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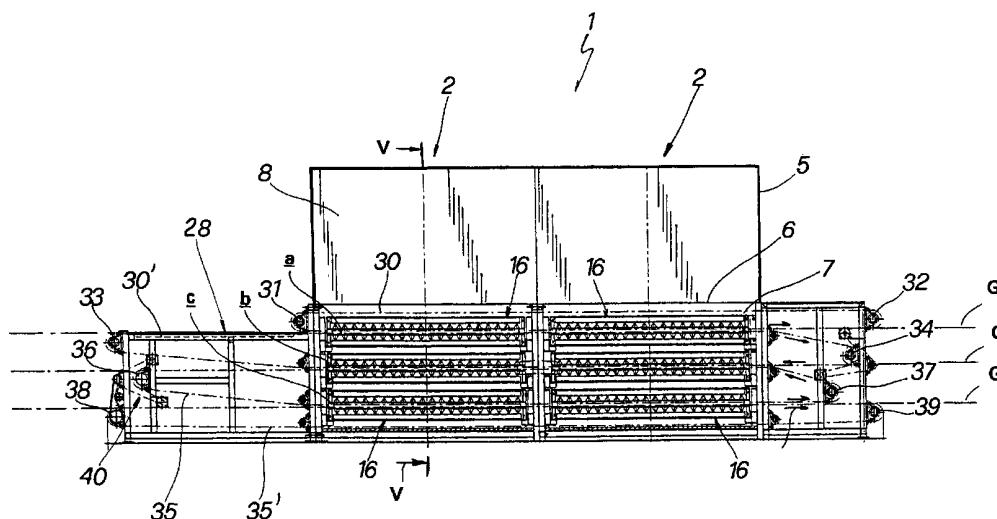
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(54) Title: MACHINE FOR CONDITIONING LAMINAR FLEXIBLE PRODUCTS SUCH AS INDUSTRIAL HIDES AND SKINS



(57) Abstract: A machine for the conditioning of laminar flexible products such as industrial hides and skins, including at least one conditioning unit 2 crossed by the products to be processed, blowers (9, 12) for blowing and extracting air directed towards products, and a series of air jets blowing simultaneously on both sides of the products under treatment in a transverse direction with respect to the advancement direction of the products. The products are caused to advance along a substantially horizontal plane (G) by means of pairs of annular threads (30, 30', 35, 35') uniformly distributed across the useful width of the conditioning paths. The threads of each pair are placed on opposite side and in contact with the products P to support and transfer them along the path leaving their side surfaces substantially free. As an alternative, the advancement means are formed by pairs of endless belts in mutually facing relationship to firmly hold the products while permitting passage of blown air.

MACHINE FOR CONDITIONING LAMINAR FLEXIBLE PRODUCTS SUCH AS INDUSTRIAL HIDES AND SKINS

Field of application

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The present invention generally applies to the field of treatment of laminar flexible products, such as hides and skins, and particularly relates to a machine for conditioning such products by means of suitably processed air.

10

Background art

It is known that some kinds of laminar flexible products, e.g. industrial hides, absorb remarkable quantities of water and exhibit high moisture content that is unacceptable in semifinished or finished products.

15

Accordingly, such products must undergo a drying process by means of suitable machines and industrial plants.

20

It may be that when the above products are subjected to the above drying process, they result excessively or unevenly dried, thus losing the necessary flexibility and handiness and as such being exposed to the risk of damage during the subsequent treatments.

25

It is further known that several products, such as industrial hides, must be subjected to finishing process involving impregnation on both sides with proofing agents having given physical and chemical properties. In such cases, if the products are dried on one side only or on one side at a time, they may give rise to a true barrier on the dried side that prevents removal of residual moisture from the inside of the products, thus causing unpleasant smells for

30 long periods.

It is therefore understood that in several industrial fields, such as in tanning industry, there must be provided proper means for "conditioning" the products, meaning with this term controlling and adjusting accurately the residual humidity of the products according to their nature and thickness, as well as to the particular requirements of the semifinished or finished items.

Machines and plants for drying laminar flexible products with high moisture contents are known, e.g. vacuum drying machines of discontinuous type.

- Such machines are provided with heating plates on which the products to be dried such as hides are accurately laid and subjected to high vacuum.

The moisture released by the products in the form of vapours is condensed and removed in the form of water.

The hides which undergo the above drying treatment may still have a residual moisture content comprised between 30% to 50%, which content for given applications can be either too high or too low.

