

# Creating Custom Finishes

by Stuart M. Altschuler, CPF, GCF

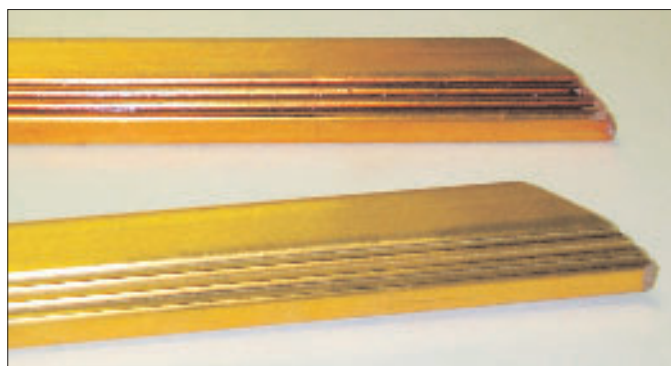
**“Does your shop sell custom frames?”** asks the potential customer. “Yes, we do. We build our frames and make the frame whatever size is necessary,” you respond. “No, I want to know if you can create a custom finish to match my coffee table.” Or perhaps, “Can you make that lovely green frame over there a little less green?”

Many custom framers are afraid to make any change to the finish of a frame because they don't know how to do it, let alone what to charge. Well, fear not, because it is easy and profits are just a swipe of steel wool, or a dry brush of paint, away.

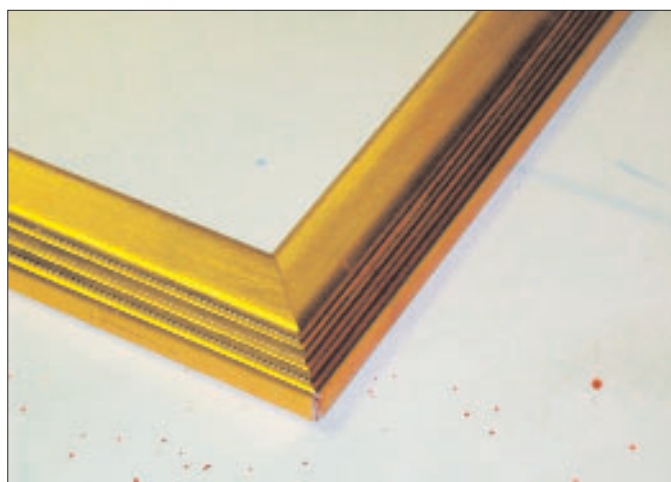
One of the easiest ways to perk up a dull frame, or subtly change the color value, is to dry brush some artist acrylic or oil paints onto the moulding. I prefer acrylic paints because they are easier to clean up and remove if you don't like the result.

Let's say you have a bright gold, broken leaf moulding with diagonal reeding. The reeds are filled with the gray-colored pumice-like filling that is popular on many gold finished frames. The customer loves the shape of the moulding but not the gray tone. They can't find any other moulding they like and they decide to “think about it.” Instead of letting the sale get away, you say, “We custom finish moulding here. Let me show you how that would look with a reddish tone.”

Reach for a tube of a reddish brown, acrylic paint, a small dry bristle brush, and a paper towel. Put a little paint on the brush (no water or thinner), and quickly run the brush over the moulding. The color will be applied over the face of the moulding and it will probably look really bad. Now for the magic. Wipe the



*Photo 1: You can see the difference between the untouched moulding (bottom) and the moulding that has been tinted using a dark red paint. It has a nice pink glow.*



*Photo 2: I use this corner sample to show how different we can make a moulding look. This dramatic example easily sells customers on this technique.*

paint off using the paper towel. Abracadabra!! The gray tone has a nice reddish glow. You simply removed the paint from the high points of the moulding without removing it from the crevices thereby leaving the gold gold and making the gray reddish brown. Use any other color of paint and you can subtly affect the tone of any similar profile frame (see Photos 1 and 2).

