

Reconditioning your Maserati's leather

Ivan Ruiz – February 2005

Maserati has traditionally employed high quality Connelly leather in their interiors. There are different grades of Connelly leather and Maserati selected one of the best. It is not too uncommon to find a Maserati from the 60's or 70's still with its original interior in good condition. Contrast this with cars such as Jaguar, which used a much inferior grade of Connelly leather and you will seldom find one with its original interior.

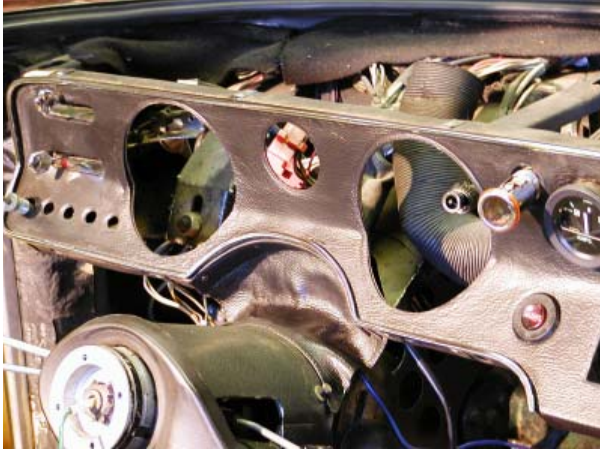
The purpose of this article is to provide you with tips and techniques on how to best correct common problems which have developed after many years of use and bringing back the leather's color, while preserving as much as the original material as possible. Although many upholstery shop disagree with me, I am of the opinion it is best to preserve the original material and only replace when absolutely necessary. A car loses much of its originality when things are replaced with new materials. New leather may look good but it never seems to have the grain, texture and odor of the original material.

The leather on your Maserati was originally surfaced with a lacquer based dye. That is the reason why areas which get much use, such as the driver's seat, will wear off the color. In fact, you can completely remove the color of the leather and leave it in its natural "brown" color using lacquer thinner. Changing the interior color is possible but not something I would recommend until you have some experience. For this article let's assume we want to keep the original color. Also let's assume there are a few "defects" which we will want to address:

- leather is a bit hard and dry
- fix a couple of open stitches
- fix a one inch tear on the driver's seat bottom caused by keys in someone's back pockets
- there are some cracks around the center console and interior door handle
- driver's seat cushion has lost its firmness
- the color is worn and faded in several areas and overall it needs to be freshen up

1. First step ... *remove as much as possible from the car*

Before attempting any repairs it is best to clean everything. You can use a general purpose cleaner such as Simple Green or one made specifically for leather such as Lexol. Make sure you use plenty of clean damp towels. It is best to remove from the car anything you plan on redying. I even separate the seat backs from the bottoms in order to avoid overspraying the chrome. The only thing I generally do not remove from the car is the dash (instrument cluster) as disassembly can be rather tedious.



Switches and gauges being removed from a Ghibli dash

2. Before proceeding ... *clean the leather thoroughly*

Before attempting any repairs or applying dye it is important to clean and treat the leather. For cleaning you can use bar soap or one of the commercially available leather cleaners. Lexol makes a good leather cleaner. Use plenty of warm water and clean rags which you periodically ring out. The objective is to remove all the dirt and oil that has trapped throughout the years. The leather on pre-1980s Maserati used a lacquer based dye that can be removed with lacquer thinner. How much of the dye you remove will greatly depend on its current condition. Hard and stiff leather is caused by a combination of the leather loosing its natural oil and of the original dye becoming brittle over time. Therefore even if you are keeping the original color there is benefit of removing the old dye as the leather will be much softer once the new dye is applied. Also, the leather softeners will work better with some of the old dye removed. You do not need, nor want, to remove all the old dye. Just remove enough for the leather to feel soft again.

Use lacquer thinner and plenty of rags to remove the old dye. Gently rubbing with steel wool can speed up the process. This process will be a bit messy, therefore have plenty of rags and do this in a well ventilated area. Again, no need to remove all the old dye, just enough to remove the old and dry coating and to provide good adhesion.

Dry the leather with clean terry towels and let dry for at least one day.

Now it is time to treat the leather with a quality leather softener. There are several on the market; Lexol makes a leather conditioner and Connelly makes "Hide Food". I have been using Soffener from Color Plus (<http://www.colorplus.com>). They claim it restores the leather's natural oil and has a low water contents. The trick is to use only a small amount and to let the leather absorb it. Spread the softener with a soft brush, working it into the stitches. If the softener is absorbed quickly, apply a second coat. Do not over apply. After about an hour wipe away the excess and let soak in overnight. If needed, repeat several times over several days until the leather is again soft. Clean the leather one more time

with soap and make sure it is COMPLETELY dry before continuing. It should take about one day to dry out, depending on temperature and humidity



Lexol cleaner, Lexol conditioner, Color Plus Soffener, Hide Food, lacquer thinner