- Other drying systems are known which are of a continuous type, e.g. the chain drying plants in which the products to be dried are hung on an endless chain that unwinds continuously in open air along a path extending through the working areas intended for other processes, in such a manner to save space and labour time. While such known plants have a relatively low cost, they have the inconvenience of an extremely low flexibility due to the fact that the treatment is the same for all products and thus cannot be adapted to the thickness and nature of the different products hung on the chain. Moreover, the products stand for a very long thereby involving a remarkable blocking of capital.

Tunnel plants are similarly known wherein the products are caused to advance in a conduit through which a moderate air current flows, previously processed by suitable conditioners or moisture absorbers to provide a repeated and fair drying. In these known conditioning plants, the moisture present in the product is not eliminated in a uniform and controlled manner. Moreover, the treatment of the products is excessively slow and it does not allow to adapt to the production requirements that are more and more differentiated in extremely short times. Even in this case, an excessive capital blockage is involved with evident economical disadvantage.

Disclosure of the invention

A primary object of the present invention is to provide a machine for the conditioning of laminar flexible products, particularly industrial hides, which allows to accomplish a controlled and uniform drying of the products on both sides thereof while preventing retention of moisture internally thereof.

A further object is to conceive a conditioning machine of laminar flexible products showing high rate and effectiveness of the treatment to thereby prevent immobilisation of large quantities of products and consequently of money, so as to obtain substantially planar and defect-free products.

A further object of the invention is to provide a conditioning machine having characteristics of high flexibility allowing to easily and promptly adjust the process parameters according to the products under treatment.

Another object is to provide a conditioning machine with relatively simple and compact structure so as to require a limited labour skill.

A further object is to provide a machine having a conditioning part as long as

possible in a restricted space.

Still another object is to conceive a machine for the conditioning of leathers and similar products having a modular structure that is capable to adapt to particular requirements of bulk and of productivity in the room in which it is located.

In accordance with one preferred aspect of the invention, there is provided a machine for the conditioning of leathers and similar laminar products that comprises at least one conditioning unit with an inlet section for the product to be treated and with an outlet section for the treated products, means for the advancement of the products along a conditioning path between said inlet and outlet sections, means for the circulation of air along said path, said air circulation means comprising air jets blown simultaneously on both sides of the products during advancement thereof along said path.

Thanks to the simultaneous blowing of air on both sides of the products, the conditioning of these products is quicker and effective and accordingly allows for reduction of both costs and times of the process.

Preferably, air jets are blown by a series of nozzles having outlet ports located on opposite sides with respect to the plan of lying plan of the products, with said outlet ports being mutually faced and longitudinally spaced apart from each other.

In a preferred embodiment, each nozzle comprises lateral walls converging toward the outlet ports.

As an alternative, such outlet ports may be arranged on substantially planar walls, parallel to the laying plan of the leathers.

Advantageously, the outlet ports extend substantially over the entire width of the conditioning unit and have a substantially constant width.

- 5 The nozzle of each series is preferably distributed with a regular span along the longitudinal extension of the conditioning unit.

In a further aspect of the invention, the means for the advancement of the leathers comprise a plurality of pairs of threads which extend [s] parallel to
10 each other along the whole conditioning paths on opposite sides with respect to the lying plane of the products and in contact with these latter to firmly hold and transfer [ring] them along the path.

A plurality of threads pairs are regularly spaced on the full transverse width of
15 the conditioning unit in such a manner to firmly support the products under treatment.

In view to the reduced transverse dimension of the threads, it will be possible to transfer the products along the path while keeping them substantially in
20 extended condition and with both sides simultaneously exposed to the action of the air jets thereby optimising the process and reducing the conditioning times.

Each thread has an annular structure defining the path for conditioning the
25 products.

Brief description of drawings

Further features and advantages of the invention will become more apparent
30 in the light of the following description of preferred but not exclusive

embodiments of a machine for conditioning leathers and similar laminar flexible products, furnished hereinafter by way of non limiting example with the aid of the accompanying drawings, wherein:

Fig. 1 shows a lateral general view of a plant for the treatment of hides
5 incorporating a first embodiment of a conditioning machine according to the invention;

Fig. 2 shows a lateral view partly sectioned along a vertical longitudinal plane of a second embodiment of a conditioning machine according to the invention;

10 Fig. 3 shows a plan view of the machine of figure 2 with some parts viewed in transparency;

Fig. 4 shows a front view of the machine of figure 2 with some parts viewed in transparency;

Fig. 5 shows a schematic view of a modular unit for the machine
15 according to the invention, partially sectioned along a transverse vertical plane V-V;

Fig. 6 shows a partially section view of the unit of Fig. 5 taken along a vertical plane VI-VI;

Fig. 7 shows a sectional view taken along the plane VII-VII of the
20 machine of Fig. 5;

Fig. 8 shows a sectional view taken along the plane VIII-VIII of the machine of Fig. 5;

Fig. 9 shows a sectional view in enlarged scale of a detail of the machine according to the invention;

25 Fig. 10 shows a detailed view in further enlarged scale of the detail of Fig. 9.

Detailed description of preferred embodiments

30 Fig. 1 shows a plant L for the treatment of laminar flexible products, e.g.

industrial hides P, in which a conditioning machine according to the invention, generally indicated with the reference numeral 1, is provided.

