

# Raising the bar

Sustainability and transparency are at the heart of German leather goods brand Leit & Held's ethos, which the company is promoting through detailed insights behind-the-scenes of its supply and production chain. **Isabella Griffiths** spoke to Nina Conrad, the label's Head of Supply Chain Management, to find out more.

**ILM: How would you describe the concept of your brand?**

**Nina Conrad:** Leit & Held was founded in 2018 by Pia Held, an art director and designer, and Dana Mikoleit, an interior architect. I joined in 2018 as Head of Supply Chain Management as my background is in sustainability management. At the core of the brand's philosophy is our desire to offer natural products which have been manufactured as sustainably as possible. We want to work with purely natural materials, which either grow in abundance or are by-products of another industry, and leather is key. We design our products with longevity in mind, so that they will last, they can be looked after, mended if necessary, and will stand the test of time. Our designs are therefore timeless, we don't chase trends and short lived fast fashion fads. We are finding that this is increasingly resonating with customers, who particularly love our lighter coloured leathers that have retained their most natural look.

**ILM: Where do you source your leather? You stress that it is as 'close to the source as possible'.**

**NC:** Indeed, we start at the source, the animal itself, and at the abattoir. We work directly and closely with an abattoir in the South of Germany, Fairfleisch ("fair meat"); a small enterprise which adheres to strict animal welfare standards and slaughters the animals in a humane and ethical way. For instance, they will be slaughtering maybe four animals an hour, not 400 as is the case in many industrial slaughterhouses. The founder himself sources the animals from other small regional and certified farmers, on average just around 30 km from the slaughterhouse, so their origin can be traced back to the individual farm. There are no



From left to right: Dana Mikoleit, Pia Held and Nina Conrad, the trio behind Leit & Held

long transport routes either. They can guarantee that the animals have been treated well throughout their whole lifespan, up until the abattoir.

**ILM: What were your selection criteria when you were sourcing your suppliers?**

**NC:** It was quite difficult. Independent abattoirs with such a mindset and code and conduct are still relatively few and far between. The tendency is definitely towards large-scale slaughterhouses and mass operations. However, when you look properly, you can find businesses that share the same animal welfare and ethical standards. We found Fairfleisch not by starting with what kind of abattoir we wanted to work with, but through animal welfare considerations and how we wanted the animals to have been farmed and treated. And it was through dealing with farmers that we came across Fairfleisch. The founder was immediately on board and loved our concept. The traditional pit tannery that we use is also just 40 minutes' drive away from Fairfleisch, which is great as it allowed the tanner to liaise with the abattoir and accommodate a lot of our requirements, and now we have a smooth, direct supply chain. There is so much talk about transparency, and it is generally considered a very hard thing to achieve, but it does not have to be, you just have to make a start somewhere. If bigger brands with higher volumes and scale can come on-board, then this is definitely achievable. You could scale what we are doing to much bigger operations. There are more and more farmers, abattoirs and tanners out there that are supporting this kind of way of working, but they do need the support and partnerships with brands.

**ILM: Why is sustainability such a big part of your brand ethos?**

**NC:** Our planet is in danger. We need to provide the next generation with a future, and we can all do something. There is a palpable shift in consumer mindsets – they are increasingly questioning the way their products are made and where and how they have been sourced, although, unfortunately, price is still the most powerful factor. When it comes to the big, global brands, a lot of them talk the talk and say all the right things, but so far there has been little action. If brands were really committed to change, they



The brand wants to break down prejudices and works with independent farmers, abattoirs and artisan craftsmen to create its leather goods.

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would just do it. That's why it's very important to us to be fairly radical in our approach. Sustainability is an over-used word that is too easily tossed around, whereas we take it very seriously. We are forever developing and researching the market and what's out there; we take part in conferences, trade shows, webinars and learn as much as possible; we trial, we experiment, we invest a lot of time in learning and educating ourselves about latest innovations in material science, traceability, animal welfare etc. so we can improve our project, but also so we are able to pass our knowledge on to others.

