

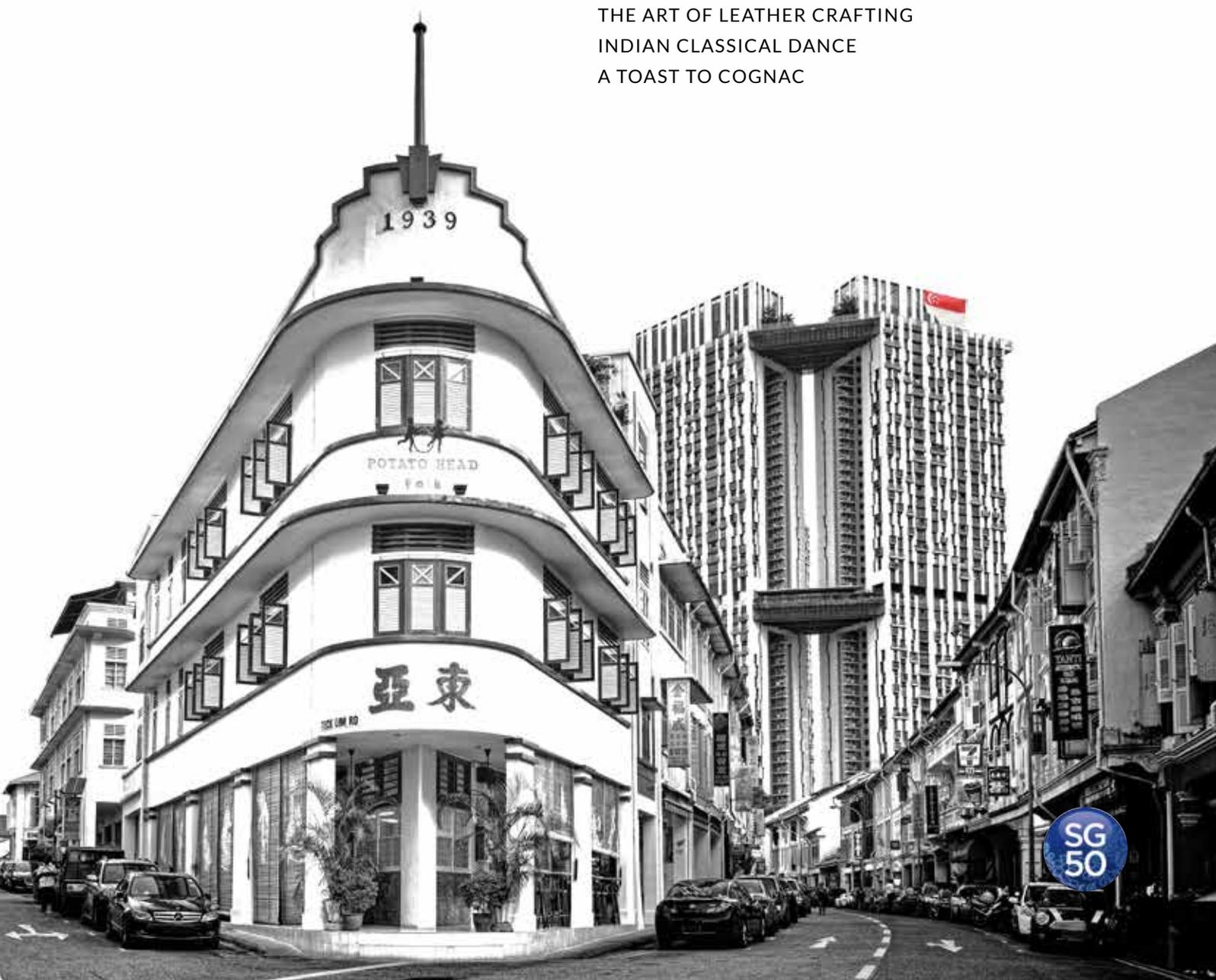
# PRIORITY

EXCLUSIVELY FOR PPS CLUB MEMBERS 

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## SINGAPORE'S GOLDEN JUBILEE

THE ART OF LEATHER CRAFTING  
INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE  
A TOAST TO COGNAC





# Crafting tradition

A new generation of artisans is helping to preserve the skills of leather crafting. Erica Wong takes a closer look at how such beautiful accessories are created by hand

There's a certain warmth that only exists when the people in a place love being there. I look around the workshop, taking it all in. The gentle, intoxicating perfume of new leather fills my nostrils; somewhere in the background, Jim Croce strums away on a record player. A large workbench that's the centrepiece of the room is strewn with a kaleidoscope of leather scraps. On a side table sit stacks of wallets, coin purses and saddlebags. Curious turn-of-the-century-ish machines line one wall. Opposite, a countertop is laid out with an array of mallets, chisels and awls. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a bottle of Laphroaig tucked away rather conspicuously.

**Facing page:**  
Putting the finishing touches to a leather case

So far, all is as expected – the intimate lair of a passionate craftsman.