Plant L includes, upstream of the conditioning machine 1 according to the invention, a per se known vacuum drying machine D with multiple heating plates in which hides are subjected to drying until they possess a residual relative humidity comprised e.g. between 20% and 40%. Downstream of the drying machine D, the hides P undergo a conditioning process, this term meaning a process for controlling and adjusting their relative moisture content up to a residual humidity level comprised e.g. between 10% and 20%. Finally the hides are forwarded to a perching machine S of a known type, to soften them and increase their footing.

The conditioning machine 1 can be obviously applied even separately or between machines and treatment steps different from those shown in Fig. 1 without departing from the scope of the invention.

Further, a conditioning machine shall be used even for increasing the moisture content, thereby conferring to the products a handy touch and a quality partly lost during the preceding drying phase.

In addition, the number of conditioning units may be established in accordance with any requirement stated by the user and by the type of products to be treated.

The machine 1 schematically depicted in Fig. 1 is comprised of six modular units 2 which are substantially identical and arranged in line one after the other, wherein the products P are advanced along a conditioning path extending in a substantially longitudinal direction A from an inlet section 3 for the products to be treated to an outlet section for the already treated

products.

During advancement of the products P, these latter are maintained in a substantially extended condition on a substantially horizontal plane G, although such plane may be inclined or vertically directed without falling outside the scope of the invention.

Figs. 2 to 10 show a simplified embodiment of the conditioning machine according to the invention, which machine is constituted by only two modular units arranged one after the other and similarly provided with an inlet section 3 and an outlet section 4 for products P.

Each unit 2 is essentially formed by a box-like case 5, e.g. metal plate and comprise lateral, upper and lower walls which are substantially planar. The inner space defined by the above walls has predetermined width W and length T and is provided with a partition wall defining a lower portion 7 and an upper portion 8.

The lower portion 7 defines a space for the passage of products P using suitable advancement means and means for processing thereof with suitable air blowing means.

As more clearly illustrated in Fig. 4, the upper portion 8 accommodates part of the air circulation means comprising one or more blower 9 for the circulation of air introduced from the outside through an opening 10 and for the passage thereof through a heat exchanger 11 before entering the lower portion 7.

The air which has accomplished its conditioning function is drawn from the lower portion 7 and discharged outside by means of an exhaust blower 12 through an outlet opening 13.

According to the invention, the circulation means comprise jets of air simultaneously directed on both sides of products P during advancement thereof along the conditioning path.

5

More particularly the air jets are generated by a series of nozzles 14, 14' having outlet ports 15, 15' arranged on opposite sides with respect to the lying plane of the products.

10 Preferably the blown air jets are oriented transversely with respect to the advancement direction A of the products during the conditioning path.

In addition, ports 15, 15' are arranged in mutually facing relationship. As an alternative, ports 15, 15' may be longitudinally offset thereby generally
15 obtaining the same resulting effects.

A preferred embodiment of nozzles 14, 14' will be described hereinafter, it being obvious that alternative shapes may be equally employed provided that they fall within the same inventive concept.

20

In particular, one or more blowing chambers 16 are defined in the lower portion 7, which chambers have approximately a prism-like or cubic shape similar to horizontal drawers.

25 Advantageously, each chamber 16 may be internally provided with a pair of corrugated plates 17, 17' with fixed or variable step length R, which plates are placed in substantially facing relationship and symmetrically transversely spanned with respect to an intermediate plane G that defines the plane in which the products P are advanced. The corrugated plates 17, 17' subdivide
30 chamber 16 in a central hollow space 18, an upper hollow space 19 and a

lower hollow space 19'.

Preferably, the corrugations of plates 17, 17' extend in a substantially transverse direction with respect to the advancement direction A of the products. Such corrugations are uniformly longitudinally spaced-apart to define respective walls 20, 21, 20', 21' slanted with respect to the lying plane G and respective bottom walls 22, 22' which are substantially parallel to the plane G.

