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From the Selected Works of Peter D Verheyen

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"Fips" and His Eels: Fish Skin in Bookbinding

Peter D Verheyen



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INSTRUCTIONAL



“FIPS” AND HIS EELS

FISH SKIN IN BOOKBINDING

by PETER D. VERHEYEN

A historical overview from the literature:

WHILE FISH SKIN, GENERALLY TANNED, has been used in binding for decorative elements such as in- or on-lays and to create protective wrappers for books, it has a long history of use for clothing, sword handles, objets d'art, and other applications, as well. Plentiful, strong, and visually quite interesting, its preparation can take the form of drying (parchment) or various tanning methods. Geographically, its use has been most prevalent in northern climes where the skins are less likely to rot because of lower temperatures. Most common have been oceanic species.



Fish skin stretched over existing 1794 leather binding.

Pastedown put down over wrapper with threads used to stretch skin visible.

From Hinson Collection (H.C. AD D56 0), Charleston Library Society, Charleston, SC.



In this article, I will focus on fish skins' preparation and use in 20th Century binding, largely in Germany where it was mentioned in early manuals, and most regularly presented in the literature. In these writings, most during the first half of the 20th Century, the focus was on the material properties and use as a covering material on books more than as decor. Much of my interest in fish as a material for bookbinding has been presented on my Pressbengel Project blog and is being presented here again.

The first mention I have found appears in Johann Gottfried Zeidler's *Buchbinder-Philosophie Oder Einleitung In die Buchbinder Kunst* (1708), where the author mentioned among other covering materials eel and ocean fishes; no further mentions could be found in the literature until the 20th Century.

During and after World War I, there were severe shortages and civil unrest in Germany, a situation which repeated with the next war. These shortages led to a high level of experimentation with “ersatz” (replacement/alternative) materials such as straw for paper and board, spun paper, silk instead of linen

Below: Detail of section on fish skin from Zeidler (1708).

[Click here](#) for digital version.

322

1. Theil das 13.

wiewohl man auch grössere
den kan / also daß es nur
het. Und brauchet eine Ab-
bereitung / nur daß sie frisch
wohl ausgespannet werde.
Vergament an Festigkeit /
als wenn die Bücher / so da
Harnisch an hätten. Ich g
dergleichen grössere Häute
ben / und zu den Bänden d
sen Nutzen gebrauchen könn
her wenig mag gewußt habe
19. Folien nun die A

for sewing thread, and colored straw for inlays (Strohintarsien). Franz Martini, Paul Kersten, Ernst Collin and others wrote articles on the subject in such periodicals as the *Archiv für Buchgewerbe*, the *Buchbinderlehrling*, and the *Allgemeiner Anzeiger für Buchbindereien*. Fish leather in the context of “traditional” leather shortages was also discussed in Lewis Radcliffe’s article in the *Transactions of the American Fisheries Society* (1919-1920) where it was in the section on the better utilization of fisheries’ waste products.

Paul Kersten is mentioned as having written about fish skins for binding in 1917, although the article has not yet been found. However, bookbinder Franz Martini of Charlottenburg (Berlin) recounted a war experience in which he saw discarded cod skins that had been pulled off the fish in a field kitchen in Belgium. This was published as “Fischhaut zu Bucheinbänden” in the *Archiv für Buchgewerbe* (1919). Drawing on his experiences at the bindery of Lüderitz and Bauer, Martini examined the skins to ensure there were no cuts or tears, then carefully removed the scales to make parchment from them that he used to bind various military journals. Bindings shown in the article were made from salted cod (Klippfisch) and carp. Based on these experiments, he deemed the fish parchment superior to calf or sheep for durability and working properties such as the ability to mold over raised cords without wrinkling.

Martini had the leather tested at the national testing center on the recommendation of both Paul Kersten (Director of the School for Artistic Bookbinding in Berlin) and the Director of Royal Library of Berlin. The results of these tests were impressive, especially in terms of fold and tear strength where the fish parchment easily reached 50,000 double folds without damage.

