

Feature



A Helmet for the Well-Dressed Valkyrie

Parry Morton

A stunning Valkyrie costume worn at Costume-Con 30 includes a winged helmet of highly tooled leather. The author talks about how he made it and shares what he learned about working and tooling leather.

My family's background is Norwegian, and I've always been fascinated with Viking culture and lore. That's why I created a full Viking costume for myself that I wear to renaissance fairs and other events. From my research, I discovered that the horned helmet most people associate with Vikings was generally only worn during ceremonies and religious observations, and was a sign of power. As a practical matter, you can't wield a battle axe very easily with horns on your helmet. Still, I included a helmet with bull horns on the Viking costume I wear today because that's what people expect to see.

At some point I decided that if there is a male Viking, why not create

a female version? That's when I got the idea of creating a Valkyrie. They were the ones who chose who died on the battlefield and carried the fallen warriors to Valhalla in Norse mythology. What better to accompany the Viking warrior that I portray?



Like the Viking Warrior, the Valkyrie costume is pure fantasy, but has its roots in historical construction. The materials were leather, skins, furs, sinews, and whatever was available. Nothing went to waste in the Viking culture, not even the bones. While my Viking warrior had horns on his helmet, the Valkyrie costume I built has wings.

Construction

I began creating the costume around 1998, and have been working on it ever since, making small improvements here and there over time. Several thousand hours have gone into its construction over ten years. I'll focus on the construction of the Valkyrie helmet, which I began in 2000, for this article.

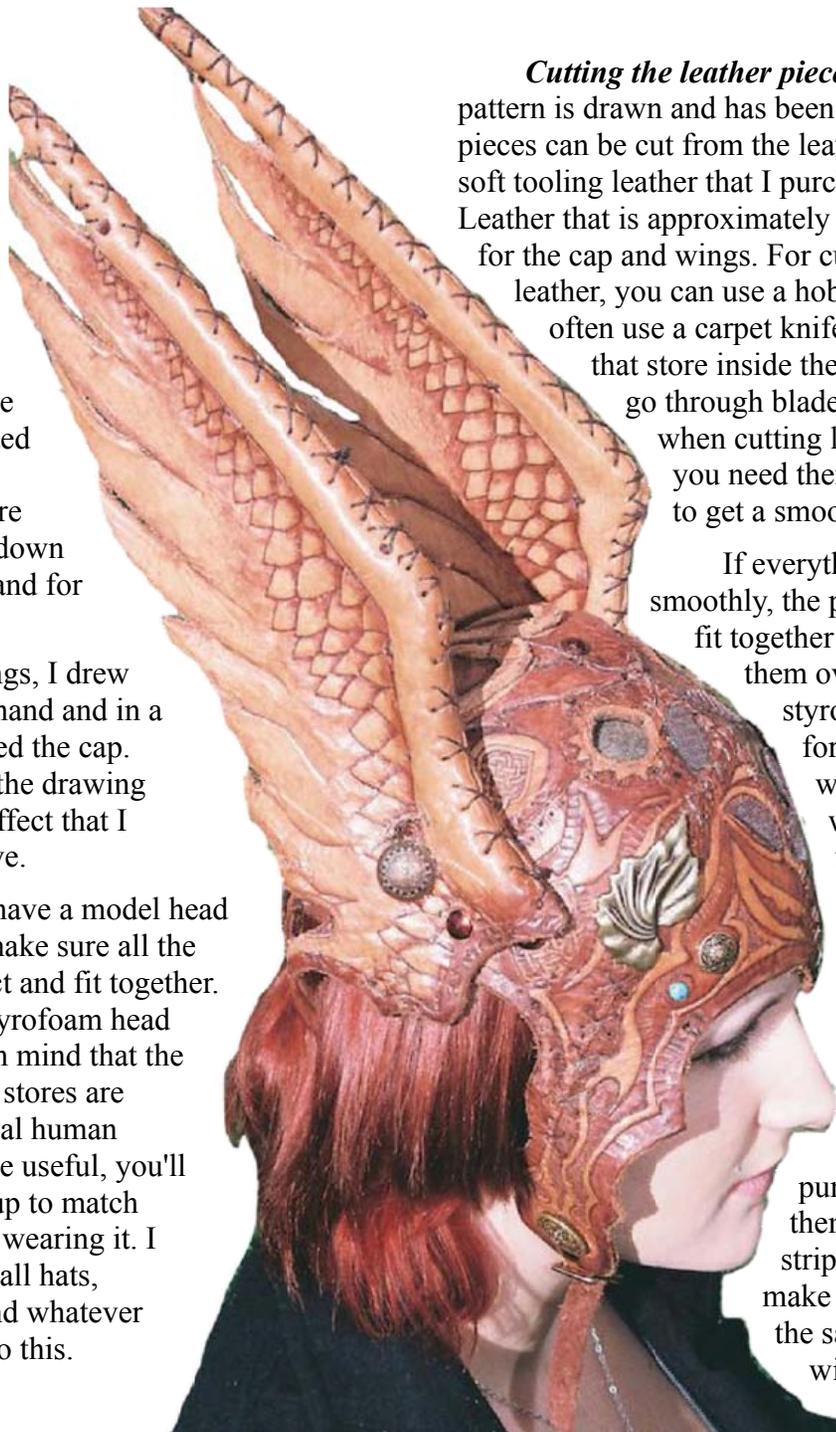
The helmet is made entirely out of leather, including both the cap and the wings. It is highly tooled, with knotwork and other patterns that were commonly found on decorative pieces and inscriptions from the time.