Such bottom walls 22, 22' are provided with slits having a substantially uniform thickness M to define the outlet ports 15, 15'. Accordingly, the nozzles 14, 14' will be generally constituted by the lateral walls 20, 21, 20', 21' and by the slits or outlet ports 15, 15' formed on the bottom walls 22, 22'.

Suitably, the outlet ports 15, 15' extend approximately over the entire width W of the conditioning unit 2. Moreover the series of nozzles 14, 14' are arranged at a regular distance from each other lengthwise with respect to the longitudinal extension of unit 2.

The air blown by blower 9 and heated by heat exchangers 11 is conveyed to a lateral manifold 23 which is common to more blowing chambers 16 and is distributed to each hollow space 19, 19' through corresponding apertures 24, 25.

The air is then conveyed to nozzles 14, 14' and blown through outlet ports 15, 15' towards the products P which are advanced along the hollow space 18 while being maintained in extended condition of the plane G.

Optionally, adjustment valves or shutters may be provided in correspondence of each inlet aperture to adjust the air flow rate in each blowing chamber 16

so as to adapt the conditioning state of the products along the path according to the desired requirements.

The exhaust air is evacuated from the hollow space 18 through a single
5 central aperture 26 provided in each chamber 16 and passes through a lateral
collecting manifold common to all chambers 16. In order to maintain a
controlled humidity level, part of the air passing through the machine can be
drawn from manifold 27 through exhaust blower 12 and discharged to the
outside through aperture 13. Fresh air is simultaneously introduced by closing
10 aperture 10.

Preferably, the nozzles are so sized to accelerate the outlet velocity of air up to a value of e.g. 10 m/s.

15 Each chamber 16 constitutes a step of the conditioning process for the hides
and the number of steps of the machine depends on various factors, e.g.
type and nature of leathers, thickness and initial moisture content. Hence, the
number of blowing chambers 16 determines the working capacity of the
machine.

20

In the embodiments depicted in figures 2, 3 and 4 each of the conditioning
units 2 presents three blowing chambers 16 which are mutually
superimposed.

25 In a preferred embodiment the advancement means, generally indicated with
reference numeral 28, are formed by pairs of annular threads 30, 30' arranged
in side by side relationship in transverse direction with steps of length U.

The annular threads 30, 30' are wound on end rollers 31, 32, 33, 34 in such
30 a manner to run parallel within the hollow space 18 of chamber 16 along a

substantially straight and horizontal length a longer than twice the longitudinal dimension T of each modular unit 2, thereby firmly holding the leathers P in the plane G .

- 5 Thus, the pairs of adjacent threads 30, 30' will define a first forward length \underline{a} directed along the arrow F . A second series of thread pairs 35, 35' similar to and placed below the preceding ones are analogously wound of respective end rollers 36, 37, 38, 39 and define a backward length \underline{b} with respect to the previous series of thread pairs 30, 30' directed along arrow F' . A second
10 forward length \underline{c} extends between the previous lengths \underline{a} and \underline{b} along the direction of arrow F . Thus, the pairs of threads 30, 30', 35, 35' placed side by side, generally define a conditioning path having a sinusoidal or labyrinth shaped configuration comprising straight lengths \underline{a} , \underline{b} , \underline{c} .
- 15 An overturning assembly 40 may be provided proximally to the end rollers to provide automatic reversal of products P between each length \underline{a} , \underline{b} , \underline{c} and the subsequent one to prevent manual intervention of workers.

The pairs of threads are arranged in side by side relationship and are uniformly
20 distributed on the whole useful width W of unit 2 to maintain the products P firmly supported therebetween. Thanks to the reduced thickness of the threads, the leathers P will be almost fully faced to the air flow thereby allowing an optimum conditioning on both sides thereof.

Threads 30, 30', 35, 35' may be made of synthetic, high-strength materials
25 with low coefficient of elasticity, e.g. Perlon®.

In an alternative embodiment, not depicted in the drawings, the advancement means may be constituted by pairs of endless belts, mutually faced so as to firmly trap therebetween the products P to be conditioned, thereby allowing
30 the passage of air blown by the nozzles.

The order with which the products P cross chambers 16 is predetermined at the project stage of the machine 1 and may also differ substantially from the above described sequence without departing from the scope of the invention.

5 By way of example, the number of lengths a, b, c may also be different, e.g. an even number, and consequently the inlet section 3 and the outlet section 4 may be placed at the same end of the machine instead of at opposite ends thereof.

10 In view of such an arrangement with blowing chambers and superimposed lengths, the machine may transfer the products along a longer conditioning path with a smaller longitudinal extension.

