

The Coat and the Constitution

Animal Surfaces as Sites of Encounter

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This article explores human-animal relationships through two different yet materially similar artefacts: a second-hand coat made of mink pelts and the Danish 1849 constitution written on parchment made from sheep and calf. Considering these “faceless” animal skins reveals how animal surfaces act as “animal-made-objects” and sites of human-animal encounter. Through a material culture lens and recent theoretical perspectives, the article shows how animal matter remains active after death and postmortem processing, complicating conventional boundaries between humans and animals.

Introduction

Animal skins occupy a significant role in human societies, spanning from practical uses to aesthetic, cultural, and educational purposes. The treatment and use of animal surfaces reveals much about the complexity of human-animal relationships. Skin, hide, pelt, fur, and rawhide – these are some of the terms that describe processed animal skins, each prepared in specific ways for specific functions. Although seemingly neutral, words like these articulate a clear distinction between humans and animals, often positioning humans as the dominant party and animals as resources within human-animal relationships (Heintzman, 2021, p. 361). Inspired by the *animal turn* and its confrontation with the notion of animals as passive objects, this article explores the complex relations between humans and animal surfaces through the lens of two objects: a fur coat and the Danish 1849 constitution written on parchment. Despite their apparent differences, both consist of *faceless* animal skins, processed in ways that obscure and erase their animal origins and individuality, unlike taxidermy for instance,

which attempts to actively sustain the illusion of animal life (Rony, 1996; Alberti, 2011; Poliquin, 2012). Examining them together highlights how animal presence persists to different degrees: in the coat, pelts still reveal traces of the mink, while in the constitution the animal is almost entirely effaced in the smooth, white surface. They also mark a spectrum of contexts: the coat, once a fashionable personal possession displayed on the body, and the constitution, a collective national possession largely hidden from touch or view. Yet both share qualities of smoothness and durability that make them enduring supports of human life. Through processes like cutting, stretching, tanning, and stitching, animal skins metamorphose from living beings into objects. These transformations raise fundamental questions: how much of the animal essence remains, and what is removed and diminished as the skins become objects to be worn, touched, read, and displayed? In examining these faceless skins, this paper also asks the contrary: how do animal surfaces subtly alter and affect the humans who engage with them? By exploring these ideas through case studies and theoretical perspectives, this article proposes ways to understand animal surfaces as sites of encounter and human-animal transformation.

Wearing Animal Skin

When considering the use of animal skin, the idea of wearing it is often the first that comes to mind. Throughout human history, animal skin has served as a protective layer for the otherwise furless human body, shielding it from the elements and conforming to norms of bodily concealment. Yet, beyond these practical functions, animal skins have long been employed as powerful visual social markers with certain skins signifying luxury and status. In modern societies, the use of animal skin in clothing relies almost exclusively on animals bred and farmed for this purpose. While leather is typically a byproduct of meat production, where the skin is secondary to the animal's primary purpose of providing food, the fur industry operates differently. Fur-bearing animals are bred exclusively for their pelts, which are made into luxury garments. This production process involves a complex series of human-animal interactions, from breeding and slaughter to treating and assembling the pelts, and finally to the purchase and wear of





ILL. 1
Second-hand coat made from 65 brown mink. Photo by the author.

the finished product. Several scholars have theorized and explored what happens when human and animal surfaces meet and interact through the production and wearing of animal skin. These interactions reveal tensions and blurred boundaries between human and animal actors. The following section examines mink fur through a secondhand coat, intended for female wearers (Ill. 1), as both a material lens and as evidence of the large-scale Danish mink industry. This coat raises critical questions about the dynamics of power in human-animal relations: Who holds the power over whom in this interface between human and animal skin? And perhaps more provocatively – who is wearing whom?