After these tests, Martini developed a way to tan fish skins to leather, also taking out a “utility model” (Nr. 674 741), a more limited form of patent, on this invention. Regarding the patent, Ernst Collin wrote in “Bucheinbände aus Fischhaut” (1934) that this was not awarded as the process was not unique enough.

This new research seems to have made its way across the Atlantic, with mentions in both the *National Lithographer* and *The Inland Printer/American Lithographer* (both 1917) indicating a likely citation of Kersten’s 1917 article about Martini. From the *Inland Printer*, page 488:

The Weser Zeitung, of Bremen, is authority for the statement that a Berlin bookbinder has discovered a new material for bookbinding, this being codfish skin, a welcome discovery in these days of leather shortage. The use of fish skin for bookbinding is no novelty, and, among others, shark leather has been used for deluxe binding because of its durability and beautiful markings. Codfish is said to have several advantages over shark skin. It is more abundant and therefore cheaper. In appearance, unsealed and properly prepared, it resembles snake skin. The royal material-testing office at Berlin has tested its strength and durability and found that in these respects it is equal to parchment. It is easy to work and untearable.

Above is an image of a binding he created with his parchment. Obviously, fish skins are most suited to half- or quarter-bindings due to their shape.

Right:
Material Properties:
Fish skin (untanned),
sheep parchment,
calf parchment

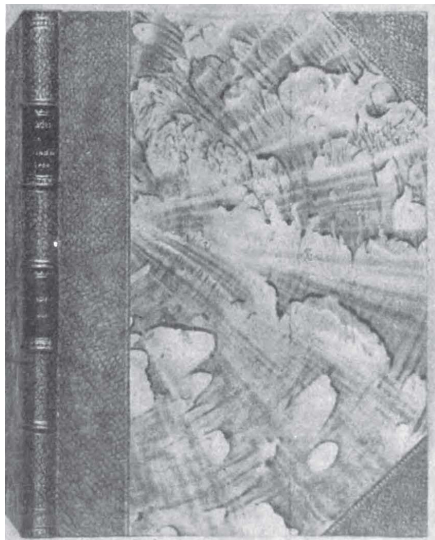
Mittlere Reisslänge in
mm = average breaking
length in mm

Mittlere Dehnung in % =
average stretching in %

Resistance to folding.

From Martini, *Archiv für
Buchgewerbe* (1919).

Material	Mittlere Reißlänge in mm □	Mittlere Dehnung in % □	Widerstand gegen Falzen
Fischhaut	7575	40,6	Nach 50000 Doppelfalzungen wurde der Versuch abgebrochen. Die Versuchsstreifen befanden sich noch in gutem Zustande und hätten voraussichtlich noch eine große Anzahl von 1000 Doppelfalzungen ausgehalten.
Schaf- pergament	6900	15,8	
Kalb- pergament	7700	21,5	Konnte wegen seiner Dicke nicht gefalzt werden.
			□ Die Versuchsstreifen wurden aus zwei aufeinander senkrechten Richtungen entnommen



Half-parchment extra binding with leather onlay and original pastepaper
From Martini, *Archiv für Buchgewerbe* (1919).

In "Kurioses Einbandmaterial" published in *Die Heftlade* (1922), Paul Kersten wrote about a number of what he considered highly unusual and large unknown animal-based materials binders might use. In it he excerpted Zeidler writing about fish, starting with eel and mentioning cod. Ernst Collin wrote about fish first in *Graphische Jugend* (1934) in the article "Bucheinbände aus Fischhäuten." The article was also printed in the *Allgemeiner Anzeiger für Buchbindereien* (1934) as "Bucheinbände aus Fischhaut."

