

Gilding a House Sign

Learn gold-leafing techniques with a handcarved residential plaque

By Francis S. Lestingi

Gilding is the ancient art of applying a thin layer of metal to a surface. In carving, gilding is most often done using gold leaf, although silver and other metals can be used.

The creation of a carved and gilded sign, such as a residential plaque, can be approached in two ways. One method entails carving directly on the bare wood, coating the panel, and then applying the size (adhesive) and gold leaf. The problem with this approach is that the application of the size requires considerable skill and time. An easier method uses removable vinyl masks. With this method, the wood panel is completely painted first. The vinyl is applied to the painted surface and the carving is done directly through the vinyl and painted wood. The carved areas are then painted and sized. With the vinyl serving as a mask, the process is effortless.

Size is available in two curing speeds—fast (one-hour curing time) and slow (12-hour curing time). We find that slow-curing size produces a more brilliant gild, especially if it is allowed to cure for 48 hours. Gold leaf is available in loose-leaf form and in patent form. Patent gold is attached to tissue sheets, comes in booklets of 25 sheets, and is novice-friendly. After you become comfortable with the gilding process, I recommend learning to use loose-leaf gold.

This sign was carved in *Woodcarving Illustrated* Fall 2008 (Issue 44). The numbers on the sign are carved through a vinyl mask, allowing us to use the easier method of gold leafing. The scrolls do not use a vinyl mask and will be gilded using the alternate method. Patent gold leaf is used in both instances to simplify the process.

GILDING: PREPARING THE SURFACE




1

Prime and paint the numbers. Apply three coats of primer. Sand lightly between coats with 120-grit sandpaper. Apply two coats of sign-industry oil-based high-gloss paint. Let the paint dry for 24 hours between coats. High-gloss paint produces a brilliant gild. Use satin paint for a matte gild. Sand the surface around the numbers lightly with 120-grit sandpaper to remove any paint buildup.



2

Dust the surface with kaolin USP. Vacuum up the sanding dust, wipe it with a paper towel, and vacuum again. Spatter the kaolin, a pure powder form of the mineral kaolinite, on the entire surface of the sign and smooth it out with an artist mop brush. Vacuum away any excess dust. The kaolin makes the colorless size visible and also prevents gold leaf from adhering to the painted areas on the cove and scroll that are not intended to be gilded.

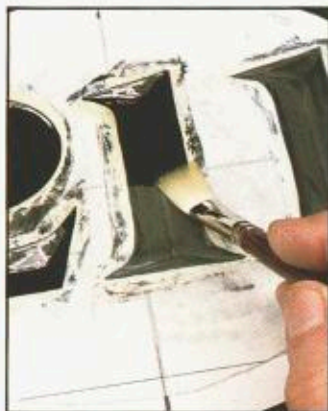


Gold leafing withstands the elements well and is ideal for exterior signs.



3

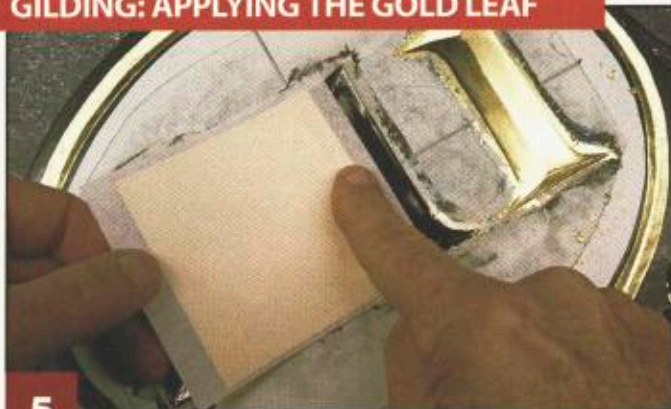
Apply size to the numbers. Pick up a small amount of size on a 1/2"-wide white sable artist's brush. Stroke the brush on a glossy magazine page to distribute the size thinly and evenly throughout the brush. Apply the size to the numbers. The size absorbs the kaolin and produces a visible glossy coating. Make sure the coating of size is thin, complete, and uniform. Remove any puddles in the valleys.



4

Apply size to the cove and scrolls. Use a professional lettering quill brush. This brush remains a constant width as you draw it around the curves. Use a #5 brush for the coves and a #0 brush for the scrolls. Take your time and be careful as you apply the size. Because these areas are not carved through a vinyl mask, the surrounding surface is not protected. The gold leaf will adhere to any area where size is applied.

GILDING: APPLYING THE GOLD LEAF



5 **Gild the cove and numbers.** Let the size dry for two days. Start at the top of the cove and work your way around. Place a sheet of gold leaf face down on the size and press lightly. The gold should rest on top of the size, but not be submerged in it. The gold peels off the paper as it sticks to the size. Gild the numbers, pressing lightly on one side of the number and then the other.



6 **Burnish the gold leaf.** Use a white sable brush. The term burnish refers to cleaning up the edges and removing any overlapping gold leaf. Never touch the gold with your fingers. Use the brush to lightly press the gold leaf against the size where necessary. The more you touch the gold, the less brilliant the gold will be. Eventually, the size will harden with the gold leaf atop it.