**ILM: How interested are your customers in animal welfare, transparency and sustainability issues?**

**NC:** The majority of our customers are quite informed and they want to know about our processes. The general feedback is that they are glad there are leather goods out there that they can buy with a good conscience. Of course there are some customers who buy our products purely because they like the look of them and nothing else. But we are fine with that, because it still enables us to inspire them with our story and ethos, and that way we are able to reach people who would have otherwise never thought about sustainability or how their goods have been made. Our customer profile is very diverse, young and old. They have in common that they can

appreciate the high quality and longevity of our products, and that unlike cheaper items where the dye might peel off after a while or they break and need to be discarded, our leather goods are made to last, and in that respect have got a far smaller environmental impact than any of today's other, alternative materials. Our products just get better with age.

Sometimes we get negative comments, especially from vegans, who regularly challenge us on how we can consider it still ethical to produce leather goods in today's world. I remember being at a conference and a lady from Peta attacked me. I do not actually think that we are that far apart in our ideologies, but they cannot see that; we are also concerned with animal welfare and we are trying to achieve better practices. I just don't believe a planet where everybody is vegan is feasible and realistic.

**ILM: What do you feel can be done about leather's image problem?**

**NC:** I have noticed that when I want to talk about beautiful leather goods and speak to people about it, the fact that leather comes from animals and that they are slaughtered does crop up in a negative way and I feel an element of trepidation whether this will cause controversy or a hostile reaction. However, it's part of the leathermaking process, and the only way to break down prejudices is to talk about it more and be as



Leit & Held specialises in classic, timeless bags, laptop sleeves and wallets made from full-substance, vegetable tanned cow leather.

open and transparent as possible. People have to understand that the alternative to not making leather is to simply burn hides or dump them in landfill and that the environmental impact of that will be so much worse.

**ILM: Your marketing is very transparent and your website depicts in detail your supply chain from animal to finished product. Why did you choose to be so open and what is the response to such honest marketing?**

**NC:** We decided very early on that we wanted to be as transparent as possible. This is not actually a marketing strategy, but the education of consumers about the leather making process is genuinely close to our hearts. So many people just really don't have a clue about how leather is made, which makes them more susceptible to false information and anti-leather sentiments. So we decided that we wanted to showcase every step of our process, starting with which farms and animals we select, how they are reared, how old they are when they are slaughtered,

where and how they are slaughtered, how the leather is made and tanned, and how we then turn it into our products and decide on our pricing structure.

It is of course challenging to break this down into accessible, bite-sized pieces of information that convey all of this adequately, but it seems to get a good response and resonates with people. There is actually a real desire for knowledge, and allowing people a glimpse behind the scenes really helps break down a lot of the negative perceptions.

We are interested in real discourse, we do not want to ignore or downplay peoples' concerns about animal welfare, to the contrary, we want to reassure them, and by being transparent about our entire supply and production chain, we hope we can explain everything better and prove that in fact our products are much more environmentally friendly than the fossil fuel based alternatives. Few people know the truth about the environmental footprint of all the 'vegan' materials, which is surely more off-putting than leather. And the bio-based materials are currently not a real alternative either. They are interesting innovations, Bolt Threads and Pinatex etc., but currently they are nowhere near equivalent to leather or scaleable to the same degree, and they still need to be coated in chemicals. Not to mention the lack of haptic, patina or the smell of leather which none of the fake leathers even come close to.

**ILM: What are your plans for your brand going forward?**

**NC:** In terms of the collection, we are looking to expand into other product categories such as home interiors, furniture and possibly footwear, either on our own or in collaboration with other brands. We also want to add more natural materials to our repertoire, such as sheepskins for instance. Apart from that, we want to continue to reach as many people as possible with our message. We are really open to sharing our experience, supply chain processes, insights or contacts with anyone who is interested; we are big believers in collaboration and feel that only by working together as an industry we will be able to achieve true sustainability. |

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