In both, Collin described the process of preparing fish skin in detail, illustrated with his photographs. Shown demonstrating how to remove the skin from the fish and prepare it was the same Franz Martini who wrote about his experiences in 1919. The article refers to an earlier article by Paul Kersten, "Fischhaut für Bucheinbände" from the *Allgemeiner Anzeiger für Buchbindereien* (1917). This was similar to Martini's 1919 article mentioned above, and indeed Kersten was a supporter of Martini. Not mentioned in the earlier articles, Collin explained that Martini's attempt to patent the tanning process failed as it was not unique enough and had been described in earlier publications. Martini had been able to demon-

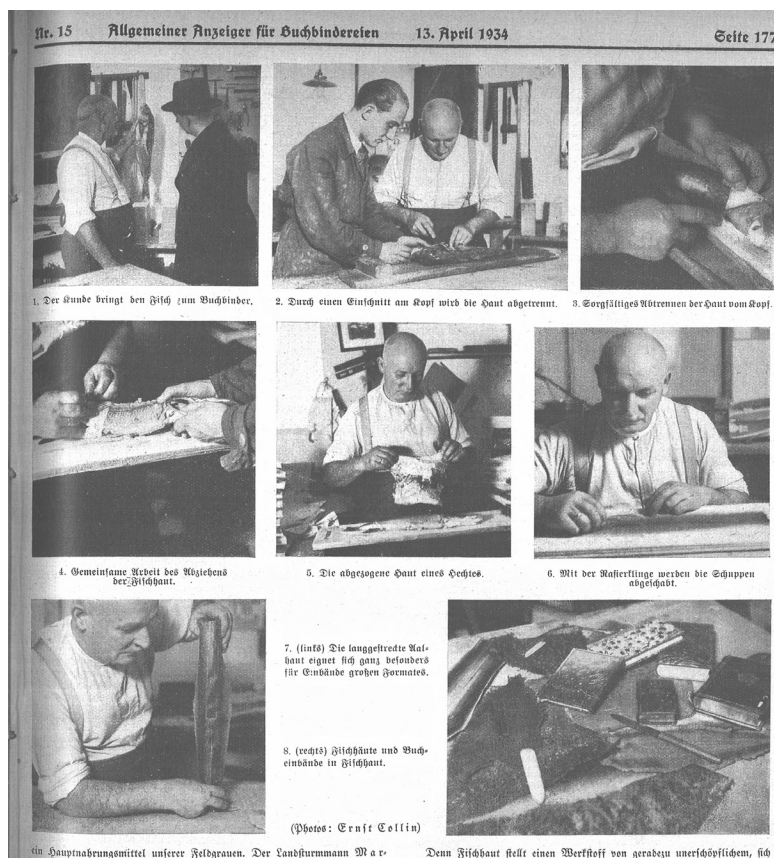
strate the effectiveness of tanning fish on a variety of species including cod, halibut, shark, and eel.

In 1937, *Der Buchbinderlehrling* introduced us to "Fips," an apprentice who is looking for something unique for his annual binding competition entry. "Fips" visited the neighboring fishmonger and brought back some eel skins that he prepared, describing the process as very simple and straight-forward. We will return to "Fips" later.

Appealing to a sense of patriotism, Collin concluded by praising fish as a material, and encouraging the German fisheries to take advantage of the need for durable yet affordable native materials to help contribute to sustainability and German economic independence. This theme was continued with a call to action in "Leder aus Seefischen," the *Buchbinderlehrling* (1938), a periodical for apprentices. The article described the manufacture of fish leather in the context of the 4-year plan to make Germany

Franz Martini demonstrating steps of preparing fish skin.

From Collin, "Bucheinbände aus Fischhaut."
Allgemeiner Anzeiger für Buchbindereien (1934).



independent of imports, and increased rationing in advance of the looming war he felt was coming. The process of tanning was described on a very basic level. First, the fish were carefully skinned and then tanned in rotating drums using a vegetable tannage such as sumac, dividivi, or willow. Unfortunately, the tannins in most domestic plants were not effective enough. To dye the skins, aniline dyes and pigments (for darker colors) were used. Finally, the leather is pressed and glazed. Overall, these processes are identical to tanning other animal skins with an equivalent quality possible. Fish leather retains its flexibility and softness; it is also very resistant to tearing. The article concludes by reminding the apprentice bookbinders that this is a material that they will need to become comfortable with, as with all other binding materials.

A brief mention in the first post-war volume of the *Allgemeiner Anzeiger für Buchbindereien* (1947) "Fishleder vom Buchbinder erfunden" let the reader know that a bookbinder "invented" fish leather. It recapped the articles mentioned above, and concludes by saying fish leather has established itself as a binding (and other leather trades) material, but no one remembers that a bookbinder first developed it.