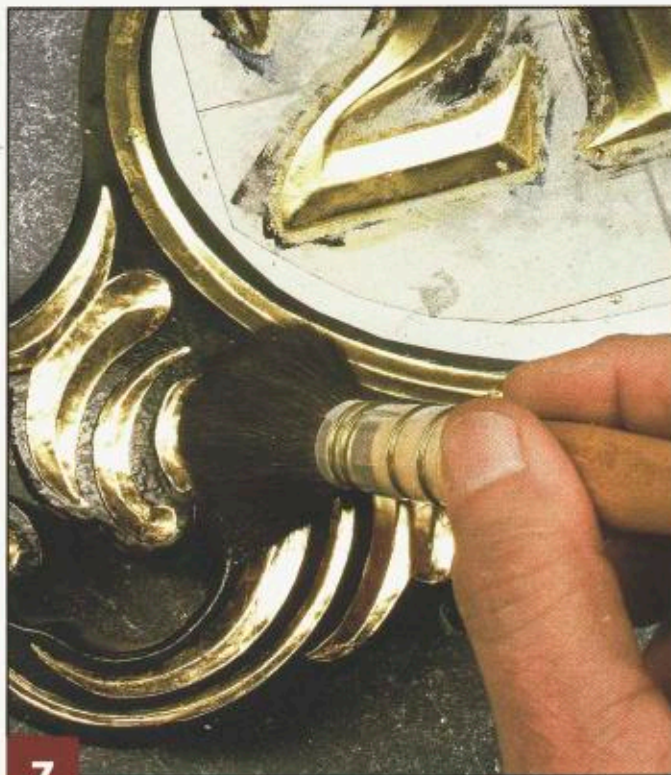


8 **Remove the vinyl mask.** Use a hobby knife to lift up a corner of the mask. Pull the vinyl at a 90° angle to the gold-leafed edge. Cut the mask with scissors at strategic places, such as the serifs, to facilitate crisp clean edges. If you pull the mask toward the gilded section, it may lift some of the gold. Always remove the vinyl mask perpendicular to the gilded edge, not toward it.

TOUCHING UP

tips

It is possible to have small voids where the gold leaf does not adhere properly. These voids are called holidays. If the gold leaf does not adhere when you attempt to cover the holiday, it may be necessary to re-size and re-gild these areas. Fast size can be used if the holiday is small enough.



7 **Apply gold leaf to the scrolls.** Use the same method explained in step 5. The kaolin prevents the gold from sticking to the relatively fresh paint. Use a soft gilder's mop to burnish the scrolls. The mop also removes the excess kaolin dust. If the kaolin sticks to the paint, remove it with a paper towel moistened with rubbing alcohol. Do not touch the gold with the alcohol.

Installing the sign

Use the template created in the carving article in *WCI* Fall 2008 (Issue 44) to position the sign. Place the template on the wall and mark the holes. Drill into the wall with a bit that is twice the diameter of the hanger bolt. Clean out the holes and fill them with silicone caulk. Add some silicone on the back of the panel and insert the bolts into the holes. Do not apply a finish over the gold leaf. Genuine 23-karat (or higher) gold leaf used in an exterior application is impervious to the elements. Coating the gold leaf will immediately lessen the luster drastically and will cause the gold leaf to crack as the coating or finish decays. Nothing is as good as gold.

Gilding with loose leaf

While the surface preparation is the same, the process of gilding with loose-leaf gold requires a different approach than gilding with patent gold. Loose-leaf gold is heavier than patent gold. It also provides a more brilliant gild. In a high-relief carving, loose-leaf gold will provide better coverage than patent gold.



1

Charge the brush. Dab a bit of lip balm on your hand and brush a gilder's tip (a specialized brush) over the oiled hand. The brush picks up a bit of oil, which attracts the gold leaf.



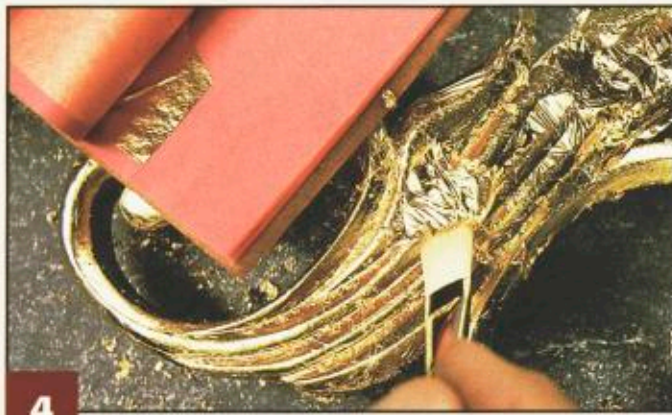
2

Cut the gold leaf. Full sheets of gold leaf are rarely used. Cut the full sheet into smaller segments with a gilder's knife.



3

Apply the gold leaf. Transfer the gold leaf to the sized surface using the gilder's tip lightly charged with lip balm. The gold leaf is attracted to the oil on the brush, but is more attracted to the size and will easily transfer to the size.



4

Burnish the gold leaf. Tear off small pieces of gold leaf with a white sable brush and fill any small voids or holidays. Burnish the gold leaf with the same brush using the techniques explained in step 6.

materials & tools

MATERIALS:

- Primer (Jay Cooke's primer)
- High-gloss oil-based paint (1-Shot lettering enamel)
- Sandpaper, 120 grit
- Kaolin, USP
- Slow size (LeFranc Charbonelle 12-hour)
- 23k patent gold leaf
- Rubbing alcohol

TOOLS:

- 1"-wide red sable brush (apply paint)
- Dusting mop
- #0 and #5 lettering quill brushes
- Gilder's mop
- White sable brush of choice
- Scissors
- Hobby knife

SPECIAL SOURCES:

Gold leaf and gilding supplies are available at many art and craft stores. You can also purchase gilding supplies on Woodcraft's Website, www.woodcraft.com.



About the Author

Francis S. Lestingi is a sign artist, calligrapher, and professor emeritus in physics at the State University College of New York at Buffalo. Francis runs Signs of Gold, Inc., and has published 13 articles on sign carving, which are available at his Website www.signsofgold.com.