



Leather Culture

by Matthew D. Johnson

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"Leather" is a blanket term for a large array of sexual preferences, identities, relationship structures, and social organizations loosely tied together by the thread of what is conventionally understood as sadomasochistic sex.

While many of these sexual styles have a considerable history and are arguably found in many societies, the explicit social organization of those who share these tastes is a relatively recent and culturally specific phenomenon, originating in the mid-twentieth-century United States and Europe. This organization began with gay men but has since expanded to encompass enthusiasts of all genders and orientations.

Who Are Leatherfolk?

Broadly stated, "leatherfolk" are affiliated by virtue of their shared interest in certain unorthodox sexual expressions. These expressions may involve elements of dominance and submission among partners; fetishism, a sexual orientation towards particular parts of the body, objects, or materials, leather not the least among these; and the giving and taking of physically painful or humiliating stimuli. Only the last of these may be properly understood as sadomasochism; and "leathersex" may be distinguished from s/m by its inclusion of other sexual and symbolic elements.

Not all of the subculture's participants practice dominance and submission, fetishism, and s/m in common, and the number of variations on and additions to these three erotic themes among leatherfolk is seemingly limitless. The credo among leather practitioners is that all such expressions are mindful of physical, mental, and emotional health, are understood as mutually consensual, and are experienced as pleasurable by all parties involved.

Sociological studies as well as anecdotal evidence indicate that persons interested in leather experience a coming-out process akin to coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. For many queer people, coming out into leather postdates coming out as queer (though this may be changing as leather achieves some degree of prevalence and social acceptance). It involves gaining sexual experience and deepening one's knowledge of queer community life (including its leather institutions), as well as overcoming the widespread social stigma, both inside and outside of queer communities, attached to certain forms of leathersex.

Sadism, masochism, and fetishism continue to be classified as mental illnesses by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychological Association, as was homosexuality until 1973. Their exercise continues to be publicly restricted or ruled flatly illegal in many parts of the United States. Like other sexual minority populations, leatherfolk characteristically view their sexual expression as an issue of freedom from intervention into what many consider a fundamentally private aspect of their lives. They believe their behavior threatens no one, including themselves, and does not impinge on the lifestyle choices of their detractors.



A bondage demonstration at San Francisco's Folsom Street Fair in 2003. Image created by Wikimedia Commons contributor Pretzelpaws. Image appears under the GNU Free Documentation License.

For many, participation in leather life is restricted to a socio-sexual sphere, finding expression only in the bar, the Internet chat room, or the bedroom. Significantly, though, there are a large number of persons who make these interests a part of their public (and not specifically sexual) personae. These people help build leather community through forming organizations, developing media for communicating their interests, educating others, staging public events, and integrating the aesthetic and ethic of leather more fully into their everyday lives.

Where Did Leather Come From?

The emphasis on aesthetics and ethics alluded to above derives from the earliest period in leather's brief history, customarily termed "Old Leather" or "the Old Guard." Leather culture had its origins in the increasingly public and specifically gay culture that flourished in major U. S. port cities during and after World War II.

Among gay men in these cities there were a certain number who eschewed stereotypical gay behaviors and preoccupations. Some shared an interest in military life, its hierarchy and its honor codes, as well as its trappings, especially uniforms, close-cropped hair, the motorcycle, and its requisite leather attire. Other divergent yet equally significant influences included so-called "physique" periodicals and the art of Tom of Finland (Touko Laaksonen), as well as films glamorizing bands of social outlaws, such as Marlon Brando's *The Wild One* (1953).

Taken either together or separately, these elements inspired the cultivation of a hypermasculine mode of comportment and interaction among certain gay men. These "leathermen" formed social institutions distinct from others in the gay world that allowed them to pursue a social life with those who shared their interests.

The first of these institutions were motorcycle clubs, already being formed by the early 1950s. Clubs staged runs, public events where men could meet and members of different clubs come together. Club members patronized certain bars, typically hanging a banner that bore their club's emblem in one bar to mark it as an informal meeting place.

Today's leather bars are the heirs of this tradition. Many still fly the colors of a cycle club or other leather organization. Yet bar patronage has never been restricted to club members, and bars developed a social world of their own that operated alongside and independent of the clubs.

Still other circles of leathermen did not form organizations and did not frequent bars. Rather, they were members of more private networks that hosted exclusive parties.

Conduct within some clubs was strictly regimented, following quasi-military conceptions of hierarchy and protocol. Membership was restricted to a select few; prospective members were sponsored by a current member and initiated by way of conferring status as a pledge. Pledges started at the bottom of the hierarchy and were taught elements of dress and comportment, along with sexual techniques, by more senior members.

A scant few leather clubs still uphold such "Old Guard" traditions, and many current leathermen--and women--idolize them. Yet the clubs of 1950s and 1960s were by no means unanimous in their embrace of such rigorous codes for conduct. Many were considerably less formal, their members emulating to some degree the ungovernable and sexually aggressive on-screen personae of Brando or James Dean.

The origins of leather were thus multiple, and the "Old Guard" had many faces. But with the coming of the sexual revolution, and the women's liberation and the gay liberation movements, the conception of leather culture outlined above was further broadened and transformed.

How Has Leather Changed?