Creating a pattern. I started with a regular cloth baseball cap that fits the head. I first cut it apart at the seams, so that the whole thing lays flat. The gores from the hat are patterns for cutting the corresponding pieces from leather, which are then sewn together to make the cap.

Next I traced the baseball cap pieces onto paper to make the pattern. I started drawing from the points of the gores towards the base, and extended the pattern downwards where necessary to go down around the ears and for the nose piece.

For the wings, I drew the pattern free-hand and in a scale that matched the cap. Then I adjusted the drawing until it had the effect that I wanted to achieve.

It helps to have a model head at this stage to make sure all the pieces are correct and fit together. You can use a styrofoam head form, but keep in mind that the ones you find in stores are smaller than a real human head. For it to be useful, you'll need to build it up to match whoever will be wearing it. I used extra baseball hats, stuffing, tape, and whatever was at hand to do this.



Cutting the leather pieces. Once the pattern is drawn and has been adjusted, the pieces can be cut from the leather. I used a soft tooling leather that I purchased at Tandy Leather that is approximately 3/16" thick for the cap and wings. For cutting the leather, you can use a hobby knife, but I often use a carpet knife with blades that store inside the handle. You'll go through blades very quickly when cutting leather because you need them to be sharp to get a smooth cut.

If everything has gone smoothly, the pieces should fit together when you lay them over the styrofoam head form. It helps to wet the leather when doing this so that it bends into shape. If the pieces don't fit exactly, trim them a bit more to match. Then you can punch holes in them to sew the strips together to make the cap. I did the same for the wings.

Tooling the leather. Before actually sewing the pieces, though, you need to tool the leather with the patterns that make up the design. It's always smart to draw your tooling patterns first so you're not wasting any leather, because it's not cheap. I laid out the knot-work and other designs on the paper patterns, then transferred them to tracing paper to make it easier to trace onto the leather. It's easier to erase stray lines on paper than leather.

I lightly traced the designs onto the leather pieces from the tracing paper, then used various "tools" to incise the designs into the leather. It is important to wet the leather ahead of time before tooling the designs. This provides a soft surface that will take the designs and hold them once the leather dries. A slab of marble makes a good tooling surface. On that, I use a pad of hard rubber and over that I place the wet leather pieces for tooling.



Tool set for embossing leather pieces.

I use a “wedge” as my primary tool. They come in various sizes. The best thing to do is to buy a set of basic tools from some place like Tandy Leather that includes the different shapes and sizes you need. Sets will include other shapes, like one you can use to produce a beaded metal look by twisting it as you tap it to produce a bumpy-rough look. There are also specialty tools for the little circles and bumps. Find a set that has the shapes and sizes you need, and buy any others you require individually.

The handles of the tools are so small in diameter, that I've taken tape and just build it up around the stem of the tool, and then put black tape over the top of that. That gives you something to hang on to.

You impress the tool onto the leather using a small hammer or pressing by hand. The harder you tap or press, the deeper the impression. To create the knots, I use various sizes of wedges and several other tools. The tricky part is keeping track of which lines go “over,” which go “under,” and and which go between the knots. You tap more lightly to make it look like it's going under a knot piece that's going the other way. It helps to keep your paper drawings handy and refer to them as you go.