Jeremiah Ang, founder of Singapore-based leather studio The J. Myers Company, leans forward in his olive green Chester armchair, its handsomely worn leather upholstery a testament to both the owner's style and the seat's functionality. "You apply a layer of dye to the edge of the leather, let it dry, heat it up, sand it down, bathe it and then re-apply the dye again. You keep repeating the process. The more repetitions you do, the smoother and richer it will feel. It's tedious, but it's also a very beautiful process that turns the unfinished item into a finished one." He is talking animatedly about his favourite step in the leather crafting process: finishing the edges. →



This kind of passion for traditional craftsmanship runs through an entire new generation of leather artisans. For example, Keiko Oshino, owner of Kyoto leather crafting shop Rim, is a self-taught artisan who takes pride in sticking to traditional European hand-sewing techniques used by harness makers over many generations. Her brightly-coloured wallets, bags and book covers are made without the aid of a single machine tool. Meanwhile in the UK, Deborah Thomas has resurrected her great-great-grandfather's leather business, producing a range of contemporary bags and accessories under the Doe label, hand-crafted from bridle hide in one of the last remaining Black Country leather goods workshops.

Every artisan shows a deep respect for the craft's history. Recently discovered, the world's oldest leather shoe dates back an estimated 5,500 years to an era before the Ancient Greeks, the

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Persians, or the Egyptians before them. Ever since the domestication of animals, the use of their hides has evolved alongside humanity. Initially as defense against the elements, animal hides became writing material for the learned, weapons in battle and, years later, as fashion for those who could afford it. All through history, the art of leathermaking was perfected while its applications multiplied.

With the advent of production lines in the late 1800s, leathermaking eased into factories and soon, machines dedicated

to skinning, splitting and tanning were churning out products. Yet, while leather goods became more affordable and widely available, mass production came at the expense of long-lasting quality.

That's not to say that traditional craftsmanship faded away completely of course. Accompanying me into adulthood was a navy blue leather clutch I had inherited from my grandmother. Flecked entirely with delicate, hand-painted white and yellow flowers, each flick of the paintbrush was intentional, any mistake unforgivable. Pressed onto the front was a barely-there Gucci logo, affirming that true artistry was what mattered most to the creator. The stitching and finishing remained impeccable after 20 years of use, the shiny hardware unscratched and the piece demurely yet firmly retaining its handmade, irreplaceable quality.

As leather artisans from Thailand to Tuscany can

**Above:** Moynat's Réjane bag.  
**Facing page, clockwise from top:** Handmade leather case by The J.Myers Company suitable for a tablet computer; rolls of leather; stitching in a zip

[ BESPOKE ]



**Clockwise from right:** Edge dyeing a case by hand; the stitching of a detail can become a key design element; glossy clutches by Mulberry

attest, and as evidenced by my prized clutch, a quality handcrafted leather item sits at the pinnacle of luxury. Every hide unique, every artisan his own style, and every finished product a triumphant sum total of its elements.

Nobody understands this better than the dozen or so grande dames of luxury leather houses around the globe. With access to the world's best leathers, suppliers and skilled artisans, these maisons shun automation in favour of shaping, trimming, attaching, sewing, stitching, fixing and finishing their leather products – by hand. Take for example the luxury French brand Moynat. The private brainchild of LVMH Chairman Arnault Pinault may have mystery as its





first allure, but the more substantial draw is invariably its bags, each made from lustrous, thick and perfectly grained leathers, and generally from one piece. Mulberry, the UK's largest maker of luxury leather goods, counts on no less than 700 skilled workers to craft its highly coveted bags.

Meanwhile, in other parts of the leather world, we've been witnessing the rise of the independent craftsman. Armed with humble tools and a deep conviction, this contemporary artisan cleverly pairs traditional techniques with modern aesthetics and digital marketing wizardry.

Let's be clear here: today's artisans aren't trying to reinvent the wheel – there is nothing new about a saddlebag or a coin purse. Rather, their mission is to reveal the creative and creation processes to a wider audience, including why they have dedicated themselves to these processes.

An equally important mission is to bring the age-old craft into the 21st century, finding that cross-section where innovation meets tradition.

“In pattern-making, we used to use a set square, a ruler and a pencil. Now, we draw it on a computer and use a laser cutter to

**Every hide unique, every artisan his own style, and every finished product a triumphant sum total of its elements**

cut it out. So in this sense, technology has made our work better, not just easier. Yet while there are some steps that can be automated, some effects can never be achieved by machines,” Jeremiah Ang explains with a wry smile.

Having witnessed the painstaking processes in his Singapore workshop, it's clear that there are no short-cuts when it comes to quality. Honing a craft like this to mastery may take decades, or even a lifetime. When asked about the greatest attribute a master leather craftsman can have, Ang's instant yet calm response: “Patience. Lots and lots of patience.” ■