It is important to know that this technique will yield

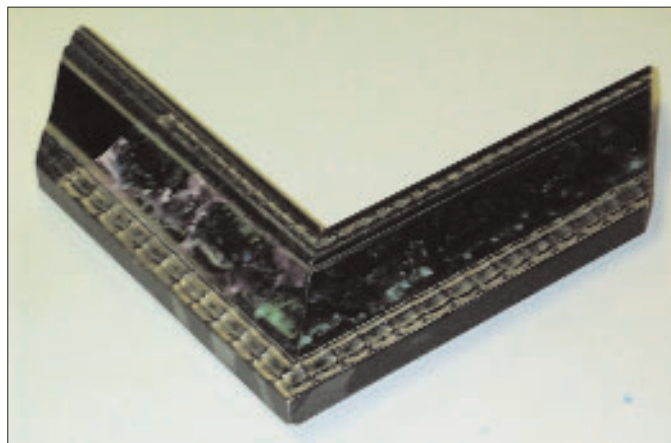
different results depending on when in the frame-making process you do your color modification. If you dry brush when the moulding is in length form, you will change the color tone but might have a jarring effect where the corners are joined, especially if any of the raw edge of the moulding becomes visible in the joinery. If you tone the moulding after it has been chopped, this problem goes away. Alternatively, you can dry brush after the frame is joined. That will create four extra crevices for the dry, brushed color to accumulate in, the corners. While this might be bad in some situations, if you are creating a patina of age, this could help you simulate dust and grime that would naturally accumulate over time.

Some really wild effects can be achieved using bright colors so don't hesitate to experiment on scraps (see Photo 3). Finally, many acrylic paint suppliers make acrylic medium that can be used as a binder to add any number of substances to. Mica flakes of any color can be added to give a sparkle to an otherwise dull frame.

There are many other methods of altering the coloration of a moulding. One of the easier techniques involves using patinating waxes. Patinating waxes simulate a pickled white or other colored look in the grain of open pored woods like oak or ash. To achieve this look, first use a brass brush to open the grain of the wood. This allows the colored wax to penetrate into the wood in the grain lines. Then apply the patinating wax. After allowing the wax to set briefly, you remove the excess colored wax with a clear paste wax. This process highlights the grain pattern of the wood (see Photo 4). Available in white, black, blue, red, and green (simulating the verdigris patina that is aged copper), patinating waxes can give a fun finish. In Photo 5, black has been used to emphasize the wood grain.

Also, if you wish to finish raw wood a water soluble dye can first be used to color the wood and then the patinating wax will add an accent by highlighting the grain.

Other waxes can be used as a media to suspend the mica powders mentioned above and create a glazed effect. And simple clear wax can be selectively applied to create additional highlights where desired. Finally, Liberon makes a wax-based gilt cream in eight colors that can be used for touch-up, or to alter a color. These colors are in the gold and silver families.



*Photo 3: Wet brushing some wild (purple and green) colors with acrylic medium can yield psychedelic effects. We created this effect for a Woodstock poster.*



*Photo 4: Red patinating wax, applied on the left portion of the moulding, emphasizes the grain pattern of the wood.*



*Photo 5: Black patinating wax has enough color to stand on its own without any stain.*

There are many easy methods to make mouldings look a little different. Oftentimes, you may be looking for a distressed look. You can rub some sandpaper over the moulding and wear away some of the finish. Of course, if you use sandpaper you will probably remove all of the finish and make the moulding useless. How about very fine sandpaper? Sandpaper comes in grits up to 2000 and higher, primarily for use in auto body repair. Some of these sandpapers (available at an auto supply store) will be better suited to the job.

But do you get into the crevices of the moulding? Do you want to? How will a moulding look if you simply

distress the high points? All of these questions are best answered by creating a sample. Most decorative painters and faux finishers make sample boards where they try out all of these different options detailing what they have done in writing on the back of the board. This allows the finisher to see what the potential results are and then easily duplicate them. These sample boards (in the case of the framer, moulding scraps) become sales aids as we work with clients.

If you wanted to evenly sand into the crevices the best way to do that would be to make a reverse profile of the moulding and use that as a sanding block. It is much easier to do than to say. Once again at the auto supply store get some Bondo. Bondo is an auto-body filler whereby you mix two components to activate much like epoxy. Put your Bondo into a plastic zip-lock bag and (before it hardens) form it to the shape of the moulding by pressing the bag onto the moulding as if it was clay. The Bondo hardens quickly. You can then wrap the custom shaped Bondo with sandpaper and distress the moulding evenly.

Sometimes even the finest sandpaper is too much. Other abrasive techniques include using 0000 steel wool. (I like the oil free made by Liberon and available through gilding supply houses). Also mild powdered abrasives such as pumice and rottenstone can be sprinkled on the moulding, lightly sprinkled with paraffin oil that will act as a carrier, and polished off using a cotton ball. These gentle techniques can subtly alter the highlights and shadows of a frame.

These are several recipes that can be used as points of departure to create hundred of different looks to moulding—and all using few tools and a small number of relatively inexpensive supplies. Start this fun and profitable process by making samples using moulding from your scrap pile today. ■



*Stuart M. Altschuler, CPF, GCF, Frame Design Editor, has been in the picture framing and art gallery business for over 25 years, continuing a tradition that began in his family three generations ago. He has taught for the National Conference, PPFA, and the Woodworking Shows.*