The final mention was "Fischleder" in *Das Falzbein* (1960), successor to *Der Buchbinderlehrling*. An overview of the topic was given, mentioning past publications, and concluding by saying that the material may have usefulness for objets d'art (Galanteriewerke), but said that bookbinders might try their hand at making it once or twice before returning to their favorite leathers.

Needless to say, these articles only fanned my interest in using fish as a binding material beyond just onlays. The connections to Ernst Collin were a further motivator. Based on the substance and tone of the articles in these trade publications it seemed logical to explore the topic further.

Working with Fish Leather

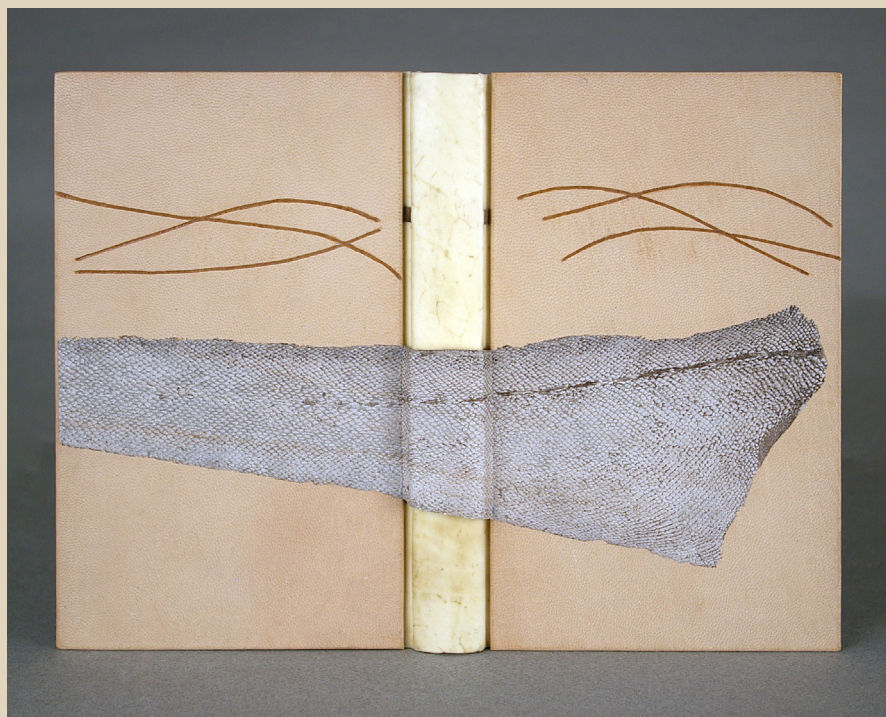
I was first introduced to fish leather twenty or so years ago when I acquired some exotic skins—frog, chicken feet, fish and eel at the annual Guild of Book Workers conference. These were used largely for decorative purposes with the eel being great for millimeter bindings due to their natural thinness that eliminated the need for paring. Beyond those uses I did not give the material further thought, although I was endlessly intrigued by the textures.

Tanned fish leather is readily available from a number of sources online in sueded or polished form and is relatively easy to work with. However, I have not been able to find parchment made from fish. The challenge in working with fish leather is that the flesh side is very fibrous and may best be dealt by sanding and "plucking" or pulling, before using a paring knife or Schärfix. In general, I edge-paring, reduce what I can on the flesh side (especially at the turn-ins), and adhere with a PVA mixture. Due to their size and shape, I have used these skins only for millimeter or quarter bindings. Paul Delrue's "Tudor" or "Lacunose" style would work wonderfully to combine into full bindings. Given the numbers and types of skins I have, it is beyond time to start using them.

Binding by
Heinz Klein.
*Dalmatinischer
Frühling* (1936)
with leather spine,
and boards covered
in linen with
herring skin onlays.

Collection of Dietmar
and Regina Klein.





Left: Cod used decoratively on my binding of *The Book of Origins*, 2005.

Collection of Karen Hammer.

Below: Salmon suede on a "Dorfner-style" open joint binding on *Mayflies*, 2013.



