By Francis Lestingi

Francis Lestingi is the proprietor of Signs of Gold (Williamsville, NY).

The Finial Touch