You can also create shadow effects that give the pattern a 3-D look by using the handle end of the tool and rounding off the edges of the embossed lines..

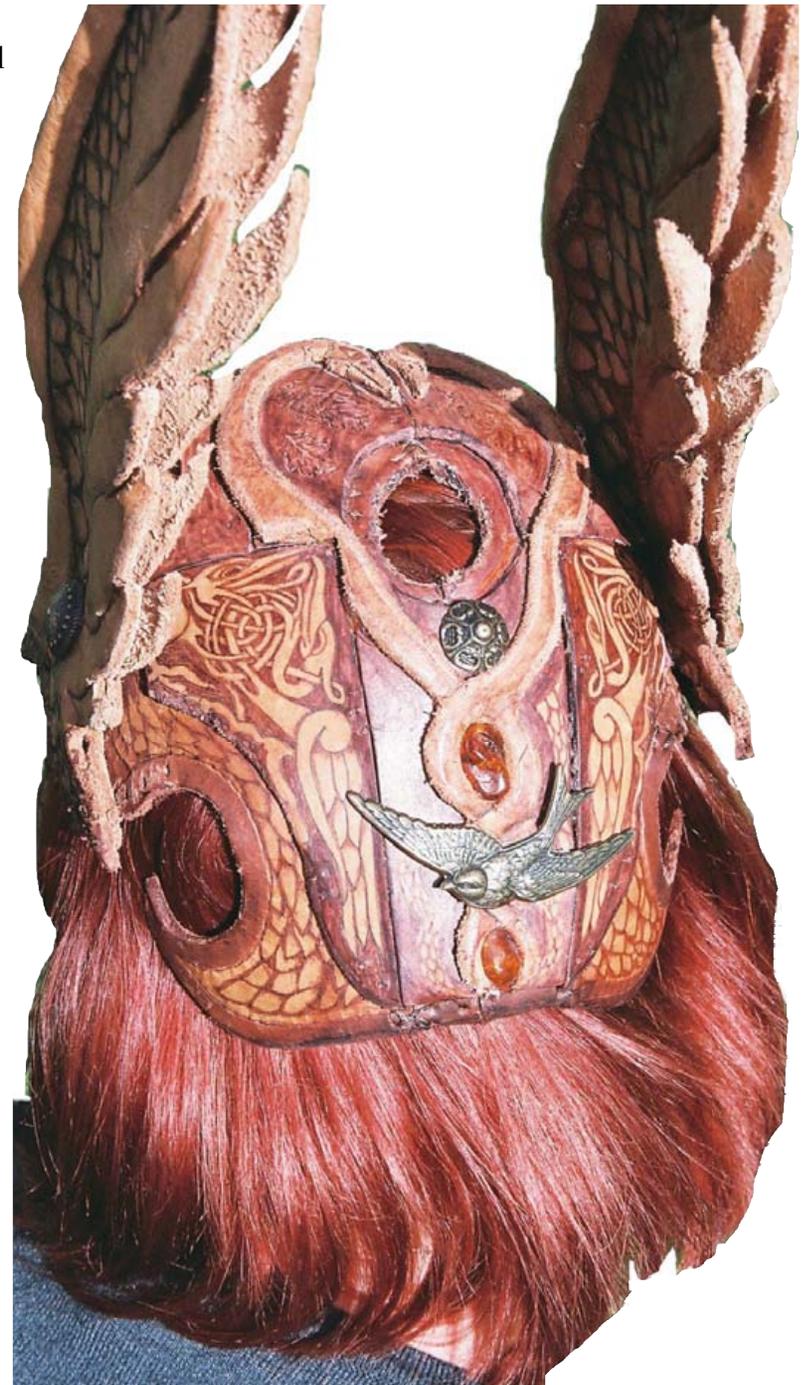
If you want the very edges to be rounded, there are several special tools you can use. One is a groove tool that comes in

different sizes. When you slide it down the edge of the leather, it will actually peel off a strip. There is also a small round white disk tool with a hole in the middle of it, but on the outside edge is has a concave mold that actually shapes the leather to be round.

Assembling the pieces.

