre arrangement is seen. It is this that is referred to as the 'shell' and it is a roughly oval shaped area within the rump of the hide on either side of the spine.

This compact fibre structure provides a leather of good strength for its relative thickness. Having said that, on full tannage the overall thickness can be relatively high at up to 5mm or 6mm. To arrive at the actual shell itself, the thickness must be reduced so that in most instances the final leather substance would be in the region of 1mm to 3mm. It can in fact sometimes vary that much within the same shell

and will also vary from shell to shell. In general, these shells are a maximum of about 2.5 sq.ft to 3.0 sq.ft in area.

TANNING AND PROCESSING

As with most bovine hides, horse hides generally arrive at the tannery preserved in salt, so the initial process is to remove the salt, rehydrate them back to their original state (salting does dehydrate them to a certain extent) and remove any blood, mud or dung. Dehairing, liming and preparation for the initial stages of tanning takes about five days, followed by a further series of pretanning stages over approximately two more.

The full hides are then trimmed to remove the bellies and neck portion where the mane would be. This area is very fatty and of little value, so it is normally sold for technical gelatin production. The remaining 'butt' is then trimmed again into a front quarter and the two connected shells. The front quarter can be either vegetable tanned (the majority) or chrome tanned depending on the end product. The shell 'bend', on the other hand, is only ever

vegetable tanned using a blend of plant-based tannages derived from tree woods, barks, etc., such as chestnut, mimosa and quebracho, all of which today come from sustainable forests in either South Africa or South America. This process can take as long as three months.

The next stage involves reducing and evening out the overall thickness using conventional splitting and shaving machines as in the manufacture of conventional leathers. This is followed by various fatliquoring and oiling operations performed in conventional tanning drums with additional hand oiling. Further thickness correction is then carried out followed by heavy machining on setting out machines to flatten the leather prior to drying. The shells may also be further softened by staking before being buffed ready for final finishing to provide a good base before colouring and re-oiling are done. The total process from raw hide to finished Shell Cordovan takes up to four months to complete.

CHARACTERISTICS

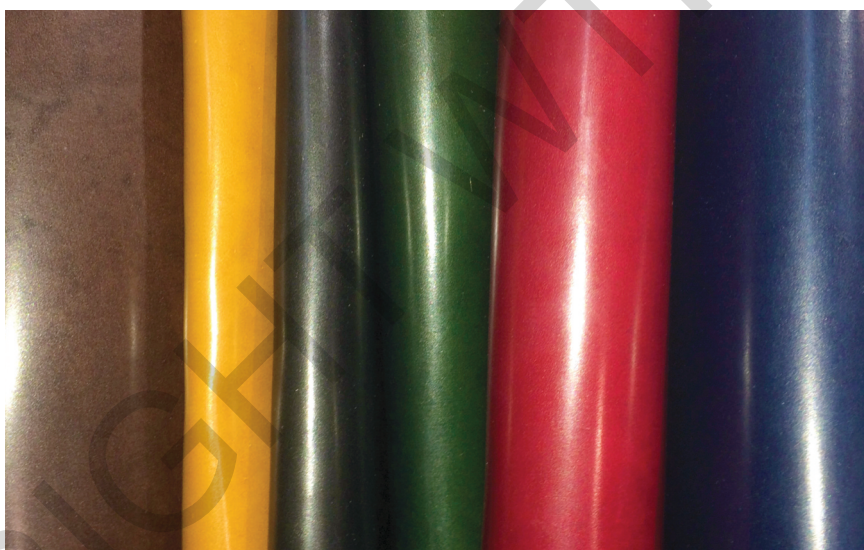
Unlike almost all other leathers, Shell Cordovan receives its final finish on the flesh side as the fibre structure of the shells is so tight and compact. This unique combination of properties also means that when bent, folded or flexed, the leather shows very little sign of any break or creasing. As a result of the high degree of oiling the leather has received, it is quite supple but with a characteristic feel; in fact, there is nothing else quite like it which is why it is so prized. Furthermore, on what is essentially a hand made product, the finish can be adjusted to suit the end user. Some shoemakers prefer to be able to add their own polish and glaze whereas others prefer it to be already polished to a high gloss.

From the shoemaking point of view, the main problem is the small size of the shells which, depending on shoe size and style, often requires two per pair. Although there will be clean cutting as there is no actual grain surface and potential scratches, etc., the potential for waste therefore remains high. As the material is extremely expensive, great care therefore has to be exercised in buying the most suitable shells for the shoes to be produced.

Unlike other types of leather, Shell Cordovan is sold by the piece rather than



Shells part way through the tanning process.



Shell Cordovan can be brought to a rich gloss finish if required.

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by the square foot. The actual price expressed in square foot terms, however, can be anything from \$45 to \$75 or even more, depending on quality, size and final finish; it calls for considerable experience on the part of the leather buyer. However, due to the small scale of production, a close relationship usually exists between tanner and customer, often going back many years. There are now only four main producers of the material world wide: Joseph Clayton & Sons in the UK, Shinuki Hikaku in Japan, Rocinante in Argentina and Horween Leather in the US, which is the largest.

ECONOMICS

Needless to say, as the leather is so expensive, so too are the shoes made from it and can cost over \$1,000 a pair. However, this is in fact not as expensive as it might seem as Shell Cordovan can literally last for years and years. The

shoes will have been made using the Goodyear welted construction by top grade manufacturers, so soles and heels can be replaced or the shoes completely refurbished several times before the upper is worn out. What is more, they retain their good looks throughout their lifetime as a regular brushing and the occasional application of a little cream is all that is needed to keep the leather in perfect condition (*see shoe in title image*).

And, finally, where does the name come from? It is generally thought to emanate from Cordova, the old 16th Century spelling for the Cordoba region of Spain where Moorish tanners prepared soft leathers from goatskins and split horse hide. It has always been a top quality product and now also has the added advantage of scarcity so that, despite the high price, it is one leather where demand will always exceed supply. 🌀