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WORDS BY KEVIN HAYNES

ATUL AGGARWAL

## *A STUDY IN LEATHER*

IT TAKES AN OLD-WORLD CRAFTSMAN SCHOOLED  
IN AMERICAN WESTERNS TO MAKE THE ULTIMATE  
MODERN-DAY LEATHER ACCESSORY.



Growing up in Bhopal, India, Atul “Bobby” Aggarwal spent hours watching American Westerns. Drawn to the action and adventure of classic John Ford and Sam Peckinpah films, he was also unknowingly studying the leather *accoutrements* of the Wild West - vintage cowboy boots,

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hand-tooled saddles and belts, riding gloves, gun holsters, pouches and travel trunks. As Bobby states, “I was influenced by it all, from the extremely rugged to the refined.” It’s there that his education in leather first began.

Fast forward 20 years, and the Delhi-based designer’s passion for leather has come full circle. Starting out as a management trainee in a Bombay cotton mill, Bobby worked in advertising and graphic design before moving on to design and manufacture his own line of leather shoes for seven years. In 2007, he launched a high-end home furniture store in Delhi that specializes in leather.

Now he’s combining his experience in leather craftsmanship to produce artisan iPhone® and iPad® covers exclusively for Restoration Hardware. “They’re made of vegetable-tanned buffalo leather, a special leather perfectly suited to this use,” he says. “It’s very hard, extremely tough and ages beautifully.”

Inspired by what he calls “very natural leather,” he strives to capture its supple feel and the random blemishes and marks that make each piece unique. “I never liked the look of new shoes,” says Bobby. “I used to wear out every pair - the more worn-out, the better.”

Each style is based on a sketch by Bobby, who then works with a three-person design team until the final cover rolls out of his factory in Noida, a small town near Delhi. “I hate to be isolated,” he says. “I want to have people around me to discuss the technicalities, like how each design is proportioned, before I do a final rough sketch.”

The secret to each cover’s distinctive look, however, is Bobby’s old-school approach. He sources leather from tanneries that employ a traditional, chemical-free tanning process that uses pigments made from local spices, herbs and bark, primarily from indigenous babul trees.

After the hides are padded and cut, they’re hand stained with up to five coats of water-based dyes that provide color without covering up imperfections. “Not many people dare to do what I’m doing because they want flawless-looking leather,” he says. “Most of my designs look as if they were brought down from the attic and restored. The touch, the smell, the patina are inspiring.” ■