Technologies of Power

At first glance, the coat may appear as if it were made from a single, continuous piece of skin. However, upon closer inspection, the seams become visible and tangible, revealing that it is, in fact, constructed from 65 individual brown mink.¹ The small size of mink means that many animals are required for a single coat, and unlike garments made from larger animals, the seams between pelts are an unavoidable feature. This makes the animal presence more immediate as the wearer encounters not one abstracted “fur” but the accumulated bodies of dozens of individuals. The softness, sheen, and density of mink fur further distinguish it from leather or other furs, which, historically, has contributed to mink’s desirability in fashion. The process that transforms living mink into a finished garment involves multiple steps: selective breeding, caging, feeding, slaughter, flaying, fleshing,² stretching, drying, tanning, and sewing (Weiss et al., 2013a, pp. 71-84). Each step is crucial in preserving the quality and surface integrity of the pelts, transforming the mink from living beings into a durable material for human use. While the coat’s exact origin is unknown, when or where it was made and who wore it, the lack of a label suggests it may have been privately commissioned, perhaps by someone connected to the mink industry. What we do know is that it ultimately ended up in a secondhand shop in Aarhus and was subsequently purchased for 600 DKK in 2019.³ It now mostly resides in the back of a coat closet. The vast scale of the Danish mink industry in the past century and the tendency to refer to mink as collective populations, numbers, and colors such as “sapphire,” “pearl,” and “mahogany” (Weiss et al., 2013b, p. 44-45), emphasizes the perception of mink as commodities to be produced and sold.

This dynamic, where humans exert power over animals through breeding, regulation, and slaughter to transform them into material objects, is explored by Peggy McCracken through what she calls the “technology of sovereignty” (McCracken, 2017, p. 12). In her study of medieval French literature, McCracken shows how sovereignty is displayed through the killing, flaying, and use of animal skins: human dominion depends not only on animal deaths but also on the management of animal populations. She argues that “the technology of sovereignty that appropriates the use of animals as a symbolic and material support for human life (...) is a biopolitics. It

calls the power to regulate, administer, and even produce life” (McCracken, 2017, p. 29).⁴ Crucially, however, McCracken also stresses that animal resistance can unsettle this power, undermining the very sovereignty it seeks to enact (McCracken, 2017, p. 30-31). Extending this theory to real, living animals, the mink coat reminds us of the material traces left behind from actual bodies. While the coat may appear as a seamless product of human craftsmanship, it also tells a story of animal resistance. The living conditions in mink farms often lead to self-inflicted injuries, with mink gnawing at their own or each other’s skin, creating wounds that could compromise the quality of the pelts and require mending, or lead to the destruction of the injured animals and thus reduced production (Rochmann, 1961, p. 297). Furthermore, mink farmers must wear thick gloves to handle the mink to avoid being bitten or scratched, emphasizing an active animal response to human handling. Ironically, these gloves are often made from ox hide, introducing another layer of animal materiality to the mink coat. In this way, animal skins become essential not only as the final product, but also in the very production of other animal skins (Ill. 2).

The mink coat, unlike McCracken’s literary animals, represents the literal materiality of animals condensed into a garment. Through industrialized processing, individual animals are seemingly erased, not only due to the vast numbers of mink in collective populations, but also through the removal of distinguishing features like heads, legs, and tails. These parts, which could help identify individual animals, are stripped away as the pelts are stitched into a single, cohesive object, underlining the facelessness of such animal materials. Furthermore, several layers of fabric lining help conceal the fleshy side of the mink skins and the stitching that holds them together. It is thus only after death, when the animal’s individuality and resistance are removed, that the fur becomes truly accessible to human touch and visual appreciation. While we should be cautious in framing all animal behavior strictly as resistance (Pearson, 2017, pp. 250-253), the actions of mink, influenced by the conditions in which they are confined and handled within human economic systems, display a form of resistance that cannot be overlooked. However, it is important to consider that it is each animal’s individual personality and circumstances that play a role in how this resistance manifests itself, for example in the form of food avoidance,



ILL. 2
Mink in handler's gloved hand. Photo by iStock.com/Neznam.

aggressive behavior, or other acts of defiance against human control. At the same time, agency in this context should not be understood as conscious intention to obstruct human projects. As Pearson notes, there is a risk of anthropomorphizing if all disruptive behavior is labelled as resistance (Pearson 2017, pp. 250-253). Acts such as biting, scratching, or refusing food nonetheless alter human practices, even if the animals do not comprehend the wider economic system in which their skin is pursued.⁵

