

Laying Leaf in Hard to Reach Places

by Stanley Robertson

Editor's Note: The text of this article originally appeared in the September 1992 issue of PFM.

The age old skill of covering a surface with gold leaf, and doing it well, is not (as most practitioners of the art will most readily agree) as easy as it looks. Some applications are comparatively easy and can be done nicely with patience and practice, but a few techniques are downright tricky and require more than a “wing and a prayer”—particularly for the casual gilder.

One of those techniques, a source of frustration to many gilders, is getting all those nooks and crannies filled with gold leaf. The problem is not just attaching the leaf, but having it look like it was laid there with care, just as the rest of the piece. The maddening part is gilding 28 times, using half of a can of size or a whole cup of gilder's liquor, and two-thirds of a book of gold on one little cavity! And it still doesn't stay! Well, read on. Help is on the way!

You all know the country western song that goes, “Looking for (love) “tack” in all the wrong places!” (Sorry, I couldn't resist the pun!) The first thing to understand, and the last thing that you want to hear, is that it takes many attempts to get that little piece of gold leaf to go where you want it to and do it well. Contrary to popular belief, practicing with



This foliate ornament has gold leaf already laid into the deep recesses (using oil size). There are also sections of the ornament that have been prepared with red clay for water gilding.

metal leaf does not cut it. When you finally think you are ready for gold leaf, the frustration starts again and the air and worktable are filled with lots of little unstuck pieces of crumpled and twisted fragments that should either still be in the book or on the piece you are “gilding.” But don't get discouraged.

The Best Place to Start

There are many ways to do this job right, but the simplest way to success is to do what experienced gilders have been doing for centuries. That is, in workshop jargon, “plan the lay.” We have to

start somewhere, and planning is far and away the best place to start (at least until the techniques are second nature to you). Let's look at this carefully and take an example that will clearly illustrate how an experienced gilder would approach this problem.

First, survey the frame. Check the piece over thoroughly. There are a number of steps to go through and none of them can be ignored. A casual glance at the frame is not enough. You must learn to read it and understand the ornament or pattern, its repeats and its underlays, what shows on the face and what doesn't.

You must know what you need the final result to be. You must know what gets gilded, what gets toned, and what doesn't. Every little low space does not necessarily have to have gold leaf at the bottom of it to look finished, but you must know what does and what doesn't.

You should also know whether it is an historical frame that is entrusted in your care. If so, it is crucial to have a good understanding of the traditional "rules" of the architecture of the frame.

In the "old days," workshops had specific guidelines. Masters taught apprentices how particular parts of frames were treated and the specific reasons for treating them in a particular way. Each individual frame was gilded, decorated, and finished to exacting and prescribed standards. Having said that, I've laid out this article in such a way that it is divided into two parts: *Preparation and Application*.

Preparation:

Six Points Towards Good Results

- 1) Before jumping in, think through your approach to the job. Make sure the surface was finished correctly for the purpose, or for the next step. If it's not done right, do it at this point.
- 2) Next, look at the techniques and materials to be used throughout the project, and in preparation for gilding the finished object. Will you be using one technique or two? Water gilding, oil gilding, or other decorative techniques?
- 3) Take a good look at your tools. Are they all in good working order? Are they the right tools for

the job? Are they within easy reach while you are working? Are they clean?

- 4) Check your workspace and its flexibility. Can you move the frame, or object, into many positions comfortably? Do you have accessible objects like blocks or easels needed to support the job?
- 5) Check your lighting and ensure that it is adequate. Many jobs are spoiled because the gilder didn't have enough light in the right place to see what he or she was doing.
- 6) Speed is important, but so is the development of skill. Skillful execution of your job is achieved by having under your control the five points mentioned above.

Application

- 1) If the project has been surveyed sufficiently, it becomes apparent what the repetitive hollows and undercuts look like and how many there are; the direction in which you will work; and where the job begins and ends. You must have the tools on hand that are going to make the job easier to approach. By that, I mean brushes or gilding tips, a good working cushion, a cutting method that works for you, and any other implements your particular style demands.
- 2) Since the tip or brush is the tool that gilders depend upon to transport the leaf from one point to another, using a full size 3 1/2 " tip to put gold into a frame hollow (that has an opening of 1 1/2 " or less) does not make sense. The way to solve this problem is to take a full size gilders' tip and to divide it, by cutting it into useable sections.
- 3) Use a good quality tip for laying

leaf in hard to reach places. Don't scrounge around for an old one to chop up (unless there is a wear pattern on the edges and the center section is strong and full). You'll be using these sections often, so treat each of them as well as you treat your full size tip.

- 4) The key to having good control over small pieces of leaf is to make sure the tip is "loaded" well before you begin. If your face is naturally oily, you're in luck. If not, you must revert to an occasional quick wipe with petroleum jelly on your cheek or wrist. The loading of the slightest amount of it on both sides of the hairs of the tip (from face or wrist) when needed ensures that the tip picks up gold leaf every time. The leaf must stay there (on the hair of the tip) long enough and strong enough to be transported to, and placed upon, the area where *you* determine it should go.
 - 5) This part requires no trick—just skill and care. It requires that the area to receive gold is prepared exactly right, that the surface of choice is smooth, free of dust, and primed for gilding.
 - 6) Dexterity and coordination are key. The trick is to have a dextrous wrist, nimble fingers, and a good eye, for they all work in tandem. (If you don't have it yet, you must develop it.) In turn, these are coordinated with placement, as the gold must be cut to the appropriate size and shape.
- It is then that the gold leaf is literally wrapped around a curved, or modeled, shape rolling it off the tip. Or it is laid into the area to be gilded, using the correct sized tip segment to do it with the right amount of tack, or moisture, on

the surface. My point, as you may have discovered, always goes back to good preparation and skillful application of materials *before* applying the gold.

*** A Note when Oil Gilding:* If the oil size is at the right tack, it should “grab” the leaf. As long as your aim is accurate and it is placed slowly and carefully, the gold should be in the right place.

*** A Note when Water Gilding:* If you are water gilding, the combination of alcohol and water, and the saturation of the clay-covered surface should do exactly the same as the oil size—grab the gold and pull it off the tip onto the surface. Again, if your aim was accurate, the gold should be nestled into the hollow, or around the ornament, exactly where you want it to go.

The Final Word: A Clever Way to Instill Good Habits

Implementing a consistent system becomes important when you are doing delicate, repetitive, or difficult work. The traditional systems in the old trades and professions thrived on workshop discipline. It was a clever method of instilling good habits, which really encouraged beginner gilders to learn those systems from the day they started their training.

If you want to maximize your gilding results, use a consistent method. You can invent your own if you'd like, but do it the same way every time. Be consistent, use the steps of preparation and application I've laid out here, and you'll get wonderful results. ■

Stanley Robertson (who passed away in May 2003) was a master gilder and conservator whose gilding appeared on many objects including frames for historic works of art, church and cathedral fittings, altarpieces, console tables, tondo mirrors, architectural ornamenting, panel paintings, bas reliefs, friezes, and the decorative features of fine musical instruments. He began his private practice, Chelsea Lane Conservation Studio in Washington, DC. in 1986. He was involved in many organizations and was a Professional Associate of the American Institute for Conservation. He was also past president of the American Society of Gilders and the Washington Conservation Guild.

To read more about laying gold leaf, look up this article on the PFM website—www.pictureframingmagazine.com: “Laying Leaf,” by Marty Horowitz and Lou Tilmont, April 1997.