



Sally Alexander

Gilding and Lacquer Studio

Method and Materials - Water Gilding

“The quality of finished gilding is only as good as the preparation underneath and the patience of the practitioner.”

Support

Water gilding requires a wooden support. Traditionally picture frames and mirrors have a base of pine, or oak with carvings in lime wood. The most common woods for furniture are pine for carcass furniture and beech for seating. The surface must be clean, well seasoned and free of grease or cracks and pin holes or knots filled and sealed prior to sizing.

Sizing

Before applying gesso, a coat of hot glue made from rabbitskin or parchment clippings that have been soaked overnight in water is brushed over the wooden support. This hot size solution opens up the grain and forms a key for the gesso; silk or linen can be used to cover knots and joints, helping to minimize the visible signs of movement in the wood that could lead to cracking in the gesso. This material is applied with the same glue size as for sizing up the wood.

Gesso

Gesso is made by warming prepared size and then adding enough whiting (chalk) to produce the consistency of cream, it is then strained. Gesso should always be applied warm, and like size should be brushed on smoothly and evenly to avoid the formation of air bubbles. On flat areas anything up to 12 coats can be applied, each layer brushed on in the opposite direction than that of the previous one. The gesso is then allowed to dry.

Cutting back and water polishing

When the gesso is completely dry, it is rubbed back to create an ultra smooth surface. When gilded the tiniest imperfection will be magnified, this is why so much trouble is taken to make the surface of the gesso as perfect as possible. This is achieved by lightly rubbing down with fine garnet paper, wet and dry, or on a flat surface a metal cabinet scraper. The gesso surface can also be water polished, using a strip of damp silk rapped around the finger or made into a tight parcel. Caution is required as over polishing can strip the gesso and too much water can cause the glue to rise from the lower levels, resulting in an unstable surface. In the past, fashion has dictated the style and finish of gesso work. In the Renaissance period, gesso work was soft and flowing; while in the reign of Louis XIV work was the opposite, well defined and sharp.

Bole

Bole is the coloured clay layer that is applied over the prepared gesso surface. It is the layer the gold leaf is applied onto. It has several purposes: it seals the gesso and provides colour enrichment underneath the gold. Bole is made by melting a quantity of rabbitskin or parchment size, slightly weaker than that used for making gesso; adding the warm size to the bole, stirring gently until mixed and straining through silk. Bole should have the consistency of thick cream. On a traditional carved frame yellow bole would be applied to the entire gessoed surface, enough to give a solid colour two or three layers, then red bole is brush on the raised areas of decoration, these are the areas that will be burnished later. When the bole is completely dry it is lightly polished to remove any rough bits on the surface.

Applying gold leaf

The gold leaf is applied to the bole by wetting the surface with size water and picking up a section of gold leaf using a gilder's tip, a specialist brush usually made from badger or squirrel hair. The gold leaf needs to be laid in a smooth down-up movement with no hesitation, as it approaches the wetted bole it will be pulled off the tip by capillary action. The second piece of gold leaf is laid so it slightly overlaps the first and so on.

Burnishing

After the gold leaf has been applied and during the drying time there is a 'window' at which point the gold is ready to be burnished. This is carried out using a tool called a burnisher usually made from agate, but in the past from dogs and wolves teeth, giving rise to the common name dogs tooth burnisher, which today refers to a particular shape rather than its material. The time lapse between gilding and burnishing varies with temperature and relative humidity; too dry and it is impossible to burnish, too damp and the surface will be damaged. In general it is only the highlights on an object that are burnished, and water gilding is often combined with passages of matt gold, these can be obtained by leaving some areas of water gilding unburnished. Finally if required the gilding can be toned and distressed to give the appearance of age and patina.

Sally Alexander 2012



Laying gold leaf on a picture frame previously coated with gesso and bole.