Parchment from Fish

So now everyone knows that I have a certain infatuation for working with fish leather. Part of the reason may be that it is so different and uncommon. A significant reason may well be the connection to Ernst Collin and my project around his writings. I first wrote about the uses of fish in binding on my Pressbengel Project blog in early 2014 in the post “Something Fishy—Fish Leather for Binding,” with subsequent posts showing my uses of the skins. While looking through all my issues of the *Buchbinderlehrling* (1927–43), I found a short article about “Fips” and the eel skin” in the 1937 volume. I’ve worked with eel leather—very thin, yet strong and great for millimeter bindings—but this was the first article describing making parchment from a fish skin. The earlier articles were scant on the tanning/drying details. In his third year as an apprentice, Fips wanted to do something special for the binding on the *Buchbinderlehrling* he was going to enter into the annual book-binding competition. So, he went next door to the fishmonger and asked for a really big and fat eel, but without the meat, guts, and bones. Despite what was written about the small size of eels, those that Fips acquired looked like they had feasted after the naval Battle of Jutland in 1916, a reference to a scene in Grass’ *Tin Drum*. After some discussion, Fips got what he needed, scrubbed it clean in the courtyard of the shop (to the disgust of all), and tacked it to a board to “let the sun do the rest.” Could it really be that easy? Conversations with Jesse Meyer at Pergamena indicated it could be.

One day in April 2017, my wife returned with half of a good-sized Atlantic salmon, skin on! I guess she had heard

enough of my talking about making parchment from fish. It was game on. If shopping for your own, start with a larger ocean fish such as salmon or cod as the skins will be thicker and easier to work with, especially important for the first time. An advantage of store-bought fish is that it is already cleaned and de-scaled. If it is not, do that first. The first step was to remove the skin from the fish so that as little of the meat was pulled out, still attached to the skin. While this would be scraped off during the preparation, why waste part of a meal (though it was tasty as sashimi). Fish is always skinned in halves as the dorsal fins would cause problems and create holes. If purchasing the fish at a store, those working the fish counter can generally be asked to skin the fish when purchasing, making sure to keep the skin. You *will* get odd looks – this is part of the experience. Note also, the images that follow are a compilation that reflects several sessions and species—salmon, sea bass, and lane snapper. Since then, had-dock has been added to that list.

When skinning your own, begin by placing the fish skin-side up on a larger cutting board or a flat baking tin. The skin is remarkably tough and resilient when being pulled off, work that is done by folding the skin back on itself while pulling using a dullish scalpel, micro-, and/or teflon-spatula to help split the two layers. This process is very similar to that applied during mechanical tape removal in conservation work. I have found it is easier to start at the head end of the fish – by the spine, rather than the tail as the skin is less stretchy – just as with traditional animal skins used in binding.

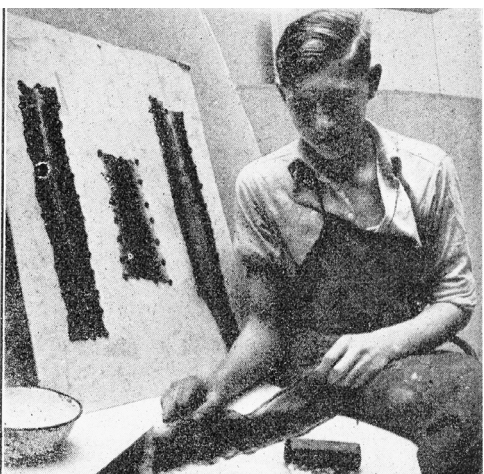
Once off, I placed the skin in cool water with a little bit of very mild unscented and

Left: Fips with his eel skins.

From *Der Buchbinderlehrling* (1937).

Middle: DIY skinning a large salmon fillet.

Right: Fishmonger skinning a large salmon fillet.



undyed dish detergent to help reduce the oils present. This was suggested by Jesse Meyer of Pergamena parchment makers, and in other articles that are mentioned later. Some fish will be oilier than others. The meat is packaged and frozen for later consumption or cooked for dinner, while the skin is laid out flat on waxed paper or baking parchment and placed in a bag to prevent freezer burn/dehydration and frozen until you are ready for the next step.

