

Gilding is easier than you think

BY PETER GEDRYS



The art of adorning a surface with gold leaf has been practiced for thousands of years. The ancient Egyptians realized that if they beat this very malleable metal into ultrathin leaves, it could be affixed to any surface and give the illusion that the object was solid gold.

Gold leaf was used regularly during the 18th century to decorate parts of furniture such as finials, shells, and fans; Federal and Empire pieces often were adorned with gilded elements. Contemporary furniture designers also use gold leaf.

There are two ways to gild: the traditional method known as water gilding and an easier way called oil or mordant gilding that I'll illustrate here

on two fans. And you won't need to raid your retirement fund to buy the gold: Each fan used less than \$25 worth of leaf.

A smooth surface is vital for gilding

With a clear finish, proper surface preparation is important; when gilding, it is critical. Gold leaf has an average thickness of 0.05 microns, or 100 times thinner than a page from a phone book. This thinness, plus the reflectivity, will accentuate any surface flaws.

Begin by sanding the surface with P150-grit paper. Then dampen the wood to raise the grain and, when dry, sand with P220-grit paper. The idea is to soften any tool marks without completely removing them, and to avoid flattening out the rays of the fan, so it retains visual

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Surface preparation is the key



1 Smoother than sanding. Because gold leaf magnifies surface flaws, you can't use it on bare wood, however well sanded. Instead, brush on thin coats of gesso to give a ceramic-smooth surface. Prepare a sample block in the same way.



2 Tint the base. Gold leaf is so thin that the underlying color will affect the final look. Apply a couple of coats of yellow ochre Japan paint to the whole area to be gilded. The yellow will also help hide any small flaws in the gilding.



3 Highlight the high points. Apply Venetian red paint to the raised area to give the finished piece a more three-dimensional appearance, and to impart a warm tone to the thin gold.

Few tools but lots of patience

There are three basic tools for gilding: a gilder's pad to place the leaf on, a gilder's knife to cut the leaf to size, and a gilder's tip to transfer the leaf from the pad to the workpiece. You'll find a large choice of gold leaf. Small amounts of other metals yield leaf that is a deeper yellow (copper) or a very pale yellow (silver). Let your taste decide, but I prefer at least a 23-karat gold so that tarnishing is not an issue.

Apply the size and wait. A type of varnish, known as gold size, is the adhesive that bonds the gold leaf to the workpiece. Diluted by 10% with mineral spirits, it should be applied thinly but uniformly. A quick-set size is ready to gild in about three hours; the slow version requires about 12 hours but gives a higher sheen.



1

Pick a leaf. Gold leaf comes in books of 25 leaves, each 3³/₈ in. square. For flat surfaces or outdoor areas, use patent leaf that is attached to the book. Just touch it onto the size like a decal. For curved areas, use surface leaf that is loose in the book and can be placed onto a gilder's pad prior to application.



3



2

Tacky enough? Before gilding, the size must be almost completely dry. To see if it is ready, touch the surface with the back of a knuckle and listen for a click as it is pulled away. A better method is to lightly drag a knuckle across the surface. If you hear a squeak, it is ready. Use the sample block for testing and then confirm using the workpiece.



4

Slice, don't saw. An entire leaf is too large to manipulate onto the workpiece, so cut it into halves or thirds using a gilder's knife. Cut with one firm pull, but don't use a sawing motion because this will tear the leaf.

movement. If the gilded area adjoins non-gilded wood, it is best to finish the surrounding surface and then tape it off.

Gesso gives the wood a porcelain-like base—Even if you were to sand to 5,000 grit, the surface would still be too irregular for gilding. You need a smooth, uniform layer called ground. This is provided by a substance known as gesso, which is applied in multiple thin layers.

To begin, give the wood a couple of thin coats of dewaxed shellac to seal the surface. Pour out enough gesso for a few coats and thin it by about 5% with a 50/50 blend of warm water and Liquitex acrylic varnish. Apply the gesso in long, even strokes with a good-

quality, synthetic sable brush. Avoid overbrushing, and if you miss an area, get it on the next pass. Lay it on as flat as possible to minimize later sanding.

Depending on the temperature, you can brush on three to four coats in an hour, but then let it sit overnight to harden completely. Now examine the surface and carefully sand down any ridges or brush marks. In a reversal from normal procedure, start with 1,000-grit wet/dry paper, and if the surface requires it, go to a more aggressive paper such as 800 grit, not the other way around. Be methodical in your sanding—I use a magnifying glass—because the gold leaf will reveal any flaws. If you cut through

any edges, repair them with more gesso. When the surface is smooth, lightly polish it with a 2000-grit Abralon pad, and then let the piece sit for 24 hours.