Blurring Boundaries

Once the 65 mink represented in the coat were killed, they could no longer actively resist or influence what happened to them. Their bodily matter, however, could still affect, and even complicate their use as garments. Despite the measures taken to preserve the skins, their organic nature often

creates a breeding ground for pests and decay due to environmental changes. In this particular mink coat, traces of decay are evident in small bald patches of skin where fur has fallen out. Such flaws change how the coat can be worn or viewed: the smooth glamorous fur gives way to a sense of fragility and the lingering presence of animal mortality. Apart from organic material's tendency to eventually deteriorate, the agency of animal matter and its potential to impact and transform the wearer has been articulated by several scholars. Todd Borlik argues that: "Furred gowns and animal skins, then, were more than merely passive objects: even after its original owner was dead and flayed, fur could continue to radiate a bestializing influence (...)." A statement that underlines the "species-blurring" power of fur in Renaissance bear plays (Borlik, 2021, p. 195). Similarly, Chantal Nadeau examines the role of beaver fur in 20th century Canada through the concept of "furladies", which designates the intertwining of female sexuality, fur, and national economy (Nadeau, 2001, p. 194). For Nadeau, the furlady is both subject and material: post-war advertisements often showed women dressed in little more than fur, suggesting that the coats were "a natural extension of female skin" (Nadeau, 2002, p. 198). In this imagery, women became embodiments of the Canadian nation's advancements, their sexuality and bodies linked to the trade in beaver pelts that sustained its economy. The trope also reinforced enduring associations of women with nature and objectification, while simultaneously situating them as national agents. At the same time, the merging of fur and wearer into a kind of human-animal hybrid ties into broader discussions of animal agency and materiality. In both examples, the story being told complicates the relationship between human and animal to convey the idea that fur garments are not just material objects, but active extensions of the bodies they adorn. This interweaving of human and animal highlights the potential of animal materials to transform their wearers. This power that animal matter seemingly holds in the relationship between animals and humans who wear them stems from the fact that they were once living, breathing beings.

Erica Fudge introduces the term "animal-made-object", which emphasizes the inseparability of the living animal and the object it becomes after death. The term carries a dual meaning: first, the *animal-made* object

as a product constructed from the animal, and second, the animal *made-object*, emphasizing the objectified animal (Fudge, 2012, p. 42). Fudge's concept also addresses the issue of wearing animal skins. She argues that animal-made-objects worn by humans are "much more than simply a product and thence an illustration of human dominion". She further claims that "the persistent presence of the animal in the animal-made-object seems always to defy the objectification that attempts its absencing" (Fudge, 2012, pp. 49-50). This tension between the erasure of the animal and its continued presence relates to McCracken's notion of human dominion, demonstrating that the animal's agency is not entirely lost in the process of becoming object. It is compelling to consider the mink coat within this dual concept of objectification. The coat is both animal and material, shaped by human and animal agency, blurring the boundaries between wearer and worn. However, in today's context of a rapidly declining mink industry and the rise of faux fur, the animal *made-object* seems to have taken the upper hand in this complex relationship. Over the last four decades, a focus on animal rights and the moral complications of wearing fur has transformed mink coats from symbols of luxury and human success into "awkward heirlooms." This shift is clear in the fur farming bans seen in several countries in the past two decades.⁶ In Denmark, the mink industry met its deathblow in 2020 with the mass culling of mink due to the risk of Covid-19 contamination after an already consistent decline in the demand for Danish mink.⁷ Now, when we look at the coat, only the mink remain. Those who produced and wore it have faded from view. The fact that the coat, along with many others, ended up in a secondhand store at a fraction of the price it would initially have been valued at underlines its unwantedness. It stands as a reminder that mink coats are increasingly associated with tales of animal suffering rather than human success. The 65 mink present in the coat have not only resisted and altered their previous handlers and wearers; in a sense, it seems that they have entirely *outworn* them.

