



STRICTLY COMMERCIAL

By Francis Lestingi

Dying to Gild

Signs of Gold's Francis Lestingi adorns a tombstone.

Francis Lestingi, a former physics professor, has operated Signs of Gold (Williamsville, NY) for 10 years. The shop fabricates handcarved, gilded, wood signs.

To hone gilding skills, get out of the shop and proceed to your nearest cemetery — yes, the cemetery. Gilding tombstones and monuments offers the chance to inhale fresh air in a serene, bucolic setting. Moreover, you'll escape your normal hustle and bustle and, most importantly, perform work that pays well.

Getting started

First, contact nearby monument fabricators and inform them of your gilding capabilities. Don't forget to present a portfolio of your work. Also, emphasize that, in this age of almost universal computerized, mechanized manufacturing, this elegant art is one of the few artistic skills that may be accomplished only with human hands.

The striking beauty of goldleaf, which greatly adds to a tombstone's appearance, can be a decisive selling point to a deceased's loved ones who seek your services. Don't neglect to inform them of goldleaf's durability. It adorned the tombs of the ancient Egyptian pharaohs and bottles used during the Roman Empire — and, the gold has largely remained intact. These attributes will allow you to command a respectable price for this timeless art.



Francis Lestingi displays his tools of the trade for tombstone gilding. He enjoys the work because it gets him out of the office, and, more importantly, it pays well in relation to the time and material costs incurred.

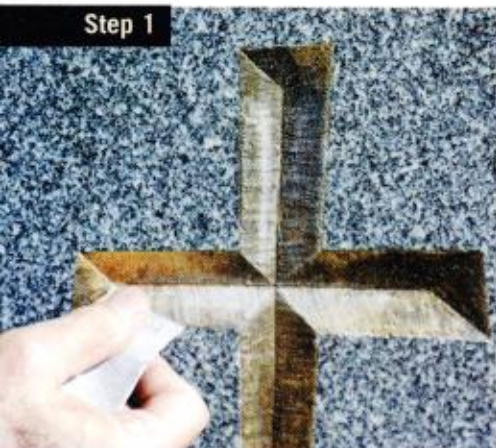
In my opinion, the best way to establish a price for your work is to reference the "Gold Leaf" section in the latest edition of *The Official Signwriters' Pricing Guide* (available from ST Media Group Intl.). As an alternative, incorporate your material costs into an appropriate markup as an hourly rate. In my market, I consider \$75 per hour a reasonable rate.

In most cases, you'll be asked

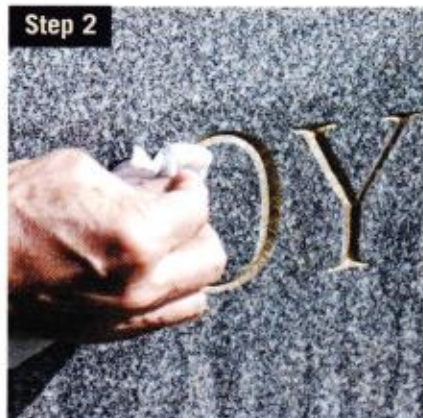
to work on monuments already installed in the cemetery, though some jobs will require gilding within the shop. Either way, proper gilding techniques will almost certainly upgrade the stone's appearance.

A new look

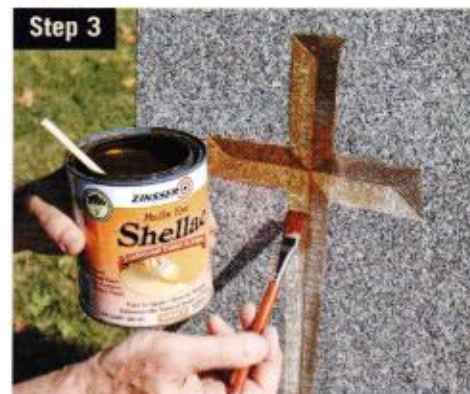
For this job, I was asked to gild a monument that had originally been decorated with imitation-gold paint.



Francis sanded away the imitation-gold paint with 120-grit sandpaper.



After sanding, he cleaned up the carved areas with a water bottle and heavy-duty paper towels.



On the advice of the late, beloved Rick "Dr. Finegold" Glawson, Francis applied Zinsser Bulls Eye shellac to seal and prime the gravestone before sizing.

STRICTLY COMMERCIAL



Step 4
Francis applied oil-based, LeFranc Charbonnel slow size with a ½-in., red-sable brush. He allows slow size to cure on tombstones for 24 hours before gilding. Its tack window stays open longer, but not so long that bugs and dirt accumulate.

The craftsman who fashioned this older stone had made incised, V-cuts that differ from contemporary, sand-blasted carving. Working with either type of stone carving is essentially similar, but incised letters allow the goldleaf a better reflection.

The first step involved sanding away the paint and smoothing the letters and cross with 120-grit sandpaper. After sanding, I dusted the

carved areas, sprayed them with a water bottle and dried them with thick paper towels.

Next, I sealed the stone for size application. The late Rick Glawson, lovingly known as “Daddy Finegold” or “Dr. Finegold,” once recommended shellac as the best way to seal and prime stone in preparation for sizing. It cures rapidly, creates a smooth surface

and seals well. Thus, I’ve used Zinsser Bulls Eye shellac to gild all my tombstones.

When applying the shellac, mahl sticks or lettering quills are unnecessary; any overlapping letter edges can be easily corrected — I’ll explain this process later. Naturally, excessive shellac will make cleaning up more difficult. To prime and size the surface, I used single-stroke, red-



Step 5
Because he applied gold to small, incised areas, Francis cuts his goldleaf sheets in thirds with a gilder's knife.



