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THE TECHNOLOGY OF LEATHER FILLING AND ITS IMPORTANCE

Abbosbek Muxtorov[1], Akmal Yusupovich Toshev[2*], Tulkin Jumayevich Kodirov[2]
[1] Namangan State Technical University, 160605, Namangan, Uzbekistan
[2]Tashkent Institute of Textile and Light Industry, 100100, Shohzhahon-5, Tashkent, Uzbekistan
*E-mail: akmal-toshev-yu@mail.ru

Abstract
This article provides a comprehensive analysis of leather filling technology, one of the key steps in the leather processing industry. Natural leather often contains surface irregularities and structural imperfections that negatively impact the final product's aesthetics and durability. Filling involves applying special materials such as acrylic polymers, protein-based compounds, or synthetic latexes to smooth out the leather surface and improve physical-chemical properties. The study highlights the technological steps of surface preparation, application of fillers, drying, buffing, and finishing. The practical significance of filling in enhancing product quality, paint absorption, and market competitiveness is also emphasized. The article presents the types of fillers used in different industries and criteria for their selection based on usage context, ecological safety, and mechanical properties.
Keywords: Leather processing, leather filling, filler materials, acrylic polymers, protein-based fillers, finishing technology, leather surface, aesthetic quality, durability

Introduction

Leather is one of the most valuable natural materials that humanity has been using since ancient times. Its durability, flexibility, aesthetic appearance, and functional properties have led to its wide application in various fields — clothing, footwear, furniture, automotive interiors, and fashion design. As industrial demand for leather increases, processing technologies are continually improving. In this context, enhancing leather quality, preserving its attractiveness, eliminating defects, and increasing its usability have become priority goals. One of the crucial technological processes is leather filling. This technology is of unparalleled importance for creating a smooth and attractive surface by eliminating cracks, pits, and unevenness on the leather surface, as well as ensuring uniform distribution of dyes. This article presents a scientific analysis of leather filling technology, its stages, the materials used and their properties, industrial applications, and economic-export potential.

Leather Filling is a process in which special filler materials are applied to the leather surface to ensure smoothness, eliminate natural defects (such as fine cracks, pits, unevenness, bark marks), and provide uniformity to the leather. This process is a crucial stage in leather processing technology, as it directly affects the final product's appearance, quality level, and service life. Since leather is a material derived from a living organism (animal hide), its surface typically features various natural markings, minor defects, and structural irregularities. While such imperfections may, in some cases, lend a natural and unique look to the product, in many industrial sectors—especially for footwear, furniture, or automotive upholstery—leather with a smooth and even surface is required. In such cases, leather surface filling technology is applied.

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The materials used for leather filling are applied in one or more layers onto the surface. These substances fill in surface voids and level the leather. Once dried, the surface is sanded, and the desired physical and mechanical properties are developed. Subsequently, the leather is treated with dyes, lacquers, or other finishing coatings. This gives the leather a more attractive, uniform appearance and enhances its aesthetic appeal.

Filling serves not only decorative purposes—it also offers functional benefits, such as increasing the leather's strength, ensuring uniform dye absorption, and improving resistance to surface wear. Leather filling technology is typically classified into two main types:

- Full-surface filling: Filler materials are applied across the entire surface to achieve a smooth and flawless finish. This method is widely used in industrial production.
- Selective (spot) filling: Fillers are applied only to defective areas to preserve the leather's natural appearance. This method is more common with high-value leathers.

Stages of Leather Filling Technology

Leather filling technology involves a set of physicochemical treatments designed to smooth the surface, improve its aesthetic qualities, and enhance performance characteristics. The process consists of several sequential stages, each requiring specific materials and equipment. Below are the stages explained from a scientific-technological perspective:

1. Surface PreparationBefore filling, the leather surface must undergo special preparatory treatment. This stage includes the following processes:

- Mechanical cleaning: Dust, fine residues, bits of hide, and other physical impurities are removed using sanding machines or abrasive tools.
- Chemical cleaning: Organic solvents (such as ethanol, acetone, or special degreasers) are used to eliminate grease, dye, or other surface-adhering substances.
- Surface sanding: The leather is abraded with specialized materials to create a suitable adhesion environment for the filler substances.

This preparation phase is critical to ensure uniform distribution of the filler on the leather surface and to achieve strong adhesion.