The next step will be to flatten out the skin again on a on a larger cutting board or a flat baking tin scale side down. Using the dullish scalpel and/or micro-spatula scrape off the remaining meaty pieces, always working from inside the skin towards the edges. The different layers of the skin will be visually distinct, easier to discern with a fish like salmon that has more color to the meat than other species where the meat is whitish.

Once cleaned, I again placed the fish into cool water with detergent to clean and rinse, and repeated as often as necessary dependent on how oily the fish is. It is ok to let the skin soak overnight in a refrigerator between washes and rinses. Cool water is critical to prevent the skin from starting to break down, so never use warm water. In my first experiences I also added kaolin to the water to create a slurry, the idea being that the kaolin would help absorb odors. I have found that it made little difference, and no longer use it. If the skin is to be dyed, something I have not done, use leather dyes after this step, before drying.

We are now ready to stretch out the skin for drying. In my first experiment, I laid a piece of Hollytex (Spunbond polyester) on a wooden board, and used a staple gun and “binder clips” to secure the

skin as I smoothed and stretched it out for drying. That worked well for the large side of salmon, but for the smaller skins that followed I used a dense foam-core board, laid on a piece of folder stock and Hollytex, securing the skin with simple push pins as I smoothed and stretched it out for drying. I dried all skins outside in the sunshine (or as close as I could get in Syracuse), a process that generally took a few hours dependent on ambient humidity. When dry, the pins were removed and the skins placed between blotters under weights for a while longer.

The skin may continue to exude/leach oils. These can be removed in a bath or by wiping with swabs using a solvent like alcohol or acetone, a step best undertaken outdoors or in a fume hood.

Now is the time to inspect the skin, in particular the “flesh” side, for remaining flesh that will be dried and appear as raised, rougher, differently-colored splotches. To remove, I use a fresh scalpel blade and scrape with light pressure. What comes off will be very fibrous. Finally, I wipe the skin with alcohol one last time, storing it flat in a folder until ready for use.

In addition to the photos in this article, more photos and videos showing the process can be viewed [by clicking this link](#). Make sure to follow the in-article links, and “fish leather” tag for more.

Due to the small size of the skins and the relative briefness of the process, with planning and preparation ahead of time the making of parchment from fish would be a wonderful workshop exercise for those studying the history and materiality of the book. The skins could then be used for any number of basic binding structures, completing the experience.

Left: Rinsing the skins in soapy water.

Middle: Remaining patches of flesh that must removed before drying.

Right: Bookbinder Barbie stretching the wet skin out.





Above: Still wet skins stretched out.

Right: Skins drying in the sun.

Below: Scraping away the dried fleshy remainders.



Using the Fish Parchment

Using this parchment is really not significantly different from using any other parchment. The one difference is that due to the shape of the skin it seems preordained for quarter-bindings, trim on millimeter bindings, or as decorative elements. All traditional binding adhesives will work—paste, PVA, and mixtures. Like traditional parchment, the moisture in the adhesive will cause the skin to expand, not always in predictable ways. I have found the most success by applying PVA to the surface the parchment will be adhered to, lightly dampening the scale side of the skin, then put the skin down. I then smooth out from the center of the spine and onto the boards, rubbing down with a folder through a piece of clean paper as I go. If making a case binding, I fill in the area between the boards with a piece of blotter cut to fit and a piece of dense foam or board, and place in the press to really set the parchment down. If working “in boards,” I will put in the press using a set of casing-in boards. Finally, I dampen the turn-ins and apply paste or a mixture, especially if I wish to form the headcaps. A link to my tutorial on binding in parchment can be found in the references.

Fish leathers, among them trout, salmon, cod, and carp, are available glazed

and as suede. Paring is possible, but what I've found most effective is pasting out the back for dimensional stability and letting it dry on Mylar. Peel off and sand (a “micro” belt sander is great) with a little edge-paring at the turn-ins, around headcaps, and corners. The fibrous nature of the skins can be challenging. A Swiss/French paring knife used like a spokeshave will work (and not clog), followed with sanding. The textured nature of the skin will help disguise any irregularities. They are best adhered with PVA or a mixture.