The 1970s and early 1980s saw a greater integration of elements of leather culture into both the larger gay subculture as well as into popular culture. Members of rock bands like The Village People and Judas Priest appropriated some of the trappings of leather culture to enhance their stage personas. Films such as *Cruising* (1980) as well as the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe introduced audiences to portrayals of sadomasochistic persons and relationships, albeit often imagined in decidedly negative ways.

The vogue for leather among gay men led to a proliferation of leather bars and bathhouses in cities large and small, part of the larger institutional elaboration of gay community life characteristic of the time. Leather-specific writing first transcended the purely pornographic with the publication of Larry Townsend's *Leatherman's Handbook* (1972), a how-to manual of sorts that initiated many more men into leather than the private clubs and informal networks of the previous two decades ever could have. Many works of gay-themed fiction from these years include a reference to or commentary on leather life.

Yet despite this effusion, leather culture as it had been known up to that point was already on the wane. Gayle Rubin has persuasively demonstrated in her work on the history of San Francisco leather culture that the motorcycle clubs and bars that had made that city's South of Market neighborhood such a haven for leathermen in the 1960s were already being threatened with destruction by real estate speculation and urban redevelopment by the mid-1970s.

The coming of AIDS is often credited with the destruction of leather culture in San Francisco and other cities. While the loss of leathermen and their contributions to community life to the epidemic cannot be overestimated, it should also be noted that AIDS emerged at a time when the leather community was already undergoing a significant transformation at the hands of other social forces.

Many persons, both inside and outside of the gay community, were quick to decry the sexual excesses of leathermen as responsible for engendering and spreading AIDS, at a time when the etiology of the disease was still largely not understood. In retrospect, this appears ironic, since the primary mode of transmission of the virus was not via whips and chains but rather through the gay male sexual commonplace of anal intercourse. Leathermen were thus unwitting practitioners of safer sex before the term was even coined.

With the demise of earlier institutions, new ones arose, which broadly shared an ethic and organizational characteristics that differentiated them from "the Old Guard." The new leather groups were typically more open; they made explicit their purpose and mission of promoting leathersex. They were more democratic, inviting interested persons to become paying members and even club officers, instead of subjecting chosen initiates to a probationary period before conferring membership upon them. This openness was no doubt due to the legacy of 1960s consciousness-raising around such issues as feminism and gay liberation, and many groups adopted a philosophy that was more political as well as more public in its orientation.

As with gay and lesbian liberation, however, the ideal of a pansexual leather movement was difficult to realize; emergent straight and lesbian leather communities formed organizations separate from those of gay men as well as separate from one another. Fortunately, this breakdown along lines of gender and sexual identity has not prevented cordial relations and collaboration among organizations serving different populations.

With this change in outlook and means of communication, the character of public leather life also changed. While some invitation-only runs persisted (often sponsored by an older generation of motorcycle clubs), newer organizations' regular meetings and special events were typically open to all. While they allowed for and encouraged socialization, sex, and s/m encounters, the cornerstone of these new events was education. Prominent, skilled, and charismatic leaders within the community were called upon to impart their knowledge of leathersex techniques as well as opinions regarding the state and direction of the leather community to event audiences. In some ways this educational mission was a substitute for the close

mentoring of an earlier period, and many bemoaned the loss of a more intimate and exclusive model for the transmission of cultural knowledge.

Another novel phenomenon was the institution of leather title competitions, perhaps the most notable being International Mr. Leather, held annually in Chicago and featuring participants from all over the world. These competitions have proliferated to such an extent that almost any city with a sizable leather community, from Amsterdam and Munich to New York City and Los Angeles, sponsors one such event and may have multiple local title holders. Leather contest winners are enjoined by their status to work to cultivate local leather life, as well as to represent the local community at national and international events. Fundraising and support for charity work has become increasingly integral to this role; since the 1980s, leather organizations have raised large sums for the fight against AIDS as well as the advancement of legal protections for leathersex and the preservation of leather culture and history.

Modes of communication among leatherfolk also changed. The 1970s saw the advent of national and international leather-themed magazines that shared information, propagated sexual styles, and brought people together through personal ads. By the late 1990s, the Internet had supplanted magazines as a source of information.

Opportunities to meet individuals into leather or make contact with leather organizations on the worldwide web continue to multiply. More and more highly specific and esoteric kinks are outlined and cultivated here in ways which they likely could not be in a for-profit medium attempting to target the largest portion of an already small market share. Extensive use of the Internet has lowered barriers to entering leather life considerably, yet proposed laws that aim to restrict the kinds of content available on the web potentially threaten the online leather community's continued vitality.

Leather culture continues to draw medical and legal opprobrium. It remains socially and spatially marginal and thus vulnerable to the vicissitudes of moral crusaders, medical authorities, social service providers, real estate mavens, and conservative forces within the "mainstream" lesbian and gay community. But as more leatherfolk discover the rich history and tremendous diversity of their community and choose to publicly acknowledge their affiliation with one another, leather culture becomes a more formidable entity. It is the hope of leatherfolk that the tradition they uphold and the recognition they struggle for will contribute to the sexual emancipation of all people.

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About the Author

Matthew D. Johnson holds a Masters Degree in Anthropology and History from the University of Michigan. He is currently Cataloging Assistant in the Brooklyn Museum library.