

THREE TRADES FOR A PAIR OF BOOTS!

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Introduction

During the school year 1986/87, I taught arts and crafts on the Azores island of São Jorge (St George) in the very small village of Calheta. The school contained about 800 children from half of the island and each week I taught about 250, aged between 11 and 15 years old.

Living a few minutes walk from the school, I had quite a lot of spare time to travel around and learn about the craft traditions of the island. The ten months that I was there marked a turning point in my interest in tools and craft history, particularly in relation to leather.

I soon got to meet some of the last remaining artisans and hear stories from the past. What did the locals produce for their needs before improved travel facilities (less than 20 years ago) provided trade with Portugal and other countries? To me, crafts are both a reflection of history and a part of it; this means that it is necessary to understand the effects of isolation and self-sufficiency (specially in a small island like St George), migrations of people (in those islands, mostly to the U.S.A. and Canada) and the changes due to cultural influences, television, markets etc.

Leather and its artisans

In spite of a better standard of living and less cultural isolation, the disappearance of traditional trades and crafts make the island more dependent on the outside; this also includes food and wine production, the break of social links on working practices (harvests, sheep, wool) and spare time (folk songs, music, theatre).

It was in such a climate that I visited the last tanner and owner of the village tanning factory, José Amorim; his factory had been in perfect condition, "small, but of big heart" he says; the hides came from the local farms and from those on other islands. Before World War II, the chrome

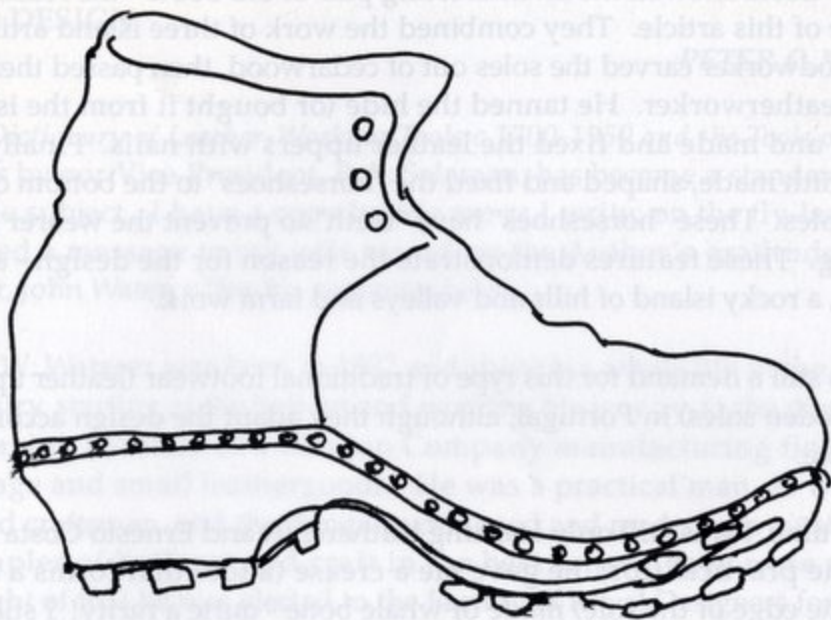


Ernesto Costa in his workshop holding the "3-trade" boots.

for tanning came from Germany via Lisbon. The leather it produced was quite famous, supplying the shoemakers and harness and pack saddle makers of the Azores and Madeira with a soft, durable material; orders also came from Portugal. Due to old age, Senor Amorim retired in the late 1970s and, sadly, none of his employers wanted to continue running the factory (which consisted of rotating drums and a small skiving machine). Like many of the leather-related trades, it is not lack of demand or economic conditions that are their downfall - it is that no young people want to learn the old crafts and so the craftsmen die without being able to pass on their skills, despite the continuing demand for their products. This is particularly true of saddlery; the actual production in Portugal has increased tenfold to fulfil the demands of a huge market for horse-related leather goods but there is still no school or course on saddlery, despite protestations from the Cultural Heritage Authorities.

One of the students told me about her uncle, Ernesto Costa, a former employer of José Amorim. Leaving the small coastal village and hitch-hiking up the hill, I visited him regularly; besides his own dairy farm (milk and cheese are the main products of the Azores) he upholsters car seats (with artificial leather!) and repairs shoes (there are no "fast repair" shops on the island and the "throw-away" attitude has not yet reached there!). However, his most interesting activity is boot-making - strong footwear "made-to-measure". He tans the hides he uses on his farm, using curved knives, half a tree-trunk and two small pits in his yard. He obtains the chrome from his former employer. The most curious feature is the use of whale oil or olive oil to soften the half-hides. Olive oil is used as a substitute for whale oil which is very hard to obtain. Until recently whale hunting was a traditional way of life. Besides food and oil, whales provided whale-ivory and bone for the local craftsmen to make scrimshaw, particularly on the island of Pico where there is a Whaling Museum. (There are many local stories about whale hunting with rowing boat and harpoon.)

Watching a pair of boots being made, I was surprised to see numerous small match-like sticks fixed to the leather between the inner and outer soles. These strong boots are made for farm work and have pieces of old tyre for the sole!



The "3-trade" boots, showing the leather uppers, cedarwood soles and "horse shoes" on bottom



The whale-ivory edge crease given to me by Ernesto Costa.

Ernesto Costa showed me an interesting pair of old boots - the reason for the title of this article. They combined the work of three island artisans. The woodworker carved the soles out of cedarwood, then passed them on to the leatherworker. He tanned the hide (or bought it from the island tanner) and made and fixed the leather uppers with nails. Finally the blacksmith made, shaped and fixed the "horseshoes" to the bottom of the cedar soles. These "horseshoes" have "teeth" to prevent the wearer from slipping. These features demonstrate the reason for the design - a wet climate, a rocky island of hills and valleys and farm work.

There is still a demand for this type of traditional footwear (leather uppers and wooden soles) in Portugal, although they adapt the design according to climate.

At that time, I was still only learning leathercraft and Ernesto Costa gave me some practical tips; he gave me a crease (a tool that forms a bead along the edge of the sole) made of whale bone - quite a rarity! I still use this, but mostly on belts and strip borders.

Senor Costa also made the boots for the village *Ethnographic Music Group* who were dressed in hand made cloth, made by the local weavers and made their music with island-made guitars.

During my year on the island, I returned once to mainland Portugal and found a leather shop that was able to supply the items that Ernesto Costa needed on St George.

