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A fin of beauty: the art of making objects out of fish leather

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Karri Furre was led to her profession by a life-long love of wild swimming and a fortuitous trip to Iceland



Kari Furre prepares salmon skins in her outdoor studio in Devon

Some train systematically for their profession. Others feel a calling. “I came to it from the swimming and taxidermy route,” says Kari Furre of her vocation as a maker of fish leather.

Based in the village of Harbertonford in Devon, south-west England, Furre, 65, is at once a master of this traditionally Nordic material, a “wild swimmer” and a polymath of an empirical sort. As we talk, ideas, enthusiasms and recollections spark off her — taking notes is like catching a shoal of fish with your bare hands.

Preserving fish skin is a tradition in Norway, where Furre’s father was born. He was a soldier

during the second world war and was able to “build a house single-handedly”. Furre describes him as “a maker who couldn’t bear to work for anybody else”. Yet for all the self-reliance he passed down to his daughter, he was not a champion of the piscine epidermis.



Furre uses curved metal blades to remove the fish scales and pare away the fat, leaving a gossamer-thin epidermis

Furre’s appreciation of fish began early. Her mother was from Totnes, Devon, and by the 1950s the family had settled in a house with a river at the end of the garden near Chard in Somerset. The wildness of the water stirred Furre’s life-long passion for diving into churning streams alive with fish. The animal-stuffing part of the story stems from her career as an exhibition designer.

Having studied at the Rose Bruford drama school in Kent, Furre had an itinerant career working in repertory theatre for 20 years. Her first foray into leather-making was fashioning *commedia dell’arte* masks for *As You Like It*. In the late 1980s, she became an exhibition designer at the innovative “sights, sounds and smells” time-cart experience of the Jorvik Viking Centre in York, where visitors trundle through a recreated 10th-century village.





Kari works a tanned salmon skin to soften the leather

Amid the fake Viking effluvium and genuine bones, Furre met craftspeople making display artefacts, like thatched roofs and Viking leather boots – the stuff of her Scandinavian forebears.

Plastic or fibreglass just didn't cut it. "The only way to make these historic objects authentic is to make them from the same materials," she says. "I made a Viking comb from bone, which I found could only be cut in one way. You then understand the maker's experience." She also preserved animals for the exhibition using standard taxidermy chemicals and techniques.



Salmon-skin boxes, £50 to £150

Furre's epiphany came about six years ago during a visit to Reykjavik, Iceland, where she bought some preserved fish skin in a shop, fascinated by its texture. She discovered that the country's only commercial fish-tanning factory is in the northern town of Saudarkrokur. Though the factory used industrial preserving fluids, traditionally none would have been involved.

Furre read a book by a Swedish artisan called Lotte Rahme, a tanner of reindeer and fish skins who uses everyday substances with techniques borrowed from Alaskan traditions. "For white fish, you've got to scale it; you soak it in urine," writes Rahme. "The urine has to come from a young boy baby." Urine was traditionally used because it turns to ammonia, which transforms the fish fats into glycerol and free fatty acids, stripping them away.



Mermaid purse, £350

Earlier this year Furre met Rahme near Stockholm and, following her example of going back to basics, Furre spent the summer curing skins in Devon. “Skin can be used like any other leather,” says Furre. Fish skin is more decorative than leather and is usually thinner. “It is also waterproof, so it was traditionally used on clothing that gets wet, including shoes. During the war the Norwegians made shoes and all sorts of things from cod skin.”

Furre uses plaice, salmon and cod for bookbinding, hats and waistcoats, masks and baskets. She has been asked to make a drum skin from skate. “I am working on some ideas for lampshades at the moment, and I think the problem is to find contemporary objects that not only appeal to the eco folk, but to the sophisticated too.”



Salmon and cuttlefish casting, sterling silver, £150 each, karifurre.co.uk

Furre sources her raw materials in Brixham, Devon, a fishing port whose fortunes became

buoyant after the demise of North Sea cod stocks 20 years ago. She relies on the chefs in local restaurants who take fresh catches and save their carefully trimmed skins especially for her.

