

Darren Hsieh, right, and Phoebe Chang work in a corner of their studio/storefront.

PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES

## Leather in the raw

*Designers Darren Hsieh and Phoebe Chang of Figure 21 let leather's natural characteristics shine through in their handcrafted bags and accessories*

BY CATHERINE SHU  
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When former graphic designers Darren Hsieh (謝政倫) and Phoebe Chang (張雲惠) decided they needed a change of pace three years ago, they quickly and decisively cobbled together a new career plan. Just two months after teaching themselves basic leatherworking techniques, the couple opened a studio in Taipei's East District (東區), where they have crafted and sold handmade purses and accessories since 2006.

"Our designs are very freestyle because we are self-taught. The things we make don't look the same as if we had used traditional leatherworking methods and that is what makes our work special," says Hsieh.

In their former jobs, the two worked mainly on advertisements, but they decided to embark on a new career path that would give them more independence and a chance to let their own aesthetic take center stage.

They were attracted to leather because it is a dynamic material that becomes more beautiful with use, Hsieh said, as he hand-stitched a black messenger bag at their workstation while Chang deftly hammered grommets through a leather strap. Both taught themselves leatherworking basics from books and Web sites, refining the rest of their technique through experimentation.

"We don't want to over-design our items because each piece of leather is special. Sometimes it's hard to find a balance," says Hsieh. "Leather continues to change, even though the animal it came from is dead. It develops a patina with use, for example. That's what got us excited about working with it in the first place."

Figure 21 bags and accessories are designed to showcase and preserve the original form of the leather each piece is crafted from. Wallets and purses have raw edges and are lightly stained in rich earth tones to allow the natural grain of the skin to show through; the colors are highlighted with contrasting stitching in thick, waxed-cotton thread. Smaller pieces of leather are left whole and folded into asymmetrical billfolds, eyeglass cases and pouches. Pieces with a more polished aesthetic include a simple red tote with a brown strap and silver hardware, and a wallet with painstakingly applied pleating on the side to make it resemble a sleek black seashell. Belts and key chains are made out of leather strips left over from larger items.

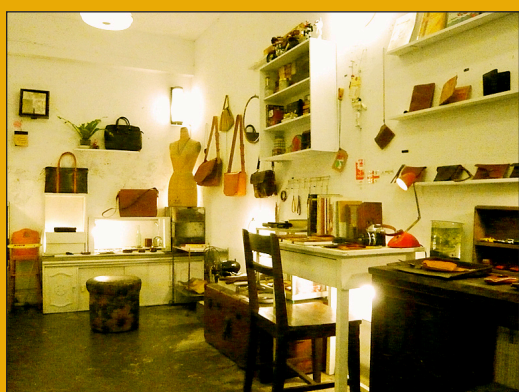
Chang and Hsieh use brand new skins, but visit flea markets to find inspiration for their creations. Their store's interior, which wouldn't look out of place in a Japanese *zakka* catalog or shabby-chic decorating magazine, also reflects their passion for seeking out diamonds in the rough. Much of the furniture was plucked from dumpsters or the side of the road, while a vintage hand-operated sewing machine came from Chang's childhood home. Vintage cameras, matchbox cars, candy tins, wooden shoe forms, plastic toys and a typewriter are carefully arranged like precious treasure in shelves made of weathered wood. Chang and Hsieh work in a small alcove to the left of the entrance.

"We like to use recycled and found objects. We like things that are imperfect and marked, but that have a story," says Hsieh.

Since the design of each item is based on the leather it is made from, every article in the store is limited edition. The store's name is a play on the phrase "figure to one," which points to the singular nature of each bag, wallet or key chain.

"We don't go into the design process hoping that a certain item will become a bestseller," says Hsieh. Custom orders take one week for small accessories, while bags can take up to three weeks to complete.

Most readymade bags in the store are priced in the range of NT\$2,000 to NT\$8,000 for larger items, including work satchels and tote bags. Wallets, billfolds and eyeglass cases sell for about NT\$2,000 to NT\$3,000. Stamped leather buttons and hair accessories are NT\$100 each, while leather-covered notebooks are NT\$980.



Darren Hsieh and Phoebe Chang opened Figure 21 just two months after teaching themselves leatherworking techniques. They culled their store's decor from hand-me-downs, secondhand stores and the side of the road.

PHOTOS: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES



Above and top left: Figure 21's key chains are made from leftovers from larger items.

Lower left: Edges are left raw in many items at Figure 21 to highlight the leather's natural shape.

Below: A deep red tote bag offset with a brown strap and silver hardware.

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Above: Figure 21's journals are wrapped in leather skins and cost about NT\$1,000 each.

Top left and lower left: Figure 21's aesthetic ranges from the rough-hewn to the more polished.

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### Figure 21

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