

# Newly Old Stock

Unable to find period-correct leather for his Ferrari upholstery business, Henk van Lith decided to make his own leather—the way it used to be done.

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PHOTOS COURTESY HVL EXCLUSIVE ITALIAN INTERIORS

**Authenticity means everything** in the world of Ferrari restoration, with items as diverse as paint color and hose clamps coming under serious scrutiny. Henk van Lith believes strongly in this mission, and is happy to talk with anyone about his areas of expertise: vintage Ferrari interiors and genuine classic leather.

“I was at a concours a few years ago and a Ferrari owner wanted to show me his car,” he recalls. “When we walked over to it, I looked in the window and said, ‘No, I don’t want to get any

closer.’ He was surprised, but I could see from outside the car the leather was all wrong. I can’t not speak my mind about that, not because I want to offend but because it’s incorrect.”

What van Lith means by “wrong” is that the Ferrari’s interior had not been restored with leather created using methods available when the car was new. Instead, it had been outfitted with what he calls “modern” leather, which is easier to produce and lacks the irregularities of natural hide, but doesn’t look, smell, or feel the same as the original.



Old-style Connolly leather, which Ferrari used to trim the majority (but by no means all) of its cars from 1947 through the mid-1980s, isn't easy to find. The company went out of business in 2002, and today's reborn Connolly deals in modern-style leather. So van Lith, the owner of HVL Exclusive Italian Interiors in The Netherlands, bought the original company's complete remaining stock. Then, knowing his private stash would not last forever, he purchased a half-share in a small tannery and set about replicating the classic Connolly formula.

**T**anning, the process of turning animal (usually cow) hide into leather, dates back more than 5,000 years. While the particulars have changed dramatically over the millennia, the basic steps remain roughly the same.

First, the animal is slaughtered and skinned. The hide is then cured (dried) to prevent decay, then cleaned, de-haired, and soaked in preparation for tanning.

During tanning—so named for the tannins found in oak-tree bark, which was once used in the process—the hide is immersed in a chemical bath. These chemicals, usually salts or tannins, soak into the hide, where they bind with collagen proteins and make the hide softer, more flexible, and very resistant to decay.

Next, it's time to color the leather. Traditionally, it was surface dyed, with colorant rubbed (in more recent times, sprayed) onto one surface, where it soaked in and tinted that surface. Once the dye dried, the leather was ready to be cut to shape and sewn into seats, door panels, whatever was needed.

Since the leather was still very close to its natural appearance (color notwithstanding), it wasn't perfectly consistent. Visible imperfections could end up in full view on a seat, while multiple sections of leather sewn



**ABOVE** HVL owner Henk van Lith stands among racks of original Connolly leather he purchased when that company went out of business. **BELOW**, L-R Sample book of Connolly leather grains; just a few of the more than 6,500 Connolly color samples van Lith acquired for his historic archive.



together might look and/or feel different. (The latter is no surprise, since an animal's hide differs depending on where it's located.)

These and other concerns, including financial and environmental, led Connolly to innovate. Thus, the company's leather of the 1940s was different than the leather it produced in the 1950s, which in turn was different from that of

the 1960s, '70s, and so on. For example, in the mid-1970s Connolly began using a grain roller, a heavy cylinder that pressed the hide to a uniform thickness and created an artificial surface texture. Around the same time it also introduced vat dyeing, in which the hide was immersed in a liquid bath that colored both sides, resulting in deeper, richer hues that better hid surface scratches.

Today, van Lith says, most automotive leathers are grain rolled and then receive a spray coating of colored vinyl, which fills the hide's pores for an even smoother surface. "I barely consider it leather any more," he opines. "It's pleather. There are no pores, no smell. It looks like plastic because it is plastic."

In addition to coated leather's appearance, van Lith



BELOW LEFT After vat or surface dyeing, cured Class Leather hides are wrapped up and prepared for shipping. BELOW RIGHT Modern-style coated leather utilizes fillers and spray-on vinyl finish for shiny, uniform appearance.



a fan of its durability. With coated leather the color is painted on, and it can be rubbed off," he says. "I see it all the time, even on new cars. Coated leather shrinks and misshapen will show up where the leather was stretched, then the coating comes off quite easily. Human sweat can also cause the coating to become brittle and peel off, which also happens very quickly."

Van Lith started his upholstery career in the aviation industry, in 1981, and eventually became the head of his department. "We had a two policies there: to not make mistakes and to check, check, and recheck," he explains. "We followed the [national aviation rules], and all the materials had to be correct for fire safety and toxicity. If an airplane goes down because of

my mistake, wow, you don't want to think about that!"

He carried those mantras with him when he decided to strike out on his own, in 1989, and start HVL. "When I started working on Ferraris, I had already spent many years collecting all the brochures having to do with classic Ferraris," says the fast-talking van Lith, "because that was my passion. But I was not telling everyone I

was a specialist, because I wasn't. But I wanted to be, so I called the Ferrari factory, got Mr. Matteo Torre on the line, and asked him to help me become a specialist. He told me, 'You're the only one who ever started on their own and asked us for help. This question is so special we will help you.' And he connected me with Leonardo Fioravanti, of Pininfarina, who I am still in good contact with, and also got me in contact with old guys like Jacques Swaters of Belgium, all these guys who had been around when the cars were new. They have helped me build my archive of carpet, headliners, vinyls, fabrics, and leathers."

