

# Burnishing the Gilded Surface

by Marty Horowitz and Lou Tilmont

*Editor's Note: In the book, "An Introduction to Water Gilding," (PFM PubCo. 1998) the entire process of learning to water gild a frame is explained. Appearing here is a section of the book that covers the burnishing process in gilding.*

## What Is Burnishing?

Once a frame has been gilded, you can achieve the full reflective quality of the gold by burnishing it. When the leaf has been laid on the frame, it has a matte finish. Burnishing will make it glossy and reflective. By burnishing some parts and not others, you will be able to emphasize certain areas of the frame through a contrast of matte and reflective surfaces.

The most common misconception about burnishing is that it is a polishing of the gold. Burnishing gold leaf is, in fact, pressing the leaf so that it conforms to the surface underneath it (this is why it is so important that your gesso and clay layers underneath are flawless). It's similar to making a tin foil gum wrapper shine by rubbing your thumbnail over it on a table. You aren't polishing the foil, you are smoothing it to conform to the table surface, and this causes it to shine.

A good burnish will have an even appearance and will not have any scratches. The reflection it gives back should be like a mirror, almost colorless (as if it is black). The frame should look as if it is made of a solid block of gold.

## Types of Burnishers

Almost all burnishers consist of a wooden handle topped with a polished agate stone. There are a variety of burnisher shapes, each with a different shaped agate (see Photo 1). A straight burnisher is used for the rails of the frame, the high points, the flat areas, and other areas where there is no pattern or intricate carving. Don't use the point of the straight burnisher; this can depress the clay and scratch the surface of the gold. Instead, use the side, flat area.



Photo 1: Agate burnishers come in a number of shapes and sizes. Shown here (left to right) are a spoon; then four of the hook (or dog's tooth) types; next, a straight with a rounded nose; and a flat. The burnisher along the top is a pointer. The burnisher you use depends on the shape of the frame profile you are burnishing, as well as your personal preference.



Photo 2: You can burnish with a small hook (or dog's tooth) agate to work on carving details.



Photo 3: The top rail, the carved highlights, the bead, and the side of a frame like this one would be burnished—with the panel kept matte for contrast and balance.

A dog's tooth burnisher (see Photo 2) is used for the carved areas of the frame. When using this burnisher, you can get close to the point without actually using the point to burnish. This helps you reach the sides of the curved areas of the frame.

A spoon burnisher has a rounded point to it (see Photo 4), so if you are careful you can burnish with the point as well as the edges and flat areas of the agate. This burnisher is good for straight lines as well as nooks and crannies. (It's a favorite here at our shop.)

Before you begin to burnish, run the agate of the burnisher between your fingers to make sure it is clean. Then wipe the agate with a clean rag to remove any oils it might have picked up from your hand, which would stain the gold.

## Beginning to Burnish

Your frame is ready to be burnished after it has dried and you have rubbed off the excess gold. (Let your frame dry for about three to six hours, or even overnight, after you have finished gilding it.) Tap the frame with an agate burnisher: if it makes a sharp, even sound, it is ready. Don't wait too long after the frame has dried—get to it as soon as you can.

The surface of the frame must be firm if you are to burnish, so be sure not to rush and attempt this before it is dry. Since you had to saturate the frame with gilder's liquor to gild it, it will have a slightly spongy feel to it until it has dried completely.

Ideally, you should be able to put a great deal of pressure on the surface of the frame (and therefore your gesso, clay, and gold) without denting it. If you try to burnish while the frame is still wet, you will depress the clay and leave a mark on the gold, damaging the surface of your frame.

When you begin to burnish, start with a small test area. If it feels too soft, you need to wait until your frame is completely dry. Once you are sure your frame is dry, you can start your burnish at the high points of the frame. Using the same burnisher, burnish all of the high points, then work your way into the more intricate areas of the carving. If you continue to burnish from the high points to the lows, it will be a good method of ensuring that you will go over the entire surface of the frame.

The front of the frame rabbet (the sight edge) is never burnished. To have a bright shine on the inside edge of your frame, right next to the artwork, is too distracting. Remember, use your burnish to emphasize parts of your frame. Leave other parts matte for contrast.



Photo 4: A spoon-shaped agate can be used to burnish the bead on the side of the frame. This agate shape combines both a flat and a curved shape. For that reason, it is ideal to use for burnishing almost any surface.

You want to achieve the maximum amount of burnishing in the shortest period of time, so be efficient in the movement of your burnisher. Remember that you want to achieve broad, flat areas with your burnish. Do not depress the clay and create lines of the surface of the leaf.

After going over the entire surface of your frame so carefully, you'll probably notice some areas that you missed when applying the gold. That is addressed in the next stage of your gilding project when you can go back and patch with the gold any areas that is missing coverage.

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Marty Horowitz has held high-level positions at many New York City frame manufacturers, including Kulicke Picture Frames. He formed Rothman & Horowitz in New York City with Henry Rothman in 1980. And, in 1988, he opened Goldleaf Framemakers of Santa Fe in Santa Fe, NM. He teaches gilding courses at the National Conference.



Lou Tilmont began gilding at Rothman & Horowitz in 1981 and later worked at Abe Munn Picture Frames. In 1988, he co-founded Goldleaf Framemakers with Marty Horowitz; he has since left the company.