



## THE GLOBE AND MAIL

April 2, 2011

### How much shagreen is too much?

By Amy Verner

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

*The hide of the cowtail stingray is a hot design commodity, but is our lust for it endangering the graceful fish?*

When actress Rosario Dawson attended the Screen Actors Guild Awards in January, she was carrying an elegant minaudière from Salvatore Ferragamo's spring accessories collection. Featuring a nubby pearl-like finish, that little ornamental cosmetics case costs nearly \$1,300 (U.S.), but it isn't real stones that lend it its texture - or its price. Rather, the case is covered with shagreen, a.k.a. stingray skin, which is fast becoming the fashion and design finish du jour.

If you can get past the thought of graceful cowtail stingrays, sinuous sea creatures that resemble undersea flying carpets, becoming card cases, cuffs and clutches, shagreen (pronounced sha-GRIN) is uncommonly sumptuous in look and feel.

As the Ferragamo minaudière suggests, the material (another name for it is galuchat) isn't cheap, although it isn't nearly as expensive as python or ostrich. Dunhill's shagreen-covered Rubik's cube - each of the 54 squares is covered in hand-applied polished galuchat - costs \$1,950 (U.S.), while a series of gem-studded shagreen cuffs by Toronto jeweller Myles Mindham go for \$1,300 to \$4,750 apiece. At Hermès, the luxury firm's new furniture collection includes nesting tables available in shagreen - price upon request.

In the past, shagreen might have referred to either sharkskin or stingray. It was used by ancient Chinese and Japanese warriors to cover sword handles but really became a status symbol among the European aristocracy when Jean-Claude Galuchat, a leatherworker for Louis XV, started using shagreen for jewellery boxes and other small objects. Its other major heyday was the art deco period in the 1920s; most stingray-skin antiques - from desktops to lamps - date back to this time.

"Shagreen has always been considered a luxury item," says Jesse Aguirre, who manages Krispen, a Houston home-furnishings store that carries picture and mirror frames, trays and boxes wrapped in the material. "It's a masculine-looking thing and highly decorative."

Like any skin, shagreen must undergo various treatments before it becomes consumer-ready. The most important step involves grinding down the rough placoid scales - small calcified papillae or buds - to achieve a smooth yet pebbly appearance. The skin is then dyed from the reverse side, its unique ultimate colour further defining it.

As a finished product, shagreen is also much more challenging to work with than conventional leather, a factor that accounts for its steeper cost. In an e-mail message from England, Peter Udeshi of Udeshi London, the Mayfair men's-wear and -accessories house, explains that the skins have to be a certain size before his designer brother Oscar is able to use them. "If they are too small, the central pearl looks cheap and the skin is too thin. If they're too big, the central pearl is substantial and attractive but too raised and the skin is too thick, resulting in more of the bigger pearls at the edge," he writes, adding that his brother personally inspects every skin they use, accepting one

Still, the novelty makes the effort worthwhile. Shagreen cardholders that Udeshi offered last year, Peter says, sold out at Christmas (more will be arriving in a few weeks). Some customers, he added, purchased two because each of the skins showed such unique characteristics.

Shagreen's inherent beauty was also the reason behind Toronto jeweller Mindham's introduction of a stingray-skin cuff collection this past fall. In addition to a smoky black, the bold bijoux come in green, turquoise, pink and red.

Women, Mindham says, tend to respond to shagreen more strongly than men, who gravitate toward traditional gold and diamond jewellery. "It's still an upward climb for some people," he admits. "But it's good to be on the edge of innovative."

Cowtail stingrays are elasmobranches, the fish group that includes sharks and skates. They are known for their long lives, slow growth and low rates of reproduction. According to Jennifer Lash, executive director for Living Oceans Society, a non-profit marine-conservation group, no Canadian rays are currently used for leather, but demand for shagreen is increasing worldwide, as a University of British Columbia paper suggested in 2003. In that study, researcher Daniel Pauly noted that imports (largely from Thailand and Indonesia) doubled in five years beginning in the late 1990s.

So is shagreen eco-friendly? While "a lack of data" prevents a full assessment of stingray stock right now, there's a concern "that the demand for luxury items is putting unnecessary pressure on them," Lash says from Sointula, B.C.


Enter, for those who may be undecided, high-end faux shagreen, an alternative to the real stuff that may or may not be endangered. Among the designers turning to printed leathers that mimic the same bubbly effect are Diane von Furstenberg and Rebecca Minkoff. "My customer responds to exotics or anything that resembles an exotic," New York-based Minkoff, who began playing around with the mock material in 2007, says over the phone. "If consumers can experience luxury and it looks well done, they're happy to be able to walk around with [it]."

Cost-wise, Minkoff says, faux shagreen is only a few dollars more expensive than regular leather to work with, about \$6 a square foot compared to \$4 for cowhide. This translates into a reasonably priced \$375 faux-shagreen summer wedge shoe that conveys a similar look.

Sure, the mock finish is flatter and slightly less rich, but it's a fair compromise - and one that's free of any, ahem, chagrin.

CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc

---

 The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.. Permission granted for up to 5 copies. All rights reserved.  
You may forward this article or get additional permissions by typing [http://license.icopyright.net/3.8425?](http://license.icopyright.net/3.8425?icx_id=/icopyright/?artid=1966132)

[icx\\_id=/icopyright/?artid=1966132](http://license.icopyright.net/3.8425?icx_id=/icopyright/?artid=1966132) into any web browser. CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc and Globe and Mail logos are registered trademarks of CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc . The iCopyright logo is a registered trademark of iCopyright, Inc.