Other DIY Methods

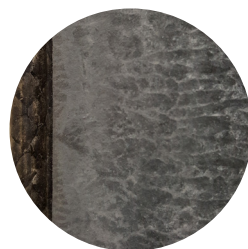
Two more comprehensive texts specific to fish are Lotta Rahme and Dag Hartman's *Fish Leather: Tanning and Sewing with Traditional Methods* (2012) and Nienke Hoogvliet's *Fish Leather* (2017). Rahme and Hartmann present histories of the material around the world; describe the material characteristics of skins; identify useful species; show methods of preservation and tanning; how to dye and finish; and working with the material. It is illustrated richly throughout.

Hoogvliet, an artist working around the themes of environment and sustainability, describes her process for egg-tanning fish, all part of her RE-SEA ME project to reduce waste by making use of this of-



Left: Salmon on the Boss Dog Press edition of Ernst Collin's *Bone Folder* (2017).

Below: Detail of spine.



ten discarded by-product of fisheries. She begins by describing the effects of plastic trash in the water, followed by the fishing and leather industries. Like Rahme/Hartmann, she then describes the various species of fish before providing step-by-step instructions for her tanning process. The rich illustrations reflect the artistic intent of the project with many detailed images showing the rich and varied textures of fish skin.

DIY methods for tanning skins, including fish, also abound on the internet, including videos. At the time of writing this article, the author began his first adventure with egg tanning per Hoogvliet with the results still pending. None of the methods found describe the process of making parchment from fish skin.

Renewed Interest in Fish Skin

Leather made from fish has seen an increasing amount of coverage in the popular press as issues of sustainability, resources, and native cultures have been gaining increasing attention and urgency. Aspects of sustainability and art are often interwoven with the natural beauty of the materials coming to the fore. The *Alaska Dispatch News* published an article, “Fish Skin Artists Share Their Skills at Smithsonian Center” (2012) that described the long history of using fish leather in waterproof clothing, among other uses, in large part because of its waterproof properties. The subjects of the article, Marlene Nielsen and Coral Chernoff, describe how they prepare the skins using methods from their Native

communities, including brain tanning. The prepared skins will be used in their art. More about the history of working in, and creating objects from, fish leather was shared in the article, “The Secret Language of Salmon Skin Coats,” by Jude Isabella (2016).

“A Fin of Beauty: The Art of Making Objects Out of Fish Leather” in the *Financial Times* (2016) by Jonathan Foyle describes how Devon (UK) based artist Kari Furre learned how to appreciate the material during a trip to Iceland where she saw objects made from fish leather. She learned how to tan skins from Lotte Rahme in Sweden. Among the methods she mentioned were urine and egg tanning; she preferred egg. Living in Devon, she is close to the sea, getting her raw skins from local restaurants where the chefs skin the fish for her carefully.

“Meet the Fish Leather Pioneers,” by Beth Timmins of BBC News (2019), describes how an Icelandic fish tannery makes fish fashionable by supplying designers such as Jimmy Choo, Dior, and Ferragamo. Touting the strength of fish, “9x stronger than lamb or cow of a similar thickness,” the article also points out the more sustainable nature of fish versus other species such as cow, and how it could help reduce demand for more endangered exotic species. The fish leather industry can also provide more security and income in other countries; initiatives in Kenya and Brazil are mentioned.

Commercially Tanned Skins

From the left:
Glazed Carp,
Suede Salmon,
Glazed Salmon,
Suede Trout, Eel



Sources of Fish Skin, Tanned Fish Leather

- Your local seafood store.
- Self-caught fish.
- Tanned fish leather
- Fiskur Leather, in Mora, MN:
<http://www.fiskurleather.com>
- Sea Leather Wear, in Calgary, Alberta:
<https://www.sealeatherwear.com/>
- eBay, Etsy, Amazon

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Further Links

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Assorted type,
provided by Magdalena
Koziak-Podsiadło

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Assorted tools,
provided by Magdalena
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PICTURED ABOVE

Fish skins, provided by
Peter D. Verheyen

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