Application of Filling Material

At this stage, special composite substances — **fillers** — are applied to the leather surface. The composition of fillers includes the following components: **Polymer bases** (e.g., acrylic, polyurethane, latex), **Base pigments** (to cover the surface and affect color), **Plasticizers** (to increase elasticity and smoothness), **Auxiliary substances** (emulsifiers, stabilizers, surfactants)

Filling is carried out in two ways: **Manual application** which is used in small-scale production or when special treatment is required, **Machine spraying**, which is done in large industrial enterprises using automated systems

Materials Used for Leather Filling

The materials used in the leather filling process are selected based on the leather's structure, intended application, aesthetic requirements, and usage conditions. Fillers perform the functions of filling surface irregularities, smoothing the surface, ensuring good adhesion of dyes and finishing materials, and imparting the required physical and chemical properties to the leather.

Below is a detailed description of the main types of filler materials widely used in leather filling, their composition, and technological properties:

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1. Acrylic-Based Fillers
Acrylic polymers are among the most common and widely used fillers. They are water-based, environmentally friendly, lightweight, and easy to apply.
Advantages: Dries quickly, Has good adhesion properties, Provides elasticity and smoothness to the surface, Well compatible with dyes and lacquers, Easy to apply by spraying when diluted
Applications: Widely used in footwear leather, furniture leather, and automotive interior leather coverings
2. Natural Protein-Based Fillers
These fillers are of natural origin and are often made from gelatin, collagen, or other animal proteins. They are known for their environmental safety and biological compatibility with leather.

- **Advantages**:
  - Bonds well with leather as a natural material
  - Low risk of allergic reactions
  - Creates a "breathable" (permeable) surface
  - Biodegradable
- **Disadvantages**:
  - Less resistant to water
  - Short shelf-life and may degrade quickly
- **Applications**:
  - Used for high-quality products (premium segment), including handbags, garment leather, and designer items

3. Synthetic Polymers
This group includes fillers with high mechanical and chemical resistance, such as polyurethanes, polyvinyl chloride (PVC), and epoxies. They form a strong, flexible, and abrasion-resistant coating on the leather surface.

- **Advantages**:
  - Strong adhesion
  - Resistant to wear and mechanical stress
  - Maintains shape at different temperatures
  - Excellent protective properties (against water, oil, and chemicals)
- **Disadvantages**:
  - May reduce the natural breathability of the leather surface
  - Higher production costs
- **Applications**:
  - Widely used in industrial production; especially for technical leather, sports goods, and industrial clothing

4. Latex Blends
Latex is a dispersion of natural or synthetic rubber and is used as a filler to ensure high elasticity and surface adhesion. In addition to natural latex, synthetic latexes such as styrene-butadiene and nitrile latex are also widely used.

- **Advantages**:
  - High elasticity and flexibility
  - Resistant to stretching and bending
  - Easily applied and evenly distributed over the surface

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- **Disadvantages**:
  - May degrade quickly under UV exposure
  - Requires lacquering after bonding
- **Applications**:
  - Footwear industry, soft leather goods, gloves, and leather surfaces for car interiors

Conclusion

Leather filling technology plays a crucial role in modern leather processing, serving both aesthetic and functional purposes. As a natural material, leather often contains surface irregularities such as cracks, pores, and scars, which can negatively impact the appearance, dye uniformity, and durability of the final product. Filling these imperfections with specialized materials helps produce smooth, visually appealing, and structurally enhanced leather surfaces. The filling process improves leather quality by increasing its tensile strength, elasticity, and resistance to wear and environmental factors. It also ensures uniform dye absorption and enhances the overall finish, contributing to the longevity and aesthetic consistency of leather goods. Moreover, properly filled leather surfaces are more compatible with subsequent finishing processes such as coloring, embossing, and lacquering. Different types of fillers — including acrylic-based, protein-based, synthetic polymers, and latex blends — are selected based on the intended use of the leather, required mechanical properties, and environmental standards. The step-by-step technological process — from surface preparation and filler application to drying, grinding, and finishing — is essential to achieving high-quality leather suitable for competitive markets. Ultimately, leather filling significantly enhances the value and marketability of leather products, enabling manufacturers to meet modern design standards, consumer expectations, and international quality benchmarks. This process is not only a technical necessity but also a strategic component in the production of premium-grade leather goods for domestic and export markets.

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