3. Now it is time to *fix problem areas*.

Most of the problems areas can be fixed by the enthusiast, but a few are better left to an upholstery shop that has the proper equipment. Make sure you have treated the leather first as it will make it easier to stretch if needed. Let's take the repairs one at a time:

Open stitches

This is something you probably do not want to tackle yourself. The stitching NEEDS to be done from the inside of the leather. If you attempt to hand stitch from the outside I doubt you will like the results, it just will not look right. Many times when the stitches have opened it is because the leather around it has shrunk. In order to fix it properly the upholstery shop will need to replace some of the leather panels. Matching the color of the leather, unless it is black, will be close to impossible but do not worry since you will be redyeing it anyway. The trick is to get leather that has a similar grain to the original, the color is much less important (naturally, avoid using a red piece of leather if you are working on a white interior!). Remember our goal is preservation; do not let the upholstery shop talk you into replacing the whole seat ... replace as little material as possible.



Driver's seat from a Khamsin shows some wear after 38 years. Notice one of the seams will need to be restched.

Torn leather

The best way to fix a tear is by gluing a backing behind the tear. Cut a round piece of new leather, canvas or vinyl just a little larger than the tear. You will use this to re-enforce the area. The backing can generally be folded and inserted thru the tear. Use an adhesive to give the rear support and to stop it from getting any larger. After the adhesive has cured use a leather crack filler to fill in the gaps. Leather crack filler is only for cosmetics, it has no strength and can only be used on small gaps. If the tear is too extensive, replacing the panel will be the only solution.

Cracks on the seat, console and door handle

It is not uncommon for leather to develop stress cracks. If the crack is not severe and has not broken thru the leather, it can be cosmetically hidden using a filler. I have used a product available from Color Plus with very good results. This filler is light grey in color and is easy to sand and adhere to leather. Use the filler in very small amounts, the more filler you use the more visible it will be once the dye has been applied. After the filler is dry, sand with 320 or 400 grit sandpaper. Only use a filler designed for leather as the dye may not adhere to other fillers.

Seat cushion has lost firmness

If the foam is disintegrating, a trip to an upholstery shop is in order. They should have no problems fabricating a seat cushion that matches the original one. Many times the foam is fine and the culprit is the lower diaphragm which holds the foam cushion in place. These too can be easily replaced. Sometimes all you need to do is add a extra piece of foam between the cushion and the diaphragm.



Seat bottom from a Khamsin. This one is in good condition, many times the webbing and/or seat cushion are breaking apart.

4. After all repairs have been made it is time to *resurface the leather*.

This is the step that will dramatically improve the appearance of your leather and will be the most gratifying when you are done. You NEED to make sure all leather softener has been removed with soap and water, and that the leather is completely dry. If the leather is not dry the dye will not properly adhere and will flake over time.

As was mentioned earlier, if you are doing an overall dye job the best way to get professional results is to remove as much as possible from the car. Small touch up work can be easily done with the parts in the car.

I have experimented with several color dyes and have found by far the best is Surfex from Color Plus (<http://www.colorplus.com>). It is a water based dye that will give the leather a nature sheen and not the dreaded painted “vinyl look”. It is relatively easy to apply, very easy to touch up and easy to clean up. This dye can be used on vinyl in addition to leather, which is convenient. Color Plus cannot create the dye using the Connelly dye number, but they will match it from an one inch square sample. A good place to get this sample is from the seat bottom, usually there is some excess.. and it has not been subject to sunlight. Keep in mind it will take several weeks to send in the sample and get back the dye, so plan accordingly. How much dye is needed depends if you are doing the whole car and which car you are working on. A Ghibli coupe probably has the most leather; a quart will do this car assuming it is not a color change. If you are touching up the seats and a few other spots, a pint will be sufficient.

Just before you apply the dye, take a clean rag with lacquer thinner and wipe the leather. This will leave the old dye sticky and the new dye will adhere better.



Surfex leather dye, sponge brush, touch up paint gun and 3M pad

If you are doing spot repairs, a sponge brush works well. Apply the dye in thin coats, letting it dry between coats. Three or four coats should do the trick. For bigger areas (ex: complete seat) and for better results the use of an air paint gun is recommended. I generally use a touch up paint gun and spray at about 30 psi. You can thin the dye up to

10% with water if needed to improve the spray flow. You want the coats to be wet but not too thick so as to cover the leather's grain.

Areas such as the instrument cluster are best done with a sponge brush. Remove as many switches and gauges as possible. Removing all the switches can be rather tedious, but the results will pay off. On cars with toggle switches, such as the Ghibli SS and Bora, I sometimes simply push the switches out but leave them connected. That way the dye can be applied and the switches snapped back into place once it is dry.

After the dye dries overnight sand it lightly with a 3M scuffing pad. This will bring out the leather's natural luster. Let it dry an additional day before putting it back into use. Do not use any leather preservatives, oils, etc for a couple of months.

You will not believe how much nicer your interior will look; at a small fraction of the cost of leather replacement, while keeping your car as original as possible.



Finished product: This Merak SS interior looks very much like the day it left the factory. Hard to believe the leather is almost 30 years old!