



Dr Tiberio Daddi of the Santa Anna School of Advanced Studies in Pisa.
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Professor Frank Mitloehner at the 2019 World Leather Congress in New York.

Leather bites the Big Apple

The fourth World Leather Congress took place in New York on July 16, with 'leather in everyday life' as the main theme.

Joint hosts of the event were Leather Industries of America (LIA) and the United States Hide Skin and Leather Association (USHSLA); the congress was organised under the auspices of the International Council of Tanners, ICT, with the administrative assistance of Italian tanning industry body UNIC, the organiser of the Lineapelle exhibitions. The 2019 World Leather Congress took place the day before the July's Lineapelle New York.

Welcoming delegates, LIA president, John Wittenborn, paid tribute to his organisation's co-hosts and to event sponsors, APLF and Italian tanning machinery association Assomac.

Fifth-generation tanner and first woman president of the ICT, Lisa Howlett, said at the start that leather is timeless. "Our production teams can make leather that fits the use of whatever it is customers want it to go into, ranging from the durability of sole leather to the softness of leather for women's shoes," she said. "It can be used to make a basketball, a baseball or a baseball glove, and all of this is produced from a product that would have gone to waste."

Presentations focused on the technical aspects of leather manufacture and gave detailed insight into the work of a number of prominent brands and into their vision for leather.

Asleep at the wheel

No presentation at the Congress commanded more attention or generated more discussion among delegates than Professor Frank Mitloehner's.

Most of the points he raised were covered in an article in *World Leather* June-July 2019, including his explanation of the need to use all available resources to feed a global

population that is on track to exceed 9 billion by 2050. Not to use agricultural land on which we cannot grow edible crops (for humans), but can grow pasture that ruminant livestock can then convert into protein that we can consume, would be folly, he said. And the fact that the by-products of beef cattle give us 400 other products we can use, the most obvious of which is leather, makes this supply chain all the more valuable.

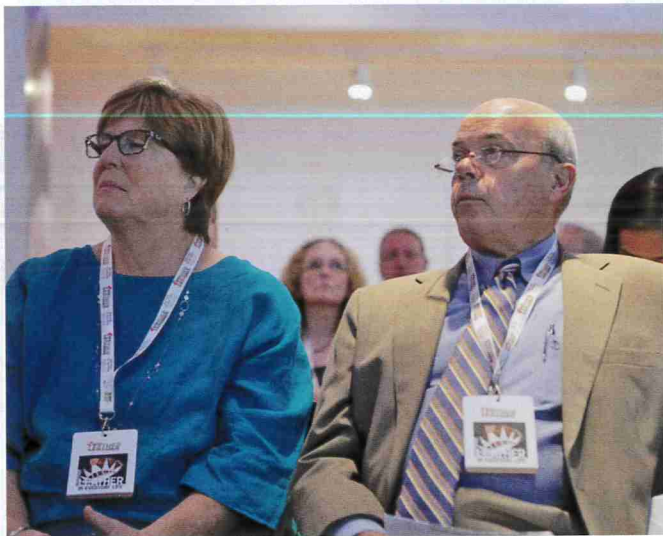
In response to a question about opposition to livestock farming and meat consumption, Professor Mitloehner told *World Leather* that, in his view, only 1% of campaigners are so entrenched in their views that they will not listen to science-based counter-arguments, even though this 1% is very vocal. He said he would continue to use science and reason to present a pro-livestock, pro-meat and (by extension) pro-leather point of view, but pointed out that emotional arguments must also be part of the battle. "People also choose what they eat and what they wear based on emotion," he added. "To ignore emotion in this discussion would be wrong. Industries that are connected to meat, including leather, have been asleep at the wheel on this and the first thing they need to do is wake up."