Writing and Reading Animal Skin

For nearly two millennia, animal skin has served as the foundation for human communication in the form of parchment, used as a surface for

writing, drawing, and painting. Parchment proved to be far more durable than the papyrus rolls it replaced, making animal skin essential for the preservation of countless texts and images (Reynolds and Wilson, 1991, p. 35). Religious, legal, and literary works were almost exclusively recorded on animal skin, a tradition that has continued into modern times. Just as with the production of fur coats, the production of parchment relies on careful preservation techniques to ensure the skin's durability and suitability for its intended use. Various animals, including calves, sheep, and goats, have been employed for this purpose, with each animal offering unique qualities for different kinds of texts.⁸ However, unlike fur-bearing animals bred solely for their pelts, those used in parchment production were not killed for their skins alone (Turner, 2018, p. 47). The transformation from living animals into parchment was a lengthy process, which ideally resulted in a smooth, white, surface. Like the mink coat, the animals used in parchment production became unrecognizable during the process, and arguably to an even greater extent. Unlike fur garments, which may still bear some recognizable features of the original animal, parchment requires a total removal of fur and other features to create an effective writing surface. As a result, the animals seem to disappear into complete anonymity, rendered invisible behind the text and images they carry. Yet, writing and reading on parchment create a unique and complex interaction between humans and animal surfaces. In this section, theoretical concepts of parchment as a site of human-animal encounter are explored, drawing parallels to recent examinations of the original 1849 Danish constitution (Ill. 3) – a crucial legal text written on animal skin. How does the animal make itself known in this kind of skin interface between humans and animals? And how do humans, in touching, writing, and reading, engage with the animal beneath the text?

Making Textured Surfaces

On June 5, 1849, Frederik VII signed the first Danish constitution. This marked a step out of absolute rule into a modern democratic form of government.⁹ Recently, on the constitution's 175-year anniversary, the codex has been the subject of close examination to establish its material origin.



ILL. 3
Title page of the Danish constitution, 1849. Scan by Rigsarkivet.

At first, the appearance and quality of the pages, which are thick and white, made specialists wonder whether they were made of thick paper. Closer inspection, however, revealed that they were, in fact, made of parchment from four calves and one black sheep, all covered in a heavy layer of white paste.¹⁰ In a substantial work from 1762, Jérôme de La Lande explains the art of parchment-making. The description of the process is a valuable source for understanding how parchment was made, the problems that could occur during the process, and the desired outcome. His description of the method begins after the slaughter and flaying of the animal. Once the skin was separated from the body, the weeks-long process began with removing the fur or wool, involving repeated lime treatments and scraping of the outer surface. The skin was then clamped to a stretching frame for fleshing and further scraping on the inner side. Then, it was dried, chalked, and scraped to make it lighter and whiter. Still not entirely smooth, it was then treated with a pumice stone. Following the description of the initial work, de La Lande dedicates a section to the correcting of damages to the skin, which could involve stitching or patching up with smaller fitted pieces of parchment. The final step was the cutting and squaring of the parchment. The qualities sought from parchment-making are continuously underlined: whiteness, smooth texture, and rigidity (de La Lande, 2021).

De La Lande spends a considerable number of pages describing how the ideal parchment is difficult to achieve due to defects resulting from experiences and conditions of the animals' life. Sheep pox and injuries, for instance, could compromise the quality of the skin. He concludes that if damages were great enough, such skins should rather be used for other purposes such as sieves or book bindings (de La Lande, 2021, p. 154). The animal's experiences in life, evident in its skin, thus greatly affected what it would become in death. A perfect white, smooth surface was almost impossible to achieve, and textures including blood vessels, pores, and scars were difficult to eliminate entirely, resulting in parchment surfaces with continuous traces of the animal to which it previously belonged. This is evident in the constitution and the choices made to create a suitable surface for the text. Curiously, the parchment used is of questionable quality.¹¹ The use of different kinds of animals, particularly a black sheep, which, according to de La Lande, was best reserved for different purpos-

