

Understanding Gold Leaf

This information was taken from "Gold Leaf Terminology" by Peter and Ines Sepp

In the past, gold leaf was produced in limited karats and quantities, but with today's technology and imagination the range has vastly expanded. To achieve this variety, gold is alloyed with silver and copper.

Copper gives the gold a warmer, richer tone without which the gold would appear somewhat green and cold. Lower karats of gold can yield lighter shades of gold by adding more genuine silver (genuine silver and palladium leaf are available).

The abundant variety of leaf on the market can make choices more difficult for the gilder, but understanding karats is a fairly simple matter. Most frames are gilded with 22kt gold (92% gold content) alloyed with silver and copper. A few frame manufacturers use 23kt gold (96% gold content) to obtain a more brilliant burnish.

Although manufacturers package leaf under many names and labels, there are really only several basic types of leaf available. All gold leaf is manufactured as loose leaf and, with a few exceptions, has been standardized to a 3 3/8" square leaf size, packaged in booklets of rouged tissue paper, each containing 25 leaves. Twenty of these booklets are wrapped as a complete unit and referred to as a pack or box, containing, in total, 500 leaves.

Gold leaf is sold in two forms, loose or patent. Qualities can vary greatly. The majority of beaten leaf is packaged in loose form and is suitable for all areas of gilding (except outdoors). Loose leaf is generally removed from its booklet with a special brush called a gilders tip. It is then transferred and placed on the intended object, which has been prepared to receive the gold.

Patent gold is loose leaf mounted onto a specially treated tissue paper which is then placed under pressure to adhere the gold to the paper. It is removed from the book by the attached paper and applied, gold side down, onto the prepared surface. By rubbing or pressing against the paper, the gold is transferred to the object and the backing paper is removed. This form of leaf can be utilized for many applications and is necessary for outdoor work or where conditions are unsuitable for loose leaf.

The majority of gold leaf, no matter what karat, is beaten to an average thickness or weight, pre-determined by the manufacturer and varied from one factory to another. However, an example of how thin a sheet of gold really is can be seen by lying 1,000 sheets — with no air between them — one on top of the other. The thickness of this stack would equal that of a dime. Regular weight leaf is very popular for usages of all types: frames, furniture, and restoration.

Double gold and even triple gold leaf does not mean that the leaf is two or three times as thick as regular leaf. Rather, double gold indicates that it is heavier than regular leaf, usually 10% to 20% thicker. This terminology is used to distinguish the difference between the heavier weights and regular leaf, and is not to be taken literally.

The thickness of gold leaf is determined by the gold content used by the manufacturer to produce a certain quality of leaf. This is measured by the amount of gold used per one thousand leaves. For example, manufacturer "A" may use 15 grams of gold per one thousand leaves as a standard for his regular weight leaf, whereas manufacturer "B" may use 11 grams per thousand leaves as his standard to achieve regular leaf. There is nothing unusual about this. It is the manufacturers choice as to how thick or thin he wants his average weight leaf to be beaten. Both will be labeled using the same terminology, but one will be slightly heavier than the other.

The same determination of thickness applies to double or triple leaf. One manufacturer's double leaf may not be as heavy as another's regular leaf. Manufacturer "B" may use 12 grams of gold for his heavier gold leaf and call it double, but manufacturer "A" already has 15 grams in his regular and will put 17 grams into his double leaf. Both beaters will label their package as double gold and both manufacturers will be correct. ■