

# Gilding Basics: Helpful Tips for the Non-Gilder

by Anne Vazquez

In the framing industry, craftsmanship and attention to detail are very important. Entrusted with our customer's valued possessions, we strive to educate ourselves and hone our skills so we may provide top of the line design and service skills. The art of gilding is one of those skills that most consider a major sign of accomplishment in the framing industry.

Perhaps you already have immersed yourself in this ancient art or have only dabbled in the practice. Or maybe you consider gilding to be outside the scope of your framing skills and just admire the work of others. Even if you're just an "admirer," you probably come into contact with gilded items on a regular basis. After all, it is present in many of the mouldings we see today (especially with the return in popularity of period frames).

In that case, it would probably be helpful to both you and your customers if you were familiar with the different gilding materials and processes, even if you never plan on picking up a burnisher. Then again, never say never!

## TYPES OF GILDING

There is water gilding and there is oil gilding. Both methods strive for the same ends, but some of the materials and processes differ. Water gilding, while the more painstaking of the two, is also the more traditional. Water gilding produces a more brilliant finish than oil gilding does. Oil gilding causes the gold to have a more matte appearance,



Gold leaf is available with varying characteristics, in different karats, colors, and weights.

depending on the timing of leaf application. It is very often used for architectural gilding.

## WHAT'S WHAT IN THE GILDING PROCESS

*Unless otherwise indicated, these components are used in both water and oil gilding.*

*Glue (water):* After the wood is sanded smooth, rabbit skin glue is applied which penetrates the wood and seals the grain. This prepares the wood for the gesso.

*Gesso:* Generally, this is a mixture of whiting and glue; denatured alcohol and linseed oil can also be added. The primary purpose of gesso is to further smooth the surface. Several layers are applied to the surface with a bristle brush (of varying stiffness

depending on the moulding design) in preparation for the bole.

*Bole (or Clay):* Serving as the intermediate between the gesso and the gold leaf, bole comes in a variety of colors. The color used is important because it will show through the gold and gives it a certain tone. Yellow is commonly used because it enhances the gold leaf, while red bole is often used to accent highlights. It is available in a variety of other colors including blue, green, orange, pink, and black.

*Gilder's Liquor (water):* This is used to wet the surface as it activates the glue in the dried bole. It is a mixture of alcohol (usually methyl) and water. Sometimes, a small amount of rabbit skin glue is added.

*Gilder's Mop (water):* The gilder dips this brush into the liquor and wets the area to be gilded.

*Gilder's Tip:* A gilder's tip is a handled brush made of animal hair (usually badger, squirrel, or sable.) This is used to lift the gold leaf and apply it to the frame.

*Size:* This is what is used to adhere the leaf to the frame surface. In water gilding, the glue, gesso, and bole work together as the size which is activated by the water. In oil gilding, it is a sticky varnish applied to the frame surface after bole. The longer the size dries before the gold leaf is applied, the more brilliant its finish will be. Due to this variable, oil gilded frames tend to end up with a more matte appearance than those that are water gilded.

*Burnishing (water):* In order to achieve the desired shine, the surface is burnished. This is done with a burnisher, which consists of a wooden handle with a polished agate stone. The gilder presses the leaf to make it further conform to the shapes of the surface. Certain areas can be emphasized by burnishing more or less than the other areas.

*Patina (or Finishing):* This is the stage where the frame is given a "history." Rubbing parts of the frame where it would have been handled often is one way to do this. This is also the stage where the gilder patches any areas that were missed while laying the leaf.

Distressing the frame also adds to its finish. Gilders use anything from chains to power drills to simulate wear and tear on the frame. Fly specks can also be simulated with a mixture of raw umber powder and orange shellac.

## TYPES OF LEAF

Pure gold leaf is 24K and is often too costly for many budgets. Nevertheless, the most costly part of the gilding process is the labor. Also manufactured is 23K and 22K gold, mixed with some silver. Much of the gold leaf on the market is gold mixed with other metals, such as silver, palladium, and copper. These mixtures result in a variety of hues which the gilder can use to reach the desired effect on the object. Standard size of each leaf is 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ ", although some other sizes are available for certain types of leaf.

*Metal leaf (or schlagmetal):* Although it contains no gold, it is an effective substitute. It is usually composed of an alloy of copper and zinc; sometimes containing other base metals and tin. It is less expensive than real gold leaf and much of the manufactured moulding we see is gilded with metal leaf.

*Patent (or Transfer) Gold:* This is adhered to tissue paper so that it is easier to handle in areas with drafts.



*This silver grain will be beaten flat to form silver leaf.*

Used for outdoor projects, this type of leaf does not achieve the same degree of brilliance as loose leaf (which is not attached to tissue paper).

*Variiegated Leaf:* Several different colors on a mainly gold or silver base with a marbled or tapestry appearance. The gold or silver is alloyed with other metals and heat is applied, causing the variegated appearance.

*White Gold:* With its silver appearance, this type of gold is 49% gold and 51% silver, weighing 16 grams per leaf. It is lighter than 24K gold and pure silver leaf, about the same weight as 23K gold, and heavier than 22K.

*Silver Leaf:* This is a relatively heavy leafing material at 22.5 grams per leaf. It is 100% silver.

## OTHER GILDING TERMS

*Pastiglia:* A low relief ornamentation for which thickened gesso is dripped from a brush onto the surface to create a design. A combination of painting and sculpture.

*Granito and Sgraffito:* Two forms of surface adornment. Granito (or punchwork) is produced by stamping the gold surface with a metal tool engraved with a design. With sgraffito, the decoration is scratched onto the surface—either through the gold to reveal the color of the bole, or through a layer of color to reveal the gold.

*La Reparure:* French for "recutting," this is the process in which the carvings in the wood are redefined after the gesso is applied. ■

Photos courtesy of Sepp Leaf Products, New York, NY