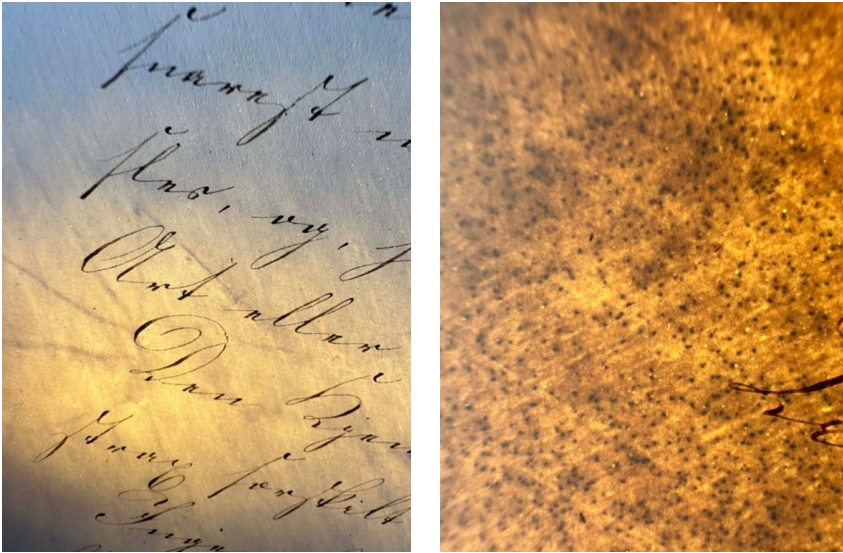
es due to the remnants of black wool in the skin (de La Lande, 2021, p. 352), is a strange choice for such an important codex. De La Lande is also adamant about the fact that bad quality or damaged parchment should never be used for documents of great significance (de La Lande, 2021, p. 349). Perhaps this was the reason for the unusual thick white paste used to whiten the pages. It certainly helped cover the parchment more than the chalk typically used. This layer of paste not only produced a uniform whiteness but also concealed the characteristic marks of skin including pores, follicles, or faint blood vessels that readers might otherwise feel or see on ordinary parchment. Jiří Vnouček, the conservator responsible for parts of the examination, considers that the thick paste could be an attempt to try out a new method of parchment-making and to underline the metaphorical weight of the document's contents.¹²

Encountering the Animal Page

De La Lande's account of the parchment-making process is a relevant example of how these unavoidable animal textures in parchment affect the human encounter with it. For Tim Ingold, writing surfaces should not be treated as "taken-for-granted backdrops" (Ingold, 2010, p. 12). As an extension of this statement, Ingold argues that haptic vision, in contrast to optical vision, engages deeply with textures. Touch makes a person "dwell" in the surfaces they encounter. Furthermore, he states the bumps and creases are "of the surface rather than *on* it" (Ingold, 2017, p. 102), implying that the surface makes itself known through texture in such interactions. Sarah Kay presents a similar argument, suggesting that the material that contains a given text is as impactful as the actual contents of the text. With a specific focus on parchment and medieval literature, Kay argues that a metaphorical "suture" exists between writers and readers, and the animal skins they touch. Engaging with texts on parchment is "charged with affect and undermines the categorical demarcation between human beings and other animals" because of its animal origin and texture that still makes it feel like skin (Kay, 2011, p. 13-14). As a continuation of the metaphorical suture, Kay contends that the animal-ness of the page may even become a medium of unconscious reading through which the pages envelope and thus physically frame the

reader, thereby serving as a double for their own skin (Kay, 2017, pp. 142-143). The conflation of humans and animals when humans touch and read pages made of parchment parallels the blurring between humans and fur coats, indicating that animal skins can wrap and alter the human body in several different ways as different animal-made-objects.