Step 6
When using a gilder's tip, many signmakers brush it against their scalp to oil the tip and adhere gold. However, Francis uses lip balm because he thinks it's a more dependable oil source.

sable brushes. The shellac's drying and hardening requires approximately an hour, so this is a good time to eat lunch or read your latest issue of *ST*.

Down to size

After the shellac dried, the stone was ready for size application. LeFranc Charbonnel's slow size is

consistently durable, offers a lengthy tack window and yields a brilliant gild. A few drops of chrome-yellow 1Shot® lettering enamel give the size better visibility. As with shellac, overlaps can be corrected later.

Oil-based, slow size requires a minimum of 12 hours to cure. I let a gilded, carved, wood sign cure 48



Step 7
Francis applied and oiled the tip to the book. The tip holds the leaf, but once he touches it to the sized areas, whose bond is stronger, the gold leaves the tip.

hours; for tombstones, one day. It could cure longer if necessary, but bugs, weather and dust may become a problem. Check the weather forecast, and select two days when sunny, rain-free days are predicted.

Once the size cured, I was ready to gild. Loose goldleaf sells in 25-sheet booklets that contain 3¼-sq.-in. pieces. This job required gold

STRICTLY COMMERCIAL



Step 8
A stiff breeze eventually precluded using a gilder's tip. Thus, Francis gingerly rolled the sheets from the goldleaf book directly onto the monument.



Step 9
After gilding, Francis cleaned up shellac and primer overlaps with a single-edge razor.

strips roughly one-third this size. Thus, I cut the leaf with a gilder's knife, which is 6 in. long and features a $\frac{1}{8}$ -in. blade that's uniformly thin with no beveled edges. This is much easier than using your fingernail, particularly after placing cardboard or some other substantial material behind the goldleaf pack. When necessary, I sharpened the knife by rubbing the blade against a 3M™ scouring pad.

Because each sheet is only 0.00001 in. thick, it can't be handled — the gold will dissolve into your fingertips. Moving cut goldleaf from the booklet to the substrate requires a gilder's tip, a wide, flat, squirrel-hair brush. An application of oil to the brush provides stickiness that lifts the leaf from the book.

Many signmakers rub the tip against their hair for oil; however, this technique doesn't provide consistent results (and, some signmakers lack sufficient hair). Thus, I stroked my hand with ChapStick® lip balm and then brush the gilder's tip against my hand. The "charged" tip now picks up the gold and deposits it onto the sized area because it possesses greater adhesion than the balm.

STRICTLY COMMERCIAL

Not a breeze

Even amidst the cemetery's pastoral setting, all wasn't perfect. As luck had it, a gilder's arch enemy — a stiff breeze — appeared. I could have used patent goldleaf, which sticks to its backing tissue and can be directly applied to the sized areas. However, it doesn't shine as brilliantly. Thus, when wind or other conditions make using a tip impractical, I roll it directly from the booklet to the monument.

After applying the leaf, I burnished the gilded areas with a soft, white-sable brush. Lightly dust the gold surface with the brush to ensure the gold has stuck to the size and that loose gold and wrinkles are removed. However, this requires a gentle touch; aggressive burnishing will lessen the gold's luster.

My final step involved cleaning up the shellac and primer overlaps with a single-edged razor in a holder. The blade easily scraped off unwanted primer, size and gold from the highly polished stone while leaving a clean, crisp edge.

Not only is clearcoating unneces-



The headstone now shines brilliantly, thanks to Francis' handiwork. He spent less than \$12 on supplies, worked for one hour and 15 minutes, and charged the monument company \$325 — an excellent profit margin.

sary, it's undesirable. Simply put, no clearcoat will resist the elements as well as the gold, which simply won't react with them.

Because gilding is an ancient art and skill, I consider it an honor and privilege to be associated, even in a small way, with this rewarding tradition. Moreover, this work was quite profitable; for an hour and 15 minutes at the cemetery, I

expended \$11.25 for the gold I used and mere pennies for the size and shellac. I charged the monument company \$325 for my work. I charged more than my mentioned hourly rate because the job required three trips to the cemetery; my fee was based upon the pricing guide's suggested rate for the large cross and lettering. In short, the job was enjoyable and lucrative. ■

More on Francis

Signs of Gold Inc. (Williamsville, NY) owner Francis Lestingi, a Queens, NY, native, taught himself pen calligraphy and brush lettering during his youth. By high school, he could gild and handletter storefront paper signs.

After high school, Lestingi entered the Christian Brothers religious teaching order, where he earned a physics degree from Catholic University and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Later, he taught physics, chemistry and theology at Rhode Island high schools and throughout several New York City boroughs. During his tenure, Harvard University hired him to design transparencies for a high-school physics course developed for the National Science Foundation.

Ten years ago, while still teaching, Lestingi decided to return to the "lettering arts" and founded Signs of Gold. He enjoyed his work so much that he retired early and began carving full time. Despite his status as a "recovering college professor," he garnered first-place awards in 1999, 2002 and 2004's USSC Sign Design Competitions, and his entries have received recognition in *ST*'s contests.



Equipment and Materials

Brushes: ¼- and ½-in., red-sable and ½-in., white-sable brushes, available from art-supply stores.

Coatings: Chrome-yellow 1Shot® lettering enamel, from One Shot Corp. (Gary, IN), (219) 949-1684 or www.1shot.com; Zinsser Bulls Eye shellac, from Zinsser Inc. (Somerset, NJ), (732) 469-8100 or www.zinsser.com.

Gilding: LeFranc Charbonnel slow size; 23k goldleaf; gilder's tip; and gilder's knife, available from Sepp Leaf Products Inc. (New York City), (212) 683-2840 or www.seppleaf.com.

Miscellaneous: 120-grit sandpaper, spray bottle, scouring pad, lip balm and razor blades, available from hardware stores.