Since Connolly had changed its formulations over the years, even 30 years ago it was often challenging to get the correct leather for a given car. That's why, when the company went out of business, van Lith arranged to purchase its remaining stock.

"I became very good friends with 'the face of the factory' David Connolly long before he died, in 1996," says van Lith. "At the moment the company closed, we bought everything, like all the hides, company relics, factory drawings, old bronze Connolly stamps, and much more. We still have many of the hides on trollies here, still unpacked, and still with the factory labels."

Van Lith also came away with Connolly's sample books, which contain leather samples in every color offered every year, and documentation, which included directions for how to prepare, grain, and dye the hides.

"There were around eight changes in Connolly Vaumol leather because of leather innovations from the 1940s until the factory closed," he says. "Even from year to year, you can sometimes see small changes in the color or the texture, even if the name or code doesn't change. We have around 6,500 genuine classic Connolly color samples and comprehensive genuine archive documents, which are crucial to knowing

exactly what leather went into a particular car.

"The old factory employees, especially David, and others were so generous in giving me the old factory archive documents and samples. David said, 'We don't look back any more, we look forward,' and I said, 'Then let me look backwards.' I got so many, many boxes full of samples and archives: how to make the leathers, the formulas. It was just amazing."

Between the records he gathered from Ferrari and

BBI production, in 1984, at which time the 12-cylinder cars were also switched to Autolux.

Maranello stopped sourcing leather from Connolly in 2001, when it switched completely to current supplier Poltrona Frau, which makes modern-style leather. It's worth noting that while old-style Connolly was the most-common leather used by Ferrari in the last century, it wasn't the only one. Other suppliers included Franzi, Roser, Arbotan, and Bridge of Weir, all of which looked different and

tomter I cannot supply the correct leather."

Van Lith contacted tanneries all over the world, and discovered that almost no one was still making leather the old way. "The market was too small, there was no money in it," he recalls. "We were working with a few companies, but it was not making sense. At one, I had to buy a minimum of 1,000 meters in one color. I said, 'I have 6,500 Connolly samples and 4,000 samples from other manufacturers, how can I do that?' Connolly

HVL calls its reproduction leather "Class Leather," and van Lith aims to exactly re-create any leather in his archive, whether it was surface or vat dyed, grain rolled or not. He starts by choosing the highest quality, factory-selected raw hides, then mimics the original production process as much as possible.

"Many others had tried to replicate the Connolly formula and failed," says van Lith. "I once showed our leather to a former Connolly shareholder, an old friend of David Connolly, and he was pleasantly surprised by the authenticity of quality, color, finish, and aroma. He's now 86 years old and still visits us regularly."

Today, HVL ships many hides of Class Leather per day to customers around the world. Van Lith says his leather has appeared in many concours-winning cars, not all of them Ferraris. "After Pebble Beach this year, I heard that three Citroens that won prizes had our Class Leather," he says. He's just as proud of his standing with Ferrari Classiche: "Our certificate [when we restore a car's interior] is recognized as proof of originality. Ferrari needs to look no further."

The company has also expanded into supplying correct carpeting, fabrics, and vinyls, all of which van Lith takes as seriously as leather. "The main section of the Dino's vinyl headliner changed from diamond-pattern perforations into square perforations with the 'L' series," he rattles off from memory. "I think that was around chassis number 00630, but I'll have to look in the archive for the exact number."

As for Van Lith himself, he's still an upholsterer. "I did the interior on the first Daytona prototype a few years ago, and I'm working on a 250 Europa right now," he says after answering his shop phone at 8 o'clock one evening, "and I have a pair of Daytona seats here, too. I'm actually booked with Ferraris for the next three and a half years!" ●

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Pininfarina, van Lith compiled an archive that can tell him, on almost every car—by year, series, and serial number—built in Maranello prior to the 1990s, what materials were used inside. He can then cross-reference this information with the various factory samples to come up with a full, period-correct picture of a given car.

Generally speaking, Ferrari used a Connolly pre-grain roller, surface-dyed leather called Vaumol until 1976, when the 308 GTB (but not the 308 GT4 or 208 series) received Connolly's grain-rolled, vat-dyed Autolux leather. A vat-dyed Vaumol D (for dyed) leather arrived around that time, and was used through the end of 512

also potentially evolved over time. Van Lith has managed to find thousands of samples from these companies, as well.

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"After Connolly went out of business, I was wondering what I could do with all the samples if no one was making it any more," he recalls. "I decided to pull myself together and see what I had to do so I would never, ever have to tell a cus-

alone had 75 different grains. So, in 2003, we decided that if no one else could help us then we had to do this on our own."

He soon found a small tannery in The Netherlands that was interested in his vision—if the terms were right. Van Lith ended up becoming a partner in the tannery, then bought the machines and began to experiment with making new-old leathers.

"It took three years, cost a lot of money, and it was not the easiest way to go," he says. "It took more time and effort than expected to create a spot-on product. It really took off after four years, when people got to know us and we got to be the best."