Plastic is the enemy

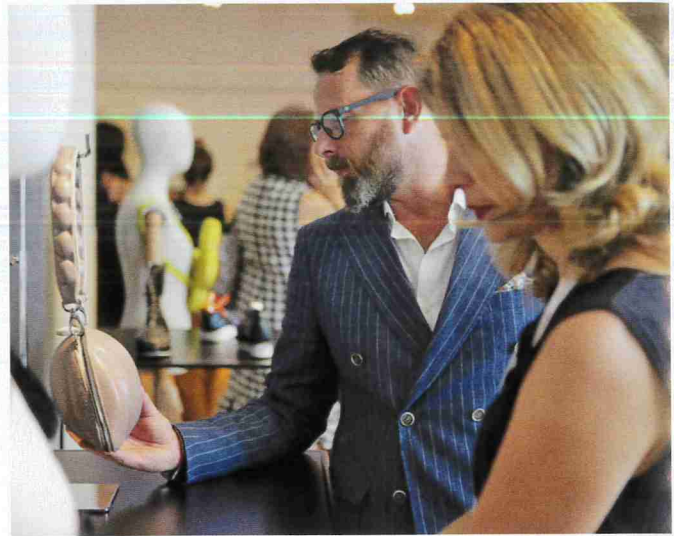
Italy's association of manufacturers of footwear, leathersgoods and tanning technologies, Assomac, was one of the sponsors of the World Leather Congress.

Addressing the congress, the organisation's president, Gabriella Marchioni Bocca, chief executive of Turin-based splitting band knife manufacturer Lamebo, said leather manufacturers have to keep trying to put across to the public a message praising the naturalness of leather.

"If tanners need help doing that," she said, "Assomac can provide it. "Leather is natural, plastic is not, and we have to



Co-hosts, ICT president, Lisa Howlett, and LIA president, John Wittenborn.



The theme of the fourth World Leather Congress was leather in everyday life.

keep shouting about that. Plastic is our enemy.”

In a presentation aimed at explaining some of the basics behind the origins of what he called “nature’s most beautiful material”, director of the Leather Research Laboratory at the University of Cincinnati, Steve Lange, said he wanted to say something about an often-forgotten type of leather, chamois, and in doing so, he joined Ms Marchioni Bocca’s criticism of synthetic alternatives. “Chamois is nature’s microfibre,” he said. “We use fish oil to make it, so it breaks down very well in water, whereas plastic microfibres will last for ever.”

He supported calls for increased efforts to convey the truth about leather to the widest possible public to help combat misinformation and avoid confusion. He pointed out that the laboratory in Cincinnati often receives questions about the difference between top grain and full grain. Based on the definitions that LIA, the International Council of Tanners and the the International Union of Leather Technologists and Chemists Societies have established, the laboratory contends that full grain is leather bearing the original grain surface as exposed by removal of the epidermis and with none of the surface removed by buffing, snuffing or splitting. And it contends that top grain leather is the same as full grain leather. “What this means,” Mr Lange told the congress, “is that the number-one answer to this question on Google is wrong.”

New communications paradigm

Also on the subject of communications, vice-general manager of Italian tanning industry association UNIC, Luca Boltri, said the organisation wants to set up “a new paradigm for communicating about leather”, a new voice. He said that, while people in the industry and most of their immediate buyers are aware of the qualities of leather, more work is required to pass that awareness on to consumers.

“It’s ironic that this is happening at a time when circulating information is easier than it has ever been,” Mr Boltri said in New York. “This has allowed us to have some big successes, but it has caused problems too. Thanks to the communications methods we have now, it’s also easy for superficiality to attack education.” He said UNIC was

preparing to embark on a new communication programme to combat this.

Hide sector hopes for tensions to end

The president of the USHSLA, Stephen Sothmann, has described the sector as being “highly trade-dependent” and, therefore, keen for the current trade tensions with China to come to a successful conclusion soon.

Mr Sothmann explained that the US beef industry currently generates around 30 million hides per year, generating a value of \$2 billion. “More than 90% of those hides are exported,” he said. “It’s important for that to continue because we want those hides to be turned into beautiful leather.”

Clean production

In presenting leather manufacture as an environmentally sound way to put hides such as these to use, another interesting intervention at the World Leather Congress suggested that where this happens can make a difference. Dr Tiberio Daddi, an assistant professor in sustainability management at the Santa Anna School of Advanced Studies, a public university in Pisa, explained that he and colleagues had carried out research to compare the carbon footprint of leather made in their part of Italy, in the Santa Croce cluster in Tuscany, to that of leather produced elsewhere. He argued that, because of the waste management systems that are in place there, including the Aquarno common effluent treatment plant that tanners and a number of the local towns use, give Tuscan leather a carbon footprint that is 22% lower than material produced outside the region.

Dr Daddi said he was proud that an international technical publication, the Journal of Cleaner Production, had published these findings in an extensive article in 2018.

At the conclusion of the event, John Wittenborn passed the World Leather Congress baton to Professor Mwinyikione Mwinyihija, executive director of the African Leather and Leather Products Institute, who will host the fifth event in the series in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2022. 🌍