

Challenges, opportunities in Zanzan's leather industry



Iranica Desk

Handicraft fields have held a special place in various societies throughout history, and this art industry has been well represented across our country from the past to the present. Zanzan Province has long been a cradle of handicrafts, maintaining its authenticity despite the changes over time. The hardworking artists in the region strive to pass these arts on to future generations, overcoming numerous challenges.

One of the historical arts of Zanzan Province is leathercraft, which has evolved due to urbanization in recent years. The knife discovered in the Chehrabad Salt Mine, dating back 1,800 years, features a leather sheath attached to the Salt Man clothing with a leather strap, highlighting the long-standing use of handmade leather products in this province, IRNA wrote.

According to leathercraft artists, this field can significantly contribute to the economic prosperity of both the province and the country if it receives adequate support and if various challenges are addressed.

Today, leather holds special status and importance among artisans, craftsmen, and the general public. It is used decoratively in the creation of numerous handicrafts. The production of leather items such as saddlery, shoemaking, *charoq*-weaving (a type of traditional footwear), bookbinding, and leather painting has been prevalent in Zanzan from the past to the present. Currently, the city of Zanzan boasts a thriving industry in leather goods and related products.

For example, *charoq*, which was once practical footwear and is now often a decorative item, is either made entirely of leather or features an upper woven with colored threads in a net-like pattern.

"An artist residing in Abhar who has been passionately engaged in this work for a long time said that it is an art that can be done both by hand and industrially.

Maryam Khodaverdi, 46, explained that when leathercraft is done with a machine, it is termed industrial leatherworking, adding that they currently produce various kinds of products in this field, mostly using natural leather.

She stated that she has been involved in leatherwork for 12 years and has been providing necessary training to apprentices and target groups for the past 10 years.

This artist, who has been recognized as a successful entrepreneur in Abhar since 2017, continued, "Initially, I had no interest in this work, but my older son was interested in it, so I learned alongside him. This experience changed the course of my career, and now I am more passionate about this art than ever."

She discussed the current status of leathercraft, noting that leather is considered a luxury commodity that many citizens cannot afford, although in recent years, purchasing leather products has become more common among the public.

Khodaverdi explained that artificial leather differs from genuine ones, as it is made from plastic materials and is environmentally friendly, even utilizing its smallest components. She also mentioned that historically, sales of leather products during various occasions have been quite high, expressing hope that this trend continues this year.

Throughout her career, she has attracted customers from other countries, indicating that this craft and industry could significantly benefit and impact the export sector.

Khodaverdi identified the high cost of raw materials, exacerbated by economic fluctuations, as one of the challenges facing this art. She noted that every year, especially in the last months, the price of leather raw materials rises, creating difficulties during that time.

She stated that there are dedicated enthusiasts for the leathercraft industry in her city. Over the past eight years, in collaboration with the province's Technical and Vocational Organization and the handicrafts department, she has trained 800 individuals in leathercraft courses.

She recently began teaching this art to beneficiaries of the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee in Abhar, emphasizing that many of these training sessions are offered free of charge to help generate income for the target groups, especially women.

Khodaverdi stressed that support from relevant authorities for handicraft fields, particularly in rural areas, could lead to increased motivation and continuous improvement in these disciplines.

The Head of Zanzan Province's Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization, Seyyed Mikaeil Mousavi, stated that approximately 300 people are currently active in leathercraft in the province, emphasizing that this craft is one of the ancient and authentic industries of the country. He noted that leather has been used for various purposes since ancient times, and today, the products in this art field have been modernized, with a diverse range including bags, shoes, and women's traditional footwear being produced in the province.

Mousavi highlighted that the best and most elegant packaging is made of leather, which is durable and long-lasting. The history of leather products in the province dates back to the leather sheath of the Salt Man's knife, a discovery from 2,000 years ago. He also pointed out that

alongside the knife sheath, the Salt Man's shoes and bag were made of leather.

He noted that the annual leather consumption in the province is approximately 40 million square feet and noted that Zanzan has earned a national badge in leather art due to the high-quality leather bags produced by local artists. Mousavi described leather as a versatile product that can be utilized across various industries, mentioning that last year, the organization provided excellent support for artists in various handicraft fields, particularly leathercraft, and this trend will continue.

Mousavi emphasized the importance of education in this field, stating that the Cultural Heritage Organization is currently focused on teaching *charoq*-weaving, which involves the use of leather. Experienced artisans are actively working and providing training in this area. He added that prominent artists in the province produce export-quality brand-name works in leathercraft, training many apprentices who are now employed in the field.

He noted that the art of leathercraft and its active practitioners are primarily found in the cities of Zanzan, Abhar, and Khodabandeh, suggesting that this craft can provide a special opportunity for enthusiasts, particularly women, to engage in home-based businesses and earn income.

Mousavi mentioned that promoting leathercraft has a significant impact on the economy of families involved in this field, and the cultural heritage department provides essential support for this craft while placing increased emphasis on the important issue of exports. He expressed concern that the export of handicrafts faces serious challenges, stating that the trade in handicrafts is nearly non-existent. Addressing these issues could lead to better recognition of this art and improved exports of produced goods.

Mousavi stressed that holding various exhibitions is crucial for promoting this art. He noted that recently, artists from Khodabandeh showcased their products in an exhibition in Tehran, presenting items at a brand level, which reflects the high potential of this art.

Fortunately, he remarked, leathercraft has established a stronger presence in Zanzan Province compared to previous years, and the production of various decorative items and packaging products has created significant hopes for the development of this art. He also pointed out that challenges in this field include the high cost of raw materials, but he emphasized that the more pressing issue is the export of handicrafts and the sale of produced goods, which could generate high added value and create a promising outlook for this historical craft in the province.

