

All Leather is not Created Equal

Is the \$699 leather sofa from Costco or Sam's Club a good deal? Is it leather? Maybe, maybe not. Or a little of both. Remember when you were a little kid and your dad or mom told you "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is"? Some of us get this fact while others tend to learn this one over and over. Let's start with a little background on leather.

What is it? Any animal skin or hide that has been processed for use and will resist decay. Leather for the furniture industry is primarily bovine hides or cowhides.

How is it made? The first step is tanning which is the process that renders the hide decay resistant. There are many steps to tanning such as salting/curing, washing/soaking, de-hairing (unless it will be a hair-on-hide leather), fleshing, de-liming and bating. The next major step is to split the hide into layers. Hides are approximately 5 mm thick but the ideal thickness of leather for furniture is typically about 1 to 1.5 mm thick. So there is a splitting machine using a fine wire that separates the hide into a top layer (where the hair was) and a few splits (from the middle and flesh side). So we get to our first leather terms. Top Grain is the piece of the hide that was on the top or hair side. The other splits are Split Grain leather.

Leather Terms

And here is where the problem starts. The term Top Grain is often used inappropriately by many retailers selling leather. Actually it isn't uncommon to run into salespeople selling leather who know nothing about it other than a few buzzwords. The most common misuse of Top Grain is to indicate a superior type of leather as in "This is the best there is, its top grain leather." Top grain really just means it is the top piece of the hide. Now relative to split grain for use on furniture, top grain is better because it is much stronger. The hair follicles create a much denser layer towards the top of the hide. It's very similar to the outer epidermal layer of our skin. So there is nothing special about top grain leather. In fact leather furniture made in the US or for sale in the US is supposed to have top grain leather on all the seating areas or areas which contact the body. These are the seat, back and arm rest areas.

A few more terms. Full Grain and Corrected Grain. Full Grain leather is Top Grain leather in its natural or uncorrected state. The markings on this leather are those that occurred naturally during the life of the cow who wore it. Corrected Grain is the opposite. It is an artificial pattern embossed on the hide. Now why would anyone put a fake grain pattern on leather? Because there are many different grades of leather. Some is just better than others for many reasons that we won't go into here. The best hides will be made into Full Grain Aniline leather. We'll talk about aniline and other leather type in a minute. Full Grain Aniline is as natural as it gets for furniture leather. Any hide that doesn't make this top quality cut gets sorted into other categories for further processing. And the more processing leather gets to make it useable for furniture, the lower quality it is. So this is one of the first things you can check for relative quality; full grain vs corrected grain.

Full grain markings are natural and random with creases, scars and evidence of everyday life. Corrected grain patterns are the same all over or unnatural, too perfect. The correcting is done because the cow had too many life scars from barb wire fences, insect bites, stretch marks, horn scars and brands to render the hide useable as is (or as full grain). By the way, the second most common misuse of the term Top Grain is to describe Corrected Grain leather. You won't hear the term Corrected Grain very much but you may run into salespeople using the Full Grain correctly (uncorrected top grain) and Top Grain incorrectly (to mean corrected grain or economy leather).

Leather Types

Now let's talk about leather types. There are three main types and then some hybrids; Aniline, Nubuck and Protected leather. Hybrids are semi-aniline and aniline leather with special finishes like wax pull-ups and oil pull-ups. So we've said earlier the highest quality leather is full grain aniline or sometimes called full aniline or naked leather. It is beautiful, natural and has exceptional hand (another leather term) or feel. It is soft and supple. This is another test of leather quality. The hand of leather. Feel it, touch it, rub it. You can feel the difference. While you're doing this there is another test you can do to see if it really is leather. Place the palm of your hand on a section of the leather and feel the temperature. It is cold initially (room temperature) but should fairly rapidly seek equilibrium with your hand temperature. This is one of the great properties of leather and why it is desired in furniture. It is comfortable to sit on whether the room is hot or cold as the leather will seek the temperature of what it contacts (like your body). Conversely, if the leather stays cold to the touch, you're probably looking at vinyl or bicast or tricast leather. Incidentally, these leather-like fakes will also have a stiff feel to them. We were talking about aniline leather. The downside to full anilines is their high maintenance. They are essentially uncoated and prone to getting dirty or showing water marks and staining easily. So it wouldn't be the best choice for the family room sofa where the kids watch TV and eat popcorn and spill drinks. This is where the semi-anilines and wax or oil finishes come in. You get the feel of the aniline with the maintainability of pigmented leather. They are much easier to take care of.

So what is pigmented leather? It's basically painted leather. A top coating is sprayed on, dried and cured in an oven. You do lose a little of the feel from this extra coating but the trade off is cleanability. Although it is not necessarily true that all pigmented leathers are lower quality, all lower quality leathers are pigmented if that makes sense. When you have a low quality hide that requires extensive repair to cover scars and defects (using a leather bondo like product) to make useable, it will be finished with grain correction and a pigmented finish. But there are higher quality leathers that are pigmented for color choice and maintenance properties and end up as expensive pieces of furniture.

The other leather type is Nubuck which is a top grain leather buffed to give it exceptional hand. It has the strength of top grain and the feel of suede. Suede is split grain leather (made from a split grain hide). Suede feels good but has inferior strength and is not used for quality furniture. Nubuck is used sparingly in

furniture manufacturing because it is extremely susceptible to getting dirty and staining. The large surface area of the many buffed fibers leaves a lot of area to pick up dirt. If you're looking at Nubuck leather on furniture, make sure it is going in a suitable area (like one of those rooms where the furniture is for show only).

Remember the \$699 sofa from Costco? It's probably bicast leather which is a product made from a split grain hide which is painted, embossed with a corrected grain pattern and then laminated with a polyurethane top coat (yes, it's plastic on top). Bicast leathers are normally dark colors and quite widely used on cheaper leather furniture today. Vinyl feels similar to bicast but it is a totally artificial and bonded to a woven mat. So if you can see the back of the leather and see a white woven cloth, you can be certain it is vinyl. Both will feel stiff and cold to the touch. Tricast leather is a newer hybrid. It uses woven matt backing like vinyl and a top polyurethane coating like bicast. The leather in between is made from leather dust glued together to form a solid layer. Nothing is wasted in the leather industry. All the little trimmings and cuttings are collected, ground up and used for making tricast leather.

Watch for carefully worded phrases like "leather match." This is a vinyl buzzword and used extensively for the non-seating areas on cheaper furniture. "Leather like" is a code for bicast or tricast leather. Quite often leather benches, ottomans and cheaper dining chairs are "leather like." This doesn't mean don't buy them. They actually wear pretty well. This information is so you know what you're getting and not paying leather prices for "leather like" product.

Why Leather?

Why should someone consider buying leather furniture? First and foremost, it is a great value when you consider the total cost of furniture over a lifetime. Leather will last up to 4 times longer than fabric. It is extremely durable if properly cared for. It is a natural product with each hide being unique, having its own fingerprint. As I have said, it is a comfortable material that adapts to the surrounding temperature. It is highly aesthetic and has status appeal. It won't burn. Dust, pollen and pet hairs will not penetrate so it is great for those with allergies. You may have noticed big leather chairs in cigar shops. It's because leather will not absorb odors as fabric will.

So who should buy leather? There is leather for everyone. Pigmented leathers are durable and great for kids and high use areas. Aniline or Nubuck are elegant for more formal settings. There are endless looks to match all styles from the hair on hide rustic lodge look to contemporary in all colors. Of course the exceptional hand or soft feel of better leathers is the primary attraction. It's just comfortable to sit on and relax.