

Leather watch strap makers embrace sustainability

On June 21, ILM was invited to attend a multi-stakeholder meeting organised by Switzerland-based International Association of Leather Bracelet Manufacturers, AQC. Presentations ranged from the chemicals used in leather making to material traceability, the stakeholders pledged for a more open communication on sustainability in future.

Held in the Swiss town of Neuchâtel, the meeting brought together about 90 participants, including twelve tanneries from France, Italy and Singapore, watch manufacturers such as Cartier, Patek Philippe and Swatch, as well as watch strap manufacturers, industry associations and leather chemical suppliers. The event represented a milestone for the association as it brought together its largest number of stakeholders from the leather bracelet industry supply chain for the first time. Angelika Duckenfield, President, AQC, kicked off the event by explaining how leather was still considered a risk material, as outlined by the Drive Sustainability initiative, and its relevance to the watch sector. Indeed, leather bracelets are the only accessory worn directly in contact with human skin for 365 days a year. The half-day event included presentations from the Italian Tanners Association (UNIC), which outlined the sustainable tanning process in Italy, Italy's Certification Institute for the Leather Sector (ICEC), which provided a brief overview of



Angelika Duckenfield, President, AQC

its certification services and how the collaboration could be further strengthened with the AQC, as well as from the ZDHC Roadmap to Zero Programme, of which the AQC is soon to become a Contributor.

Moderated by Aurélien Debeyer, General Director, AQC, the event featured two discussion panels; the first one comprised of watch brand representatives from Swatch, luxury holding Richemont and Tiffany, and the second by suppliers Gimmel Leather, Tanneries Haas and leather chemical specialist Stahl. Speaking during the panel, the brands said they already do much work to ensure sustainable practices are carried out throughout the supply chain and praised the efforts of the AQC in seeking to foster working groups for improved

communication. "We need to start working together to achieve more and share information", said Mathilde Grosgeat from Richemont, outlining the need for the sector to step forward into the Life Cycle Analysis of the products and share sustainability data. Although only a small piece of accessory, a watch can be made up of dozens of different components, sourced in different countries. "Sometimes we do not even know where the material comes from. We need a clearer vision of the supply chain. Events like this are an opportunity for us, brands and manufacturers, to share. An opportunity that we do not always have", added Grosgeat.



One of the discussion panels held during the meeting

Key achievements of the AQC in figures

- 9 meetings of the Watch Brands Working Group with 60 brands
- 10 meetings of the Tanneries Working Group
- 7 AQC Working Groups
- 1,027 samples of bracelet components tested, documented and analysed since 2016
- 840 leather samples (database of 13,000 results since 2015)
- First complete leather bracelet RSL composed of 8 RSLs: leather, metal, textiles, threads, insides, tinctures, glues + production
- Supply Chain Mapping with 60 suppliers
- 96% of chemical compliance on leather

From fields to farms

Patrick Lederry, Head of Quality Management from Swatch Group said that from fields to farms, the time-piece manufacturer has visited every country it sources from. "Sustainability has a lot of value. We, as brands, are here because we have the same customers. We need to look at not just the competition but also for our common values", he explained. On the suppliers' side, Jacques Kress from French leather makers, Tanneries Haas said the tanners also have to work towards building a more open communication among themselves, while Max Gimmel from Gimmel Leather praised the event for offering the opportunity strengthen the communication between

tanneries and brands in the segment.

Officially established in 2014, the Swiss based AQC (in French 'Association pour l'Assurance Qualité des Fabricants de Bracelets Cuir') was created by five bracelet manufacturers (Brasport, Camille Fournet, Hirsch, Interstrap and Multicuir) to provide a platform to facilitate the traceability and compliance of materials used in the manufacture of leather bracelets. According to Angelika Duckenfield, the AQC will focus its work on two "pillars"; the chemicals used in the tanning process and traceability/animal welfare. When ILM asked about the growing demand for smart watches, which usually do not have leather as a component, and if the part leather plays in the watch production is generally declining, Duckenfield said she did not like placing the Millennials in the same basket. "There are classical Millennials out there who will choose leather bracelets". She also outlined how leather has many advantages over metal as it can be more flexible and comes in different colours. "It becomes like a second skin, you cannot do that with metal", she told ILM. Nevertheless, as shown on the AQC's key activities and achievements table, the association has extended its testing services to materials other than leather. The "AQC Label", which aims to guarantee the highest level of quality and safety of leather bracelets for the luxury watch industry, not only aims to guarantee the finest bovine or alligator leathers from suppliers committed to material traceability and animal welfare but also to chemical monitoring and production control. It has set up the first complete leather bracelet RSL composed of eight elements; leather, metals, textiles, threads, insides, tinctures, glues and production. It brings together all the different criteria developed by, for example, REACH but specifically developed for the watch segment. ■

QUALITY SAVES.



LANXESS and its initiative **Sustainable Leather Management** encompasses and extends the entire life cycle of leather by improving its properties in terms of sustainability during and after use. We are bringing economic interests, ecological soundness, and consumer safety requirements into line! With **LANXESS** you save:

- Processing cost & time
- Recycling cost & effort
- Energy, water & raw materials



QUALITY WORKS.

LANXESS
Energizing Chemistry