

Handmade Things Medieval Leatherwork Worksheet

A lot of medieval leatherwork has been found in archaeological deposits in Hull and Beverley and is now kept in Hull and East Riding Museum. There is a very good online collection, if you want to browse it there are some very good high res pictures that you can look at there is a link in the resources at the foot of this worksheet.

Leather is very useful material it is strong, supple, hardwearing and is quite easy to get hold of as it is a by-product of the food industry and as a result it can be used for many purposes including shoes, horse harness, purses & pouches and also knife sheaths. In the video we looked at the process of making and decorating a knife sheath

Medieval Leatherwork was usually decorated, either with impressed lines or with stamped decoration. Usually the stamps were in simple shapes, but were used repeatedly to create an all-over pattern. Either separated in a grid or closely spaced to create a rich texture, they might also be accompanied by embossed lines forming a frame, or a grid in which the stamps were placed.



A selection of replica medieval leather stamps.

Another way that medieval craftsmen used stamps was to create a textured background for carved figures. In the example below, a stamp has been used to make a textured background to throw the letters into relief.



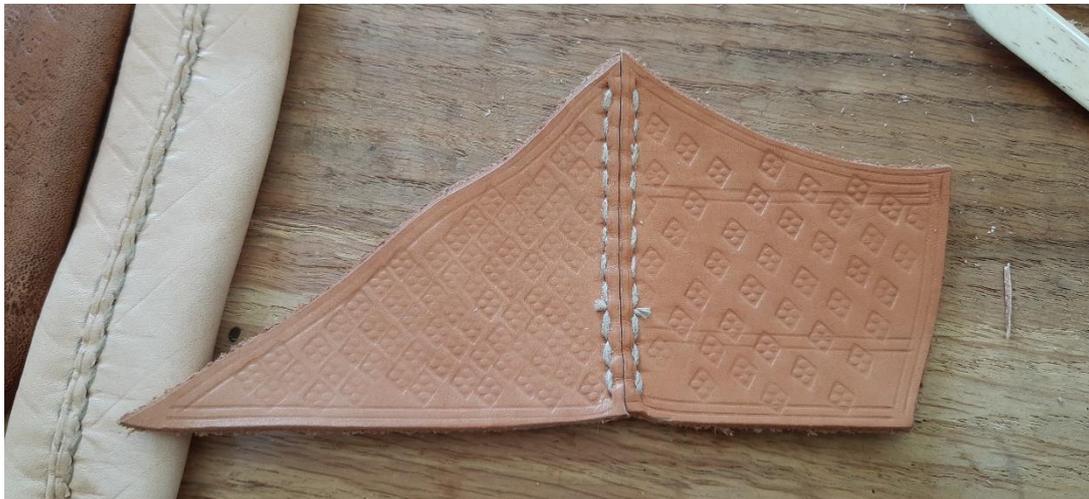
Carved letters which stand out in relief against a heavily stamped background.

As not everyone has access to leather and specialist stamps, why not use paint and paper to create a medieval inspired stamped pattern instead? For a stamp you could use an object you have around the house which will not mind being covered in paint (choose one which is washable – Lego blocks work quite nicely) or you could carve a simple stamp from something soft and easy to work. Potatoes would be a good choice, but carrots, would work instead. Or you could carve an eraser if you wanted a longer lasting stamp. Choose a simple shape – the one I used in the film was the diamond with four spots. The key is to use the stamp in a repeated pattern so that the simplicity of the stamp adds to the overall design.

Now that your stamp is ready, choose some paint and start stamping. Choose a good thick paint, not too runny, poster paint, standard acrylic paint or even left-over emulsion paint will all work,

For the lines, a pen or pencil and straight edge will give you nice clean lines or you could draw them freehand as I did in the film.

Decide whether you are going to space your stamps out to make use of the blank space between the stamps, as I did in the film, or whether you want to stamp closely together to give an allover texture. The picture below shows the different effects produced by using the same stamp in different ways.



Sampler showing how different effects can be achieved using the same stamp in different ways.

Some Medieval craftsmen used very simple stamps in unusual ways to build up a design. The case below uses just two simple stamps combined with embossed lines to make a floral design. The stamps are a simple round – you could use the eraser on the end of a pencil, and a small straight stamp used in sets of three – the handle of a teaspoon would work for that.



Floral pattern on a leather case made using simple stamped shapes and embossed lines.

If you don't fancy paint and paper, but happen to be making biscuits or pastry, you could decorate the surface of that in a medieval inspired pattern (make sure you wash the Lego first!)

Once you have made some simple patterns, why not browse the online collection and see what other designs you could make?



My copy of the Birdman Sheath.

Further reading:

Knives & Scabbards. Medieval Finds from Excavations in London. Cowgill, de Neergaard & Griffiths (Museum of London ISBN 978-1-84383-353-6)

Purses in Pieces: Archaeological Finds of Late Medieval and 16th-Century Leather Purses, Pouches, Bags and Cases in the Netherlands. Olaf Goubitz, ISBN: 9789089320148

The Archaeology of York The Small Finds 17/16. Craft Industry and Everyday Life. Leather and Leatherworking in Anglo-Scandinavian and Medieval York. Quita Mould, Ian Carlisle and Esther Cameron. (pdf: https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/yat_2011/downloads.cfm)

Hull Museums Collections: <http://museumcollections.hullcc.gov.uk/collections/search-results/resultsoverview.php?keywordsorig=&titleorig=&personorig=&placeorig=&dateorig=&materialorig=&accessionnumberorig=&collectionorig=&museumorig=&keywords=medieval+leather&SearchSubmit.x=0&SearchSubmit.y=0&title=&person=&place=&date=&material=&accessionnumber=&collectionall=all&museumall=all&location=any>