



The men wear shoes in which specially processed wood veneer replaces the leather. It is flexible and unique worldwide. Schorn & Groh bosses Rolf Loose-Leonhardt (left) and Axel Groh see enormous potential for their Karlsruhe-based company. Photo: Andrea Fabry

Shoes made of soft wood veneer for vegans

In addition to furniture, cars, yachts and instruments, Karlsruhe-based Schorn & Groh sees new potential

From Dirk Neubauer

Karlsruhe. Leather shoes and leather jackets may be chic, but vegans tend not to wear them. "The fashion industry was the impetus for finding a renewable, vegan alternative to leather," recalls Rolf Loose-Leonhardt, managing director of the Karlsruhe-based company Schorn & Groh. Their real wood veneers adorn dashboard panels in Porsches and Bentleys, can be found in luxury yachts, in the Elbphilharmonie concert hall and in Apple stores.

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It is impossible to copy our Nuo technology.

Rolf Loose-Leonhardt
Managing director Schorn & Groh

Fashion designer Marta Antonelli and her father, textile supplier Marcello Antonelli, knew this. They developed a new type of wooden mesh and teamed up with Schorn & Groh. The Karlsruhe-based company now holds the rights to all the patents and has invested over three million euros in its Nuo machine park in Eschelbronn. This is where they produce wooden textiles.

"This is ash, this is walnut, this is oak," says Schorn & Groh managing director Axel Groh, pointing to samples. They are flexible and feel like leather or textiles. Then the two entrepreneurs lead us next door to their showroom. There are shoes, deco parts, armchairs and acoustic panels made from their materials.

The company now generates 15 percent of its total sales of 17 (2022: 16.5) million euros with the material called Nuo. In the long term, Loose-Leonhardt says, the company could reach 20 million euros with the wood textiles alone. The potential is therefore enormous, and the company re-

25,000 euros for an oak tree

To round off the range:

Schorn & Groh also offers classic solid wood, but this only accounts for 0.5 percent of total sales. At the Freiburg site – one of five Schorn & Groh sites – table tops up to nine meters long and 2.50 meters wide are produced. They are up to eight centimeters thick. "These are also passed on," says company boss Axel Groh.

The XXL Oak: The Karlsruhe-based company recently purchased an oak tree in the district of Biberach for just under 25,000 euros.

The facts: around 300 years old, 8.70 meters long, 1.62 meters in diameter, 20 tons in weight, 17.09 cubic meters of material. This is used to make classic lumber for tabletops. "The log is planned for a customer in the USA," says managing director Rolf Loose-Leonhardt.

Consumer tip: If you want to buy a natural product, make sure it is not a reproduction: sometimes they are advertised with fantasy names that sound like real wood veneer.

cently, won carmaker Renault as a customer for Nuo.

The innovative wood material, applied to cotton for example, can be sewn and dyed. A lot of money was lost in the development process, but the company gained a lot of know-how. "It is impossible to copy," Loose-Leonhardt is convinced. In the meantime, Nuo is making a profit. In terms of price, it is similar to high-quality leather.

However, classic veneers are still the main business of Schorn & Groh, whose natural products are also used on Steinway & Sons grand pianos, in private jets or in the casino in Monaco. The business model is as follows: wood experts like Groh are located all over the world, buying trees. In partner sawmills, veneer is made from them. Much of it ends up in the warehouse, which has six million square meters of material, valued by Groh at 25 million euros.

Veneers made from trees such as cedar, lemon or cypress, plum, zebrano or ziricote are stored there. 130 different wood species. Despite this diversity, oak is still the most sought-after. Apple, for example, wants a certain wood color and structure in its stores.

"We know that the corresponding oaks grow in a certain area." And so Schorn & Groh supplies oak veneer from the Palatinate and the Spessart to a US company that uses it to make Apple furniture. This is another way in which the Karlsruhe-based company is present worldwide. In general, they supply to 80 countries. "It's not going brilliantly, but it's good," says Loose-Leonhardt, describing the business situation. The automotive industry now only contributes 15 percent to total sales. According to Loose-Leonhardt, six years ago it was still 25 percent. Especially in the case of mid-range vehicles, imitation wood or foil is now used instead of natural wood.

Schorn & Groh has also noticed the weakness of the German furniture industry – most recently, this was made apparent by the insolvency of the company behind the traditional brand Hülsta.

The interior finishing work would still be going well: for retail, banks, hotel chains, private villas.

The company was founded in 1961 as a two-man business, and today it has 75 employees. In 1970, there were still around 180 furniture manufacturers within a 50-kilometer radius of Karlsruhe.

With their disappearance, expert knowledge has been lost. "The veneer world is retiring, and unfortunately the knowledge is not being passed on," says Loose-Leonhardt.

The company Schorn and Groh therefore sees itself as a center of excellence for veneers for Germany and the world. None of its competitors, of which there are five worldwide, has such a high level of added value and is as innovative. Veneers are also used in watches, glasses, bicycles, and can be woven like a basket, embossed and backlit. With 300,000 tiny holes per square meter, they also absorb noise and interference in rooms. However, not everyone is aware of this versatility. "We save designers and architects a lot of time and show them solutions that they would otherwise not have," says Loose-Leonhardt.

The eco-trend is an opportunity. Groh emphasizes that his company does not buy entire plantations, but rather buys individual trees at auction for good money that will soon die. A tree can be used to create a lot of surface area in a natural way. "Veneer is the forest's best friend," says Groh. He also describes it as "the thinnest solid wood".

Schorn & Groh sees EU bureaucracy as one of the challenges. The so-called EU Deforestation Act and the Supply Chain Act may have been created with good intentions, but these are being counteracted. This is damaging Europe's competitiveness, says Groh.

The forestry graduate is naturally a wood fan. He was recently in the US state of Mississippi to buy trees at auction that will be used to make veneer for Bentley cars. Groh believes that being able to supply such end products should be fascinating, as should innovations such as Nuo wood textiles. Nevertheless, finding new employees is a challenge. "We are looking for real wood lovers," he says.