

# Introductory

*The art of sgraffito is a method of ornamentation where a surface layer is incised, or scratched through, to reveal a ground of contrasting color. It is a method commonly used on water gilded frames.*

*There are many ways to use sgraffito. You can scratch through to gesso, clay, or burnished gold. There are techniques to use to arrive at complex designs, but what we will describe here is a simple “scratch through the paint to the gold” type of sgraffito.*

## **Creating a Surface to Scratch Through**

For this article, we have created a seventeenth-century Italian frame. We will paint the center panel black and then scratch through that panel to reveal the gold underneath. This is done after the frame has been gilded, distressed, antiqued and shellaced. Make sure the shellac is fully dry before you apply the black panel. Otherwise the paint will become gummy underneath and you won't be able to scratch through it cleanly.

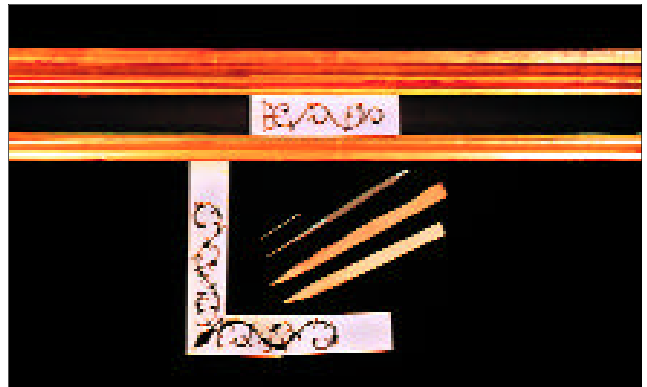
Although there are many paints you could use, we prefer a “super-saturated” black paint. This is a casien paint with a polymer mixed into it. It looks great because it has such a flat appearance. Our second choice would be black Japan paints.

## **Deciding On and Transferring Your Design**

The exact origin of your design won't matter much. It helps, however, to choose a design that is compatible to the stylistic period of the frame. Books on the history of frames and visits to museums will provide you with plenty of sources of inspiration.

There are multiple ways to transfer your sgraffito design to your frame. If you have a steady hand, you can “draw” your sgraffito design freehand right onto the surface of your frame in pencil, then scratch the design following your pencil lines. Or you could just begin scratching with your tool.

This kind of technique works well on one-of-a-kind frames. If you are creating a frame design that you intend to sell multiples of, however, you will need a technique that will ensure consistency. For this, I recommend using a stencil. Create the stencil and use it to create your corner sample, and



*A variety of tools for sgraffito and two stencil examples.*



*Trace the stencil onto your moulding with a sharp #2 pencil.*

# Sgraffito

by Marty Horowitz and Lou Tilmont

then all the frames you sell from that sample. This way, the design that the customer sees on the sample will be the same as the one on their frame.

Once you have decided on a design and created your stencil, position the stencil where you want the design to be on your frame. Then using a very sharp No. 2 pencil, follow the lines of the stencil and transfer them to the surface of the frame. When you remove the stencil, the design will be outlined for you in pencil and you can begin to scratch away the paint to reveal the gold underneath. I consider this to be one of the most simple and accurate methods.

You could also create your sgraffito pattern on a sheet of paper, and then poke holes through the paper, following the lines of the design. You would then lay the paper on the surface of the frame, and assuming you will create your design on a black panel, pounce white chalk through the holes in the paper and onto the surface of the frame. This will also transfer the design.

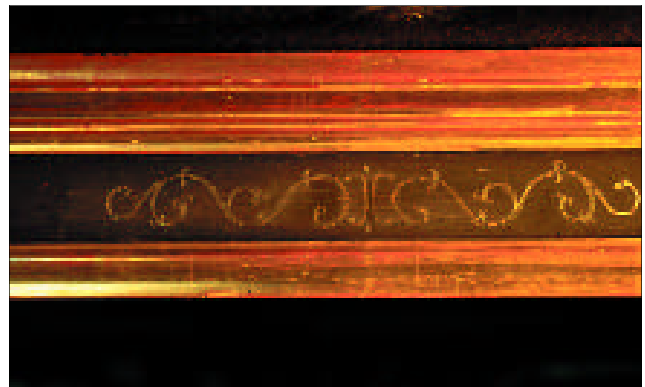
## Your Sgraffito Tool

Almost anything with a sharp point can be used as a sgraffito tool. A nail is a good choice, although it is hard to hold unless you set it into a wooden handle. You can also sharpen small pieces of shim wood with a knife. Be sure to use a hard wood, not a soft wood.

Jewelry repair tools, a small awl, or even an ice pick will also work well. You can also check with companies that sell etching tools.

## Working Wet or Dry

When you scratch through a paint surface, you work dry to make the layer easier to scratch through. If you are going to scratch into gesso, however, it is better to moisten the surface by placing a damp rag over the frame for about 30 to 45 minutes. When it is slightly damp you'll find that your scratching tools move easier—just be sure not to make the surface too soft. ■



*Scratch away the paint, following your pencil lines. Scratch just enough to reveal the gold.*



*The finished sgraffito design.*