

Crushed Gold Gilding

by Anne Vazquez

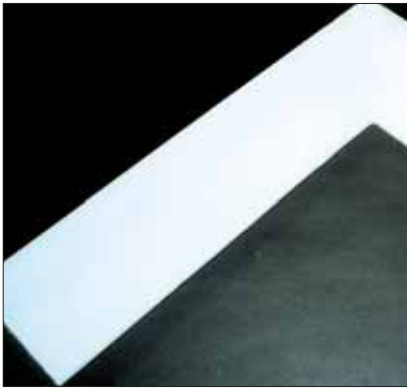


Photo 1: The process shown here uses a three inch Eaton profile. Here, it has been covered with white chalk gesso.



Photo 2: Apply Eaton ornamentation and hand carve sweep lines.



Photo 3: Sifted sand is applied in the trough with rabbit skin glue to add texture to that area of the frame.



Photo 4: Apply the bole with dry brush.

The finish of a gilded frame is a primary part of its appeal. Whether it's an antiqued, worn look or a shiny luster, the reflective qualities of the frame conveys a certain feeling to the art it houses. Traditional water gilding and matte oil gilding are the two most well-known gilding methods, but there is also a technique that has been used in England and other locales for several hundred years. It is crushed gold gilding and the finish that can be achieved is a variation on that produced by water or oil gilding.

That's not to say it's better—just different. It is an alternative finish to offer the customer, explains Barnes. The gold used is not in leaf form, but rather a crushed powder. The physical nature of the powder means that each “crystal” has many sides that reflect light. Therefore the finish on an item gilded with crushed gold has a high degree of luster.

Alan Barnes, partner with Robert Best in Willow Master Frames in Dallas, TX, says that at his studio this gilding method is used on about a third of the period frames they handle. Often, those frames on which crushed gold gilding has been employed are used to surround portraiture. He adds landscapes are another genre often paired with a crushed gold frame.

Crushed gold is also used for roughly half of the restoration projects done at Willow. “It's easier to tone due to its fine texture,” Barnes explains. The technique has been used at his fine art dealership, W.J. Morrill in London since 1796. Barnes adds that when the time, materials, and the expertise of his staff are combined for these jobs, it rivals the cost of metal leafing.

The Process

For the most part, the frame surface is prepared in the same manner for crushed gold gilding as is done for water gilding. Bole is applied with a dry brush. At Willow, the color seen in Photo 4 is the standard color used in this process. However, the gilders do use other colors if requested by the client or if a restoration project calls for it. The gilder helps the drying process along by rubbing his hands over the bole. The friction draws out the moisture and produces a soft finish, explains Barnes.

A difference from water gilding is that litemere oil is applied onto the bole where highlights are desired on the finished frame. Once dried, the oil creates a



Photo 5: Smooth the dry clay with wide steel wool.



Photo 6: Apply French “Noir” black top coat clays.

hardened surface, which maximizes the resulting highlights.

For the gilding, a solution of the crushed gold, a bonding agent traxacanth (found at pharmacies), and mineral water is made. Once these items are combined, it is a mercury substance with a semi-clear appearance and a gummy consistency.

The color can be manipulated by mixing shades of the crushed materials. Before making the solution, the various shades available can be combined to achieve the desired look. At Willow, the gilders mainly use six colors—shades of gold, and a copper and bronze.

After the frame surface is prepared and the solution made, the gilding begins. This is done with a dry level brush (shaving brush cut straight, for example). The brush is dipped in the gold solution and rubbed on a sheet of



Photo 7: Hand dry clay with friction of hands.



Photo 8: Rub with a horsehair linen cloth.



Photo 9: Add litsmere oil to areas that will have highlights. Then let dry.



Photo 10: Crushed gold solution at left, and traxacanth container.



Photo 11: Begin dry brush gilding process.



Photo 12: The gilding is nearly complete.

paper to remove excess liquid. The gold is then applied with quick even strokes, covering small areas at a time.

Next, the highlights are rubbed through, the frame is burnished, and placed in the drying area for 20 to 35 minutes, depending on the humidity. Then, in order to make the frame look a bit aged, they “knock the tops off” where it would have been handled over time. The most common approach at Willow is to burnish only on the ornamentation for highlights, while the panel areas are left alone.

The frame is then sealed with a clear lacquer. Instead of shellac (as they use for leaf gilding), they tone with waxes and rottenstone which they find gives a more authentic appearance—antiquing the corners where wax collects and at the bottom edge. Also adds highlights when buffed and comes up to a nice luster. ■



Photo 13: Rubbing the highlights through.



Photo 14: Burnishing the top edges. The frame is burnished and placed in the drying area for 20 to 35 minutes, depending on the humidity.



Photo 15: The frame surface after burnishing.



Photo 16: Sealing with fine lacquer.



Photo 17: Applying fly specks and wax finish



Photo 18: Fly specked frame surface.



Photo 19: The finished product.