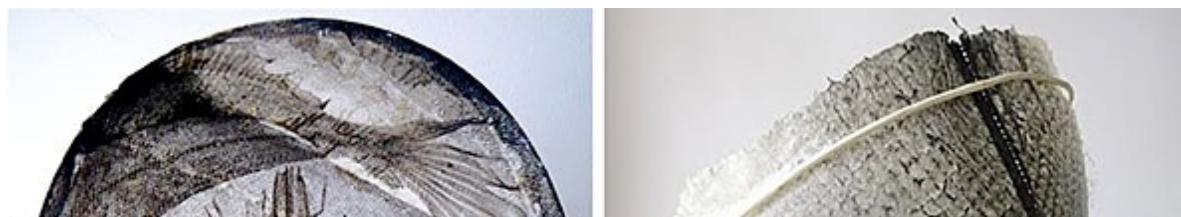
Furre uses an antique West Country, slate-bladed knife to scrape off the scales, then flips the skin over to pare away the layers of fat and fibres with a sharper curved metal blade. Sometimes the fibres themselves provide enough structure for a material, such as those that weave beneath the tough skin of salmon. Either way, when the fibres are removed she is left with the gossamer-thin epidermis.



Green bowl, salmon skin, £80

“Never let it get above 20C,” she says. That is why it is a good thing to do in northern Europe.

She washes the skin in cold water and soaks it in salt and washing up liquid — a modern concession — to dissolve the remaining fat. Egg yolk, soft soap and an unsaturated oil such as rapeseed are then whisked together in a kind of batter that is put on to the skin before it is pegged on to a washing line. This stage carries some risk because “the local cats have had them”. After three days, Furre manipulates the skins before they harden and glazes them with egg white.





Bowl, cod and plaice, £150 (left); bowl, salmon and hollyhock, £100

Furre enrolled for a fine art degree at Plymouth College of Art in 2010 and spent “three years messing about” with art and craft techniques and materials, an experience she found liberating.

She majored in silversmithing while “writing and reading, discovering what I’d been part of” in her earlier career. Now she combines metal with the skins in sculptures that play with reflection and translucence, intractable metal versus delicate veins and cells.

Where, I wonder, is her marketplace? “Collectors,” she replies. “I had some pieces at the Mint gallery [in London]. It would be good to exhibit regularly but, anyway, hand-making individual pieces is hardly a commercial enterprise.”

We arrive at the old issue: the cost of hard-won artisanal craft versus the low prices the market demands. Good job she is thick-skinned.

Photographs: Gareth Iwan Jones

Norway’s taste for nature

“Scandinavian” is a byword for well-proportioned, functional design, but what distinguishes Norwegian design from its Nordic cousins? The rebranded Oslo Design Fair — which runs from January 28 to 31 — aims to answer this question, writes *Jenny Lee*. Much of the work on display utilises simple, often natural materials — glass, wood, wool and stone — with an emphasis on traditional craft techniques and their shrewd appropriation by contemporary designers.



“It’s all about picking up the old traditions,” says Grete Sivertsen, the fair’s director, “working with natural materials, using real, honest products.”

Jon Pettersen’s Jacquard-woven fabrics are fashioned from the wool of the endangered Norwegian Grey Troender sheep, while Hallgeir Homstvedt’s granite bookends reference Norwegian wildlife.

Also present in Homstvedt’s work is the spectre of long Nordic winters. His long-stemmed Growlight lamp is made for plant pots in need of light. The height of the lamp head can be adjusted as the plant grows.

Growlight lamp

There are references to Norway's industrial heritage, too. The geometric pattern of Osloform's brass laminate coasters is derived from the architecture of Norway's hydropower stations — a nod to the possibility that the water for your coffee may have generated the electricity to boil your kettle.

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