

# Meet the Maker: Freyja Ulveland of Fehu Inc.

🕒 October 22, 2015    👤 Cathleen Sachse



***American Made Show: Please tell us a little bit about your background and how you arrived where you are today.***

**Freyja Ulveland:** I have always been a maker, a tinkerer, a crafter — but it wasn't until I began working with leather that I found my art. Leather has come to wholly envelope my life, consuming every inch of space in my domain, and I just couldn't be happier.

A few months in, I signed-up for my first ever craft sale. At the sale I met a boutique owner from my favorite neighborhood and — lucky break! — she wanted to sell my bracelets in her store. It wasn't long before she offered me an extra room in her building to use as a studio space. Beyond the benefit of extra space, this was a pivotal event in my development as an artisan. By

working right from her store, I was offered direct and immediate critique from her customers. Better yet, I got to learn the ins-and-outs of running a boutique. The importance of having a positive wholesale experience is now clearly etched into my mind, as are the means of making a product that people want to buy.

Having found my material — one that I cherish so much it invades my dreams — and having seen both sides of the store counter, I've spent the past several years growing a thriving business. I love that my venture has me making art and making deals, but also dabbling in photography and writing and web development. I couldn't imagine a better career for a maker like me.



**AMS:** *What inspires you to create new designs?*

**Freyja Ulveland:** There is a woman I envision. She is ethereal, cold, and from the land. She

inhabits my memories of summers spent on horseback, and winters wandering lost in the snow. She is the focal point of my creative process; I design for her, and I pull my influence from her world.

I take these daydreams and visions, and sketch them out in my notebook, to formalize the questions that drive my process. How will I manufacture what she was wearing? What colors I will use? Where will I find those materials? Which new techniques must I learn?

The joy of creation, for me, comes from being inspired by the intangible but then realizing it with exact technical process. That contrast is powerful. Similarly, I pay careful attention to fashion. I love browsing boutiques and trend sites, attending events of high-culture, and talking with my peers about where different media are headed. But when I need to design work of my own, I try to steer my mind as far away from that as possible, and return to it later to inform my self-critique. Above all, I focus on being true to my dream'd woman. <3

***AMS: Tell us about the technical processes you employ in your work.***

**Freyja Ulveland:** In addition to learning about leather history and technique, I've also taken a keen interest in the science behind leather. The journey from cow to cuff requires a great deal of processing, each step involving some aspect of chemistry, and I find this fascinating. I figure, the better I understand the science, the easier it will be to create something novel by manipulating it.

Here's an example. Prior to the industrial revolution, leather was tanned, treated, and dyed using plant matter: tree bark, flowers, lichens, etc. But with the eruption of large-scale industry, tanneries turned away from plants and toward chromium, producing a weaker but less-costly leather, and toxic byproducts. Leather workers by-and-large stopped dyeing with flowers and plant extracts, and started using industrial-grade products, replete with MSDS sheets warning you not to breathe or touch them. This is the world of leather that dominates today, but it is not the one I want to be a part of.

Through reading and experimentation, I've found that the pre-industrial techniques — flowers, lichens, and the like — universally result in a higher-quality product. It takes a lot of time and experimentation to figure out which plants to use, how to heat or soak or dry the leather just-so, how to balance the pH, and so forth. But the quality is so, so much higher, and the leather doesn't stink of chemicals, and the wastewater and other byproducts are far more environmentally friendly.

Learning about the science behind leather, and how it intersects with the industry and history,

was akin to opening Pandora's box. I can't take the easy path and just buy my quick-and-dirty dies from the supply shop here in town. I can't just buy the leather from any old tannery. If I'm going to make a product I can feel good about, it MUST be vegetable-tanned. It MUST be dyed with plant extracts or other processes that are safe for my body and my children, since this is the environment I'll be raising them in.



**AMS: How would you describe your artistic style?**

**Freyja Ulveland:** "A Nordic twist on Western romanticism."

I am of Norwegian heritage, and deeply admire their balanced approach to the environment and modernity. Ingrained in their culture is a reverence for the forests, the mountains, the ocean. On top of this, they cherish crisp design and technical innovation, with an optimistic eagerness about the future. I feel a deep resonance with this balance.

I live in Calgary, Alberta, Canada — “Heart of the New West”. The Albertan landscape is one of rolling grassland and straight-line modernist architecture. Calgary takes the cowboy hat as its flag and icon. Tall boots are legion, often seen with boot bling. There’s a real old-world-meets-new-world romance to the culture here that I just thrive in. But there’s also a deep conservatism — people talk of change and advancement, but cling desperately to the familiar and well-worn. I feel a deep desire to keep pushing the culture forward.

My work pulls from both of these influences, relishing in their compliment and conflict. Leather is as much a part of Norse history as it is Western, but it is manifested so distinctly for each that there’s tremendous room for interpretation and imagination.



**AMS: What is your most popular product line?**

**Freyja Ulveland:** My very first leather product became my all-time best seller — a lucky break, indeed. They are colorful, all-leather Wrap Cuffs that curl around the wrist and slot neatly into themselves, obviating the need for a metal fastening. They’re highly adjustable and come in a cornucopia of hues, so they work just as well for men as they do for women. The colors range from the bright & bold, to soft pastels, to a range of natural wood grain inspired patterns, and special marbled or spotted looks. While they were originally dyed using off-the-shelf water-based

dyes, I've recently switched to using a variety of planet extracts and other natural processes to achieve the range of colors, and they look and feel so much nicer than before. I'm very excited to debut these new natural colors at American Made.

***AMS: Do you have any big announcements or plans in the near future?***

**Freyja Ulveland:** While visiting Florence this past Spring, I happened upon the Santa Croce Leather School. There I learned how to apply gold leaf using the exact technique of the famous Florentine book binders of years past.

I have been working on a series of designs inspired by my travels, which leverage this leafing technique. Come see them at the Washington, D.C. American Made show this January.

---