The Danish constitution, however, presents a different case, initially. As a foundational legal document rather than a medieval manuscript, it was not intended for regular and close reading. Instead, it has served more as an authoritative object, which physically holds intangible human laws and ideologies. For most of its existence, the document's animal origins were hidden beneath the white paste, creating a smooth surface that shielded potential readers from any textures that could have revealed its animal core. Only specialists or conservators working in controlled conditions directly engage with it, and it remains encased behind glass during exhibitions, shielded from human touch. Therefore, any physical interactions that might evoke the animal presence have so far been limited, leaving the boundary between human and animal intact and *unsutured*, to challenge Kay's term. However, the recent examinations have drawn the animals back into the narrative. When exposing the individual pages to raking light, conservators were able to detect blood vessels, hair follicles, and cuts made by the butcher's knife (Ill. 4). All these signs of five animals whose skin became the initial and foundational surface of the constitution's text mark a stark contrast to the red velvet, gold appliques, and white silk that hold the pages together. Paradoxically, the paste used to erase the skin textures filled the natural crevices and irregularities of the skin, ultimately accentuating the visual appearance of the lines and grooves, revealing to conservators what animals were used.¹³ The animal traces, hidden yet enduring, are now woven into the fabric of the constitution, a testament to the impossibility of entirely erasing the animal origins of its pages. As the black sheep and four calves have emerged as a part of this document's ongoing narrative, they add depth and vitality to the story as active, embodied presences, simultaneously *of* the surface and *beneath* it. This renewed understanding might form and evoke new "sutures" between the pages and those who view, handle, and interpret them in the future, an invitation to let the eyes and hands dwell in the pages of an animal *made-object*.



ILL. 4
Enlarged details of pages from the Danish constitution, 1849, showing blood vessels, knife mark (left), and hair follicles (right). Photos by Rigsarkivet.

Conclusion

While the mink coat and the constitution may appear as objects worlds apart, their skin surfaces each serve as sites of encounter and complex interspecies relations. They reveal that animal potency, insistency, and resistance remain embedded in these animal-made-objects. Despite their facelessness, the 65 mink, four calves, and black sheep reveal themselves in the fur garment and pages of the codex, a testament to the resilience and power of animal agency that transcends death, preservation, and human manipulation as they serve in new roles within human society. Cut, stitched, inscribed, read, and worn, these skins simultaneously blur and suture the demarcation between themselves and the human agents who engage with them, leading to a shift of focus in otherwise human-dominated narratives. As such, attending to these faceless surfaces not only recovers traces of once-lived lives but also draws attention to the expendability of animal life on which human culture has long depended. If scholarship cannot restore

those lives, it can at least reframe how we perceive them, reminding us that our actions today continue to shape the futures of animals whose bodies sustain human projects.

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SUMMARY

The Coat and the Constitution

Animal Surfaces as Sites of Encounter

Throughout history, animal skins have been favored materials for a wide range of practical and aesthetic objects. Such items serve as tangible evidence of complex human-animal relationships, extending from the animals' lived lives to their deaths, preservation, and afterlives as material objects. The author examines two objects made from animal skin: a second-hand fur coat made of mink pelts and the recently examined Danish 1849 constitution, made of parchment from sheep and calf. By exploring the probable contexts of their production – including the twentieth- and twenty-first-century Danish mink industry and early modern parchment-making practices – and assessing their material qualities through theoretical perspectives rooted in new materialist thought, the author discusses the dual nature of these objects as simultaneously influenced by human and animal agency. These faceless, textured surfaces prompt thoughts on the boundaries between animal materials and the humans who wear, read, and interact with them. They suggest that the subtle traces of the once living animal persist as they become sites of human-animal encounter and transformation.

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NOTES

- 1 The number of pelts was determined by the author by visually inspecting the coat and tracing the seams between individual skins.
- 2 The process of removing all excess meat, fat, and connective tissue from the inside of the pelt.
- 3 Price point of new mink coats of this length today typically ranges between 25,000 and 40,000 DKK.
- 4 See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 1978.
- 5 For further discussion of animal resistance as agency, see Carter and Charles, 2013, and Despret, 2013.
- 6 Fur Free Alliance.
- 7 Danmarks Statistik, 2021
- 8 For instance, a recent study suggests a preference for the use of sheep skin in legal deeds in the 13th-20th centuries due to their specific skin structure, which made fraudulent text and manipulation difficult (Doherty et al., 2021).
- 9 Danmarkshistorien.dk, 2012.

- 10 Rigsarkivet, 2024a.
- 11 Rigsarkivet, 2024b.
- 12 Rigsarkivet, 2024b.
- 13 Rigsarkivet, 2024a.