You can see through gold leaf

Leaf is so thin that the ground color shows through. Gilders take advantage of this by manipulating ground colors to give the piece a three-dimensional or glowing appearance (see photos, p. 92).

Japan paints work well because they dry quickly and polish nicely. Apply a thin washcoat of dewaxed shellac to seal the gesso and act as a barrier coat for the paint. Thin the paint about 10% with mineral spirits and mix well. Using

Vaseline grips the leaf.

Known as a gilder's tip, a brush with a single or double row of hairs is used to transfer the leaf from the pad to the workpiece. Rub a little Vaseline on your cheek, and then gently brush the tip across the skin.



5

Lay down the leaf.

Place the leaf on the workpiece, overlapping the previously applied leaf by about 1/8 in. Apply the leaf with a down-and-up motion, not a brush-stroke motion, which risks tearing the leaf.



7

Tamp it down. When all the leaf has been applied, use a piece of pure cotton wool to lightly tamp it down and achieve a firm bond with the size.



9

Brush off the surplus.

Overlapping leaf, known as skewings, will not stick to the workpiece and should be brushed off onto a piece of paper and saved in a box or other container.



11



6

Lift the leaf. Place the charged tip onto about two-thirds of the sliced section of gold leaf and lift it upward away from the pad.



8

Holes are easily patched. The initial application of leaf is unlikely to achieve 100% coverage. However, it is easy to cover any voids, and joints in the thin leaf won't show in the final results.



10

Fill the recesses. Use a soft brush to push the leaf down into the recesses.



12

Touch up. With the surplus leaf removed, inspect the surface for any gaps. Fill these using the skewings that you collected in step 11.

Two ways to age the gilt

After gilding, the last thing on your mind is to deliberately blemish the gold or reduce its sheen. On some contemporary furniture, the pristine look may be most suitable. But on period furniture, subtle aging or an antique look is more in keeping. In either case, place the gilded section on the rest of the project if possible, move a few feet back, and let your eyes be the judge.

a soft artist's brush, lay on the color in thin, even applications. After the paint has dried for at least four hours, polish it with either Liberon's 0000 steel wool (hardware-store brands are too coarse), or for a higher polish, the 2,000-grit Abralon pad. Let the piece sit overnight.

Apply the gold leaf

The next step is to apply the size, which adheres the leaf to the workpiece. After checking that the size is dry enough to gild, shake out a piece of gold onto the pad and use a light breath to flatten it. With the gilder's knife, which has a flat cutting surface and not a sharp edge, cut the gold with one firm pull. It's common to cut each leaf into halves or thirds, but you can also just cut it to match the surface you are gilding.

The tip, which is a brush with a single or double row of hairs, needs to be lightly "charged" so that it will pick up the leaf. Rub a small amount of Vaseline onto your cheek and brush the tip against it a couple of times. Don't overdo it or the gold will not release from the tip.

Gradually cover the area to be gilded with leaf, overlapping each section slightly. When finished, tamp down the leaf, remove the surplus pieces, inspect the surface, and patch any areas that you missed. You'll probably be in awe at the shine, but if you are gilding a period piece you should consider aging or even antiquing the gilt (see photos, right).

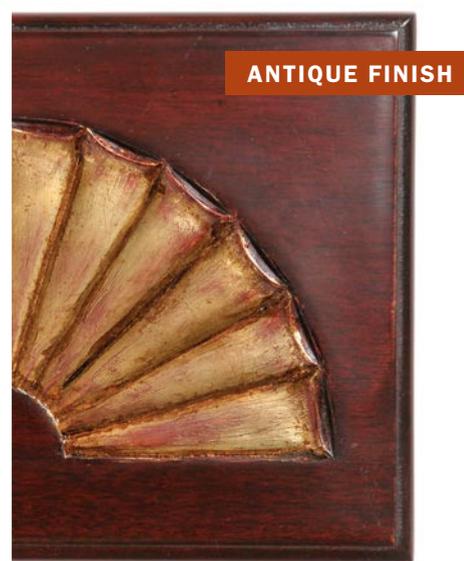
Now that you've started gilding, you'll find yourself searching for other objects that require the look only gold leaf can give. □



Dull the sheen. The first step is to rub the gilt with cotton wool to take the edge off the shine. Then apply a washcoat of shellac.



Apply dark wax. Use an old brush to apply some dark brown wax, making sure to let it build up in the recesses for an aged appearance. Buff the high points with a cloth.



Deliberate damage. Use some 0000 steel wool to rub away some of the gilt, concentrating on those areas most likely to get worn, such as high points and around knobs or pulls.



Add some grime. Brush some asphaltum, heavily diluted with mineral spirits, onto the surface. Apply several coats to recesses to imitate centuries of dirt.