Thus, the machine will show an outstanding compactness with the same
15 length of the conditioning path thus involving a notable reduction of labour in spite of the same output of treated products.

Moreover, thanks to the simultaneous action of the air jets at very high velocity on both sides of the products, these latter will exhibit after treatment
20 thereof a substantially planar and even surface as well as an extremely reduced shrinkage.

The conditioning machine will be obviously provided with means for varying and adjusting the flow rate, temperature and humidity of the conditioning air,
25 comprising e.g. valves, heaters and water and vapours jets.

Moreover, the conditioning machine may be provided with a per se known central control unit of electronic type which a digital interface. Such central control unit is preferably connected with suitable sensing means and with the
30 above adjusting means to control the flow rate, temperature and humidity of

the air evolving along the path.

In addition, a system for recirculation of air may be provided to redirect the controlled air instead of discharging it into the outside environment in order to
5 save energy.

CLAIMS

1. Machine for the conditioning of laminar flexible products such as industrial hides and skins, comprising at least one conditioning unit (2) with an outer case (5) provided with an inlet section (3) for the products to be treated and with an outlet section (4) for the already treated products (P), means (30, 30', 35, 35') for the advancement of the products (P) lengthwise of a conditioning path between said inlet (3) and outlet (4) sections, means for the circulation of air along said path, said air circulation means comprising air jets which are simultaneously blown on both sides of the products (P) during advancement thereof along said path.

2. Machine according to claim 1, characterised in that said air jets are generated by nozzles (14, 14') with outlet ports (15, 15') located on opposite sides with respect to the plane (G) of the advancing products (P) under treatment.

3. Machine according to claim 1, characterised in that said air jets are directed transversely with respect to the advancement direction (A) of the products (P).

4. Machine according to claim 2, characterised in that said outlet ports (15, 15') are arranged in substantially facing relationship, respectively in offset relationship with respect to the longitudinal direction.

5. Machine according to claim 2, characterised in that said nozzles (14, 14') comprise lateral walls (20, 21; 20', 21') converging towards said outlet ports (15, 15').

6. Machine according to claim 5, characterised in that said lateral walls

(20, 21; 20', 21') are joined by a bottom wall (22; 22') substantially parallel to said lying plane (G), said outlet ports (15; 15') being formed in said bottom wall (22; 22').

5 7. Machine according to claim 6, characterised in that said outlet ports (15; 15') extend over almost the entire width (W) of said conditioning unit (2).

8. Machine according to claim 7, characterised in that said outlet ports have a substantially constant width (M).

10

9. Machine according to claim 2, characterised in that said nozzles (14; 14') are arranged at regular distances (R) along the longitudinal extension of said conditioning unit (2).

15 10. Machine according to claim 1, characterised in that each conditioning unit 8(2) comprises a blowing chamber (16) for the distribution of air to said nozzles (14, 14').

11. Machine according to claim 1, characterised in that said
20 advancement means comprise pairs of threads (30, 30'; 35, 35') substantially parallel and arranged on opposite sides with respect to said lying plane (G) of the products (P) to firmly support and advance them along said path.

12. Machine according to claim 1, characterised in that said
25 advancement means comprise pairs of endless belt of meshed tissue which are mutually faced to firmly hold said products (P) during advancement thereof while permitting passage of air blown on the products.

13. Machine according to one or more of the preceding claims,
30 characterised in that the overall path of the advancing products P is

substantially sinusoidal and comprises a plurality of successive adjacent lengths (a, b, c) which are substantially horizontal and mutually superimposed.

5 14. Machine according to claim 1, characterised in that said air circulation means comprise at least one first blower (9) for the circulating the air within said blowing chamber (16), heating means (11) and means for adjusting the air humidity, and optionally a second exhaust blower (12) for drawing the exhaust air.

10

 15. Machine according to claim 1, characterised in that said circulation means further comprise means for sensing and adjusting the flow rate, temperature and humidity of the blown air, a central control unit being connected to said sensing and adjustment means for controlling the flow rate,
15 temperature and humidity of the blown air.

