

Introduction to Water Gilding: Distressing and Antiquing

by Marty Horowitz and Lou Tilmont

You've already taken the first step in antiquing your frame by rubbing it with rotten stone (detailed in last month's article). The next few steps are some more aggressive methods of making your frame look several centuries old. (Save this part of the job for a day when you need to release some tension.)

By using the tools in your shop, you'll be recreating the years of wear and tear a genuine antique frame would have suffered. One of the most important things to understand is that you are trying to make the frame look as if it became worn through years of use—not that you made it look that way in a single afternoon. Study the frames in museums and any other antique frames you can get the chance to see. That's the best way to learn how to create an authentic look.

Scratching

Wood will expand and contract with changes in temperature and humidity. Gesso, however, is not elastic. This means that as the wood of a frame changes dimension, the gesso on its surface won't, and will therefore crack under the stress.

This is what scratching simulates: the cracks that would appear in the gesso after a long period of time. These types of cracks appear at the stress points of the frame (the edges of coves, the corners). They would also appear in the flat areas of the frame, since the gesso would have been sanded more thinly there, making the gesso even weaker and more likely to crack.

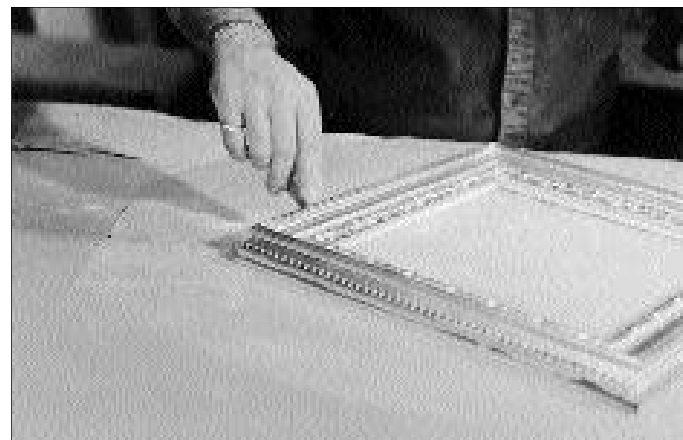
You can use almost anything for scratching—a razor blade, a nail, etc. Razor blades will make scratches that are erratic and uneven and therefore very authentic looking.

Worming

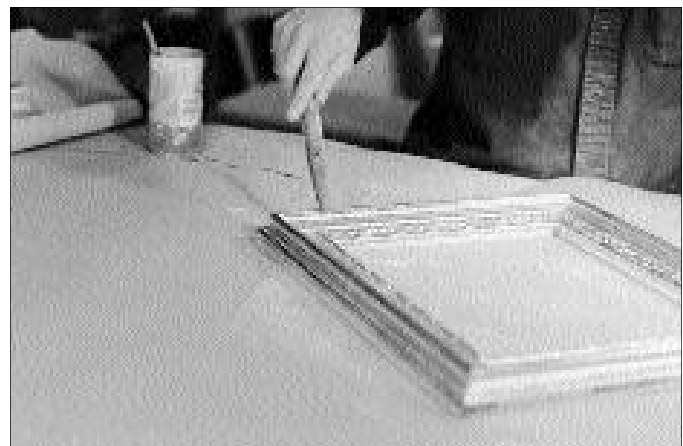
Worms would be attracted to the animal skin glue used in making frames. Remember that when placing your worm holes: the worms always went where the glue was.



Place plenty of worm holes in the corners—worms would be attracted there by the glue.



Razor blades make authentic-looking scratches.



Chip the surface of your frame with a rasp or chisel.

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That would be the corners and other crevices as well as where a liner was joined to a frame.

Use a awl or an ice pick to make your worm holes. Sand the point so that it is slightly rounded. (We use a grinding wheel or sandpaper to get a point we like.) Once you are happy with the point, tap (or you can even stab) the surface of the frame with the awl or ice pick. Use different amounts of pressure to achieve different results: some holes will be big, some smaller. Also keep in mind that the older a frame is, the more worm holes it will have.

Chipping

Most antique frames have gotten knocked around a bit through the years; chipping will simulate this type of damage. Use a (wood) rasp to round off square edges and chip the surface of the frame to give it a general wear and tear look.

A chain can also be used to make the frame look “banged up.” Those chains with knobs on the links are good for doing heavy and uneven damage. There are two ways you can use a chain to distress your frame. The first is the closed hand method: hold the entire chain in your hand, above the frame, and then drop the entire chain on to the frame. Do this in several areas. The second is a whip action: swing the chain and hit the frame with it for a very old look.

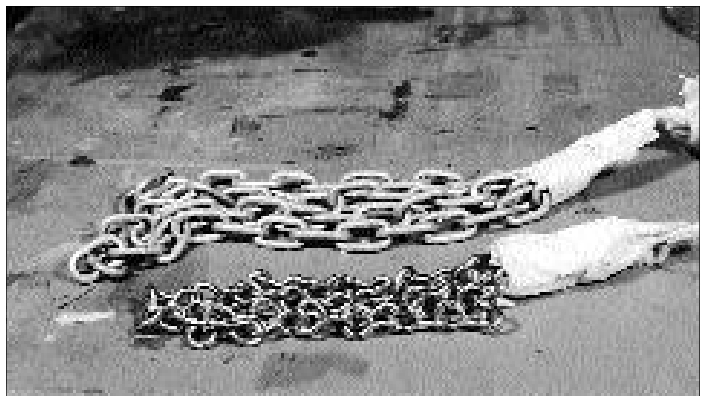
Fly Specks

For some types of finishes (such as a Florentine or Spanish finish), you will also want to simulate fly specks and other types of dirt that spotted and specked the frame over time. This kind of spotting should be sporadic (some in the corners, the rest here and there). Fly specks should be a gentle nuance, nothing harsh or heavy.

To create fly specks, mix raw umber powder and orange shellac. Then dip the bristles of a stiff brush in



Use a small piece of wood to spray the fly specks onto your frame.



Different chains will do different amounts of damage.

the mixture and flick the bristles towards the frame to achieve the specks. This should be just a translucent splash of color and tone.

Making It Look Authentic

Frames of different types will have different types of wear. When creating a French frame, we suggest light scratching, light chipping (no chain!), and a little bit of worms. For a Florentine or Spanish frame, we suggest heavier scratches, heavier chips (go ahead and use a little bit of chain), and heavier worms.

All of the distressing you do on your frame must look natural, not applied. The effect must be that the chips and spots arrived there through the course of history. A good frame must never look as if it were finished; it should look as if it had never been worked upon.

Although we can give you a general idea of where the distress on your frame should be, it is important to go to museums and examine antique frames. Study the originals and become familiar with what you are attempting to replicate. ■