Once you have tooled the leather, you punch stitching holes along the edges using a stainless steel tool and sew the pieces together. I prefer to stitch all my work by hand. I use a leather thread that I get at Tandy Leather. It's a waxed thread that comes in either white or black. With the white, you can actually dye the thread brown to match the leather.

The wings are double pieces of 3/16” leather sewn together. Before sewing them, I put a length of heavy wire in between the pieces to add stiffening and provide a way to attach the wings to the helmet. The wire goes all the way along the leading edge and down the outside edge. It provides stability, so that the wings will have some weight to them. I made a loop at the end of the wire just big enough for a Chicago screw that will go through the leather and wire and fasten inside the cap.



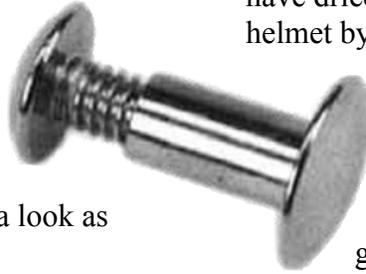
Finishing the leather. Before assembling the cap and wings, I used leather dyes for contrasting color. I like to keep the leather as natural as possible. It will always change some when you color it, and will also darken over time, but I prefer as natural a look as possible.

I used oil-based leather dye for the cap and wings. You'll want to make sure to have adequate ventilation when you're using it. The water-based ones will come off. If you get them wet at all, they'll also bleed on your leather.

I used brushes to apply the dyes. If you don't want to put a lot of stain on an area or want to feather it out, then use a dry method. For that I use a paper towel and just slightly dip it in the stain and just work from the darker areas fading it out towards the lighter areas to give it a 3-D effect. I do not put any kind of sealer over the dyes to avoid darkening the leather any further.



I'm currently experimenting with a something that can be painted on with a brush. It's a waterproofing liquid that you put on cloth when you go camping. The liquid is clear, and I want to see if it doesn't change the color of the leather.



Attaching the wings. Once the dyes have dried, I assembled the wings onto the helmet by running Chicago screws through the two holes I punched in the cap and through the holes and the wire loops in the wings. Before screwing them together, I put just a little bit of glue, like white glue, into the threads of the nut to keep the two pieces from coming loose. They have a tendency to work their way loose while the helmet is being worn, with all the bending and flexing it's subject to.

The wings have some weight to them so they tend to want to lay sideways, but once the helmet is being worn the wings will stay up. The helmet also has a chin strap to keep it from going backwards because the wings have weight to them and the weight is distributed towards the



Oil-based leather dye. (left) Two-part Chicago screw. (above)



back. I plan to add a piece to the back of the helmet that will go behind the skull down to the neck. That will give it more stability and keep it in place better. If the helmet isn't kept tight, the peak part above the nose piece wants to ride up a little bit.

Storing the helmet.

When it's not being worn, I keep the helmet out on display on its styrofoam head piece, with a piece of closet rod going into the bottom of the head piece and a flat base that the rod is screwed to. The helmet will mostly keep its shape when not being worn, but it is better for the helmet to be stored on its head form. The thing to avoid is having the helmet get wet. If that happens and it's not dried in the right shape, then it tends to stay that way.

So far, it has not been necessary to condition the leather to keep it from drying or cracking. There are conditioners to keep saddle leather soft and flexible that might work for the helmet. If I were going to use that, I'd apply it to the inside. That way, it

would not darken the surface, but it would still absorb into the leather. The leather stays in condition without adding anything if it's being worn regularly, just from skin and hair oils.

Final Thoughts

Building the Valkyrie helmet and the rest of the Valkyrie costume has been an interesting experience. Several friends have worn it to events like renaissance fairs and to school demonstrations, and it's always been greatly appreciated.

An interesting story is that after the costume was completed, I and several others were invited to a 50th anniversary celebration in Petersburg, Alaska, which is known as "Little Norway." When we arrived in costume, we noticed a flock of Trumpeter Swan on the lake. In Norse mythology, Trumpeter Swans are the form that the Valkyrie take on earth. It was amazing to see a Valkyrie in human form standing there with them.

Parry Morton ("*Sven the Viking*") *studies Viking and Celtic culture, and creates costumes that reflect his cultural heritage. He descends from John Morton of Norway and Sweden, who was a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Parry has portrayed "Sven" for the past 25 years at the Arizona Renaissance Festival and various Faerie Festivals, as well as lecturing in schools on Viking history.*