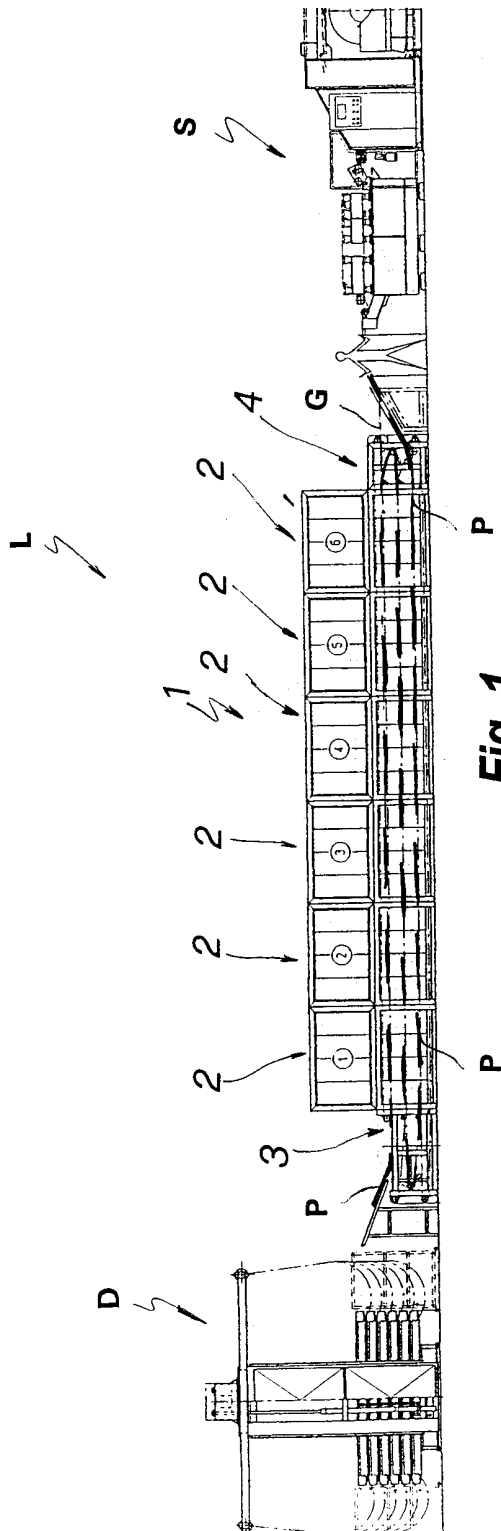


Fig. 1

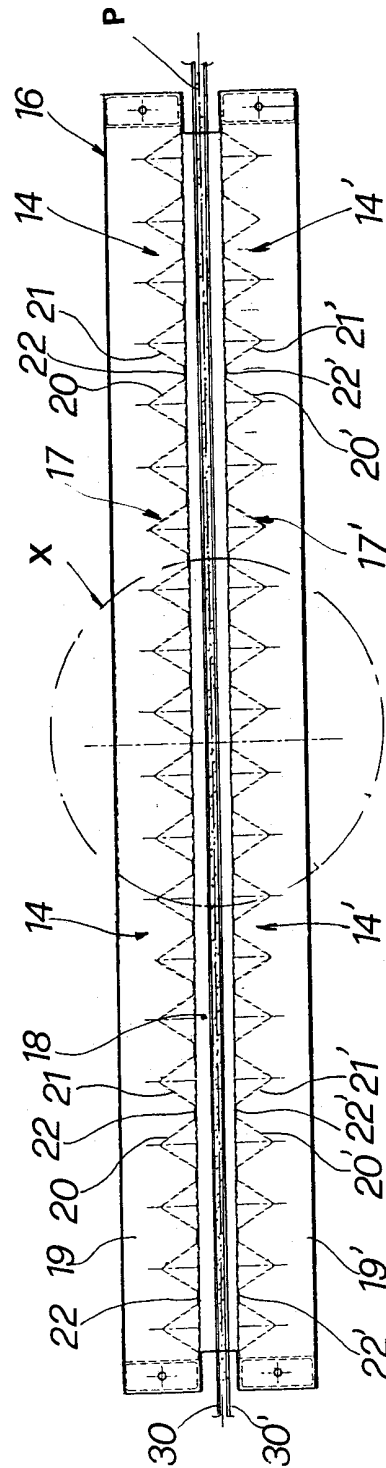


Fig. 9

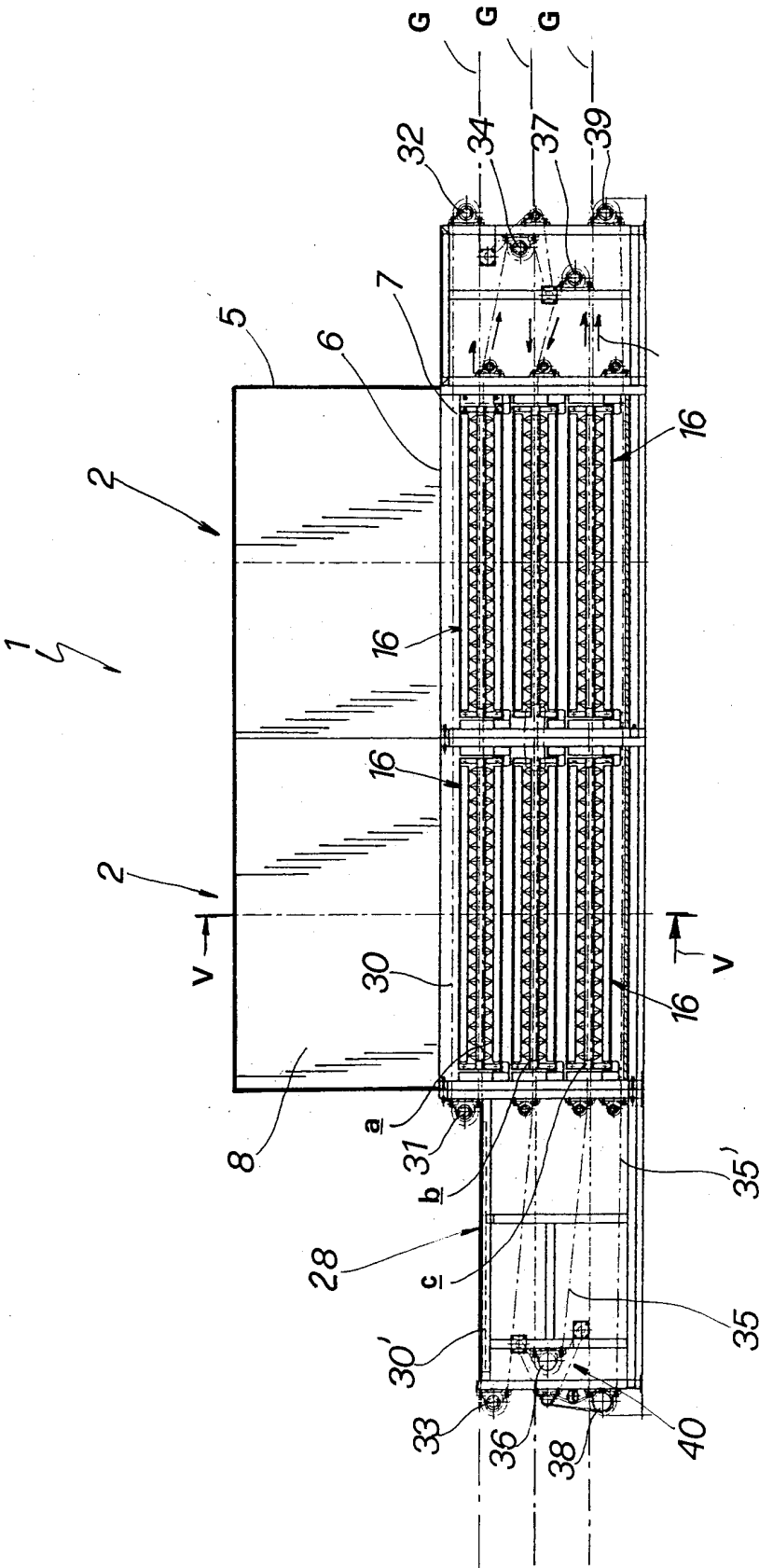


Fig. 2

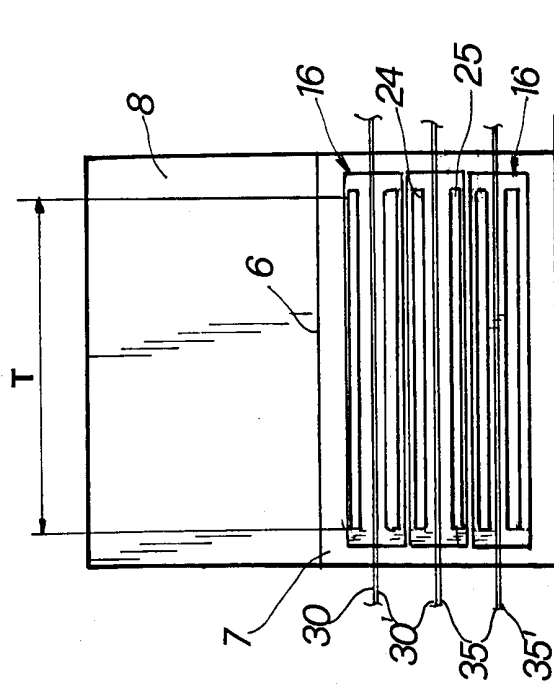


Fig. 6

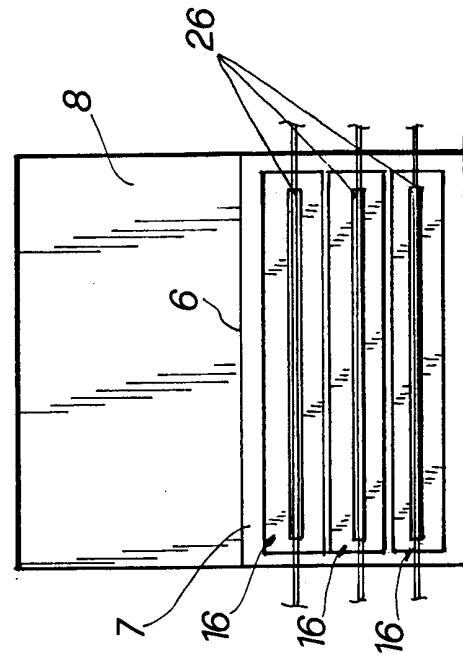


Fig. 8

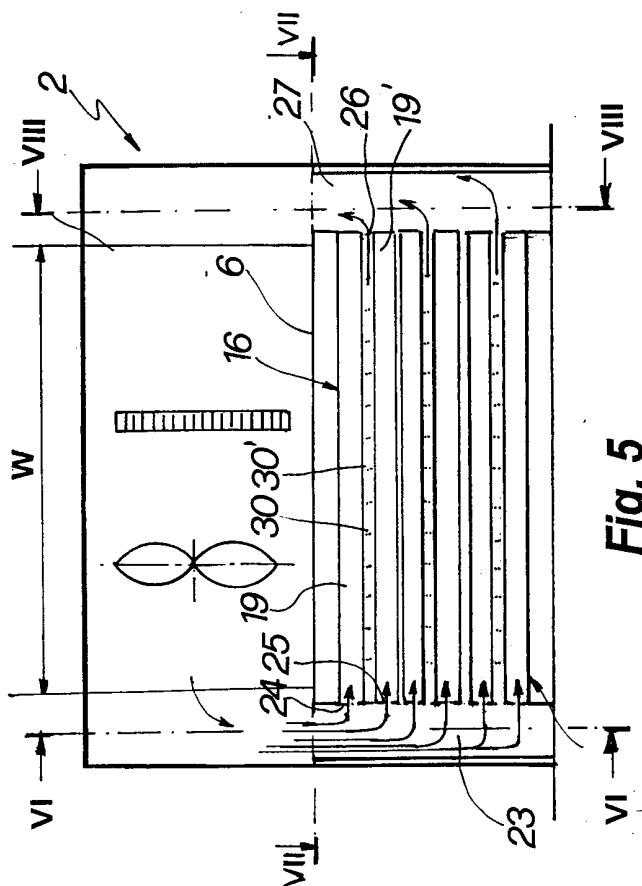


Fig. 5

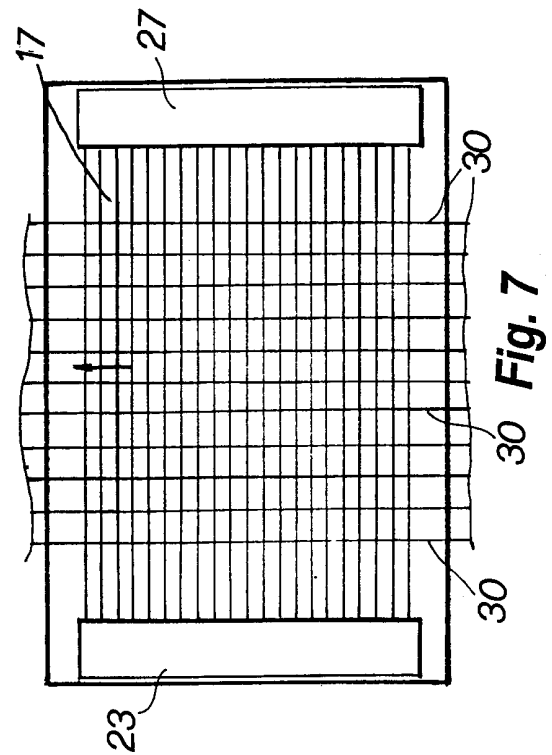


Fig. 7

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International Application No
PCT/IB 00/00495

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER
IPC 7 C14B1/58

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
IPC 7 C14B

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practical, search terms used)
EPO-Internal

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category °	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
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Further documents are listed in the continuation of box C.



Patent family members are listed in annex.

° Special categories of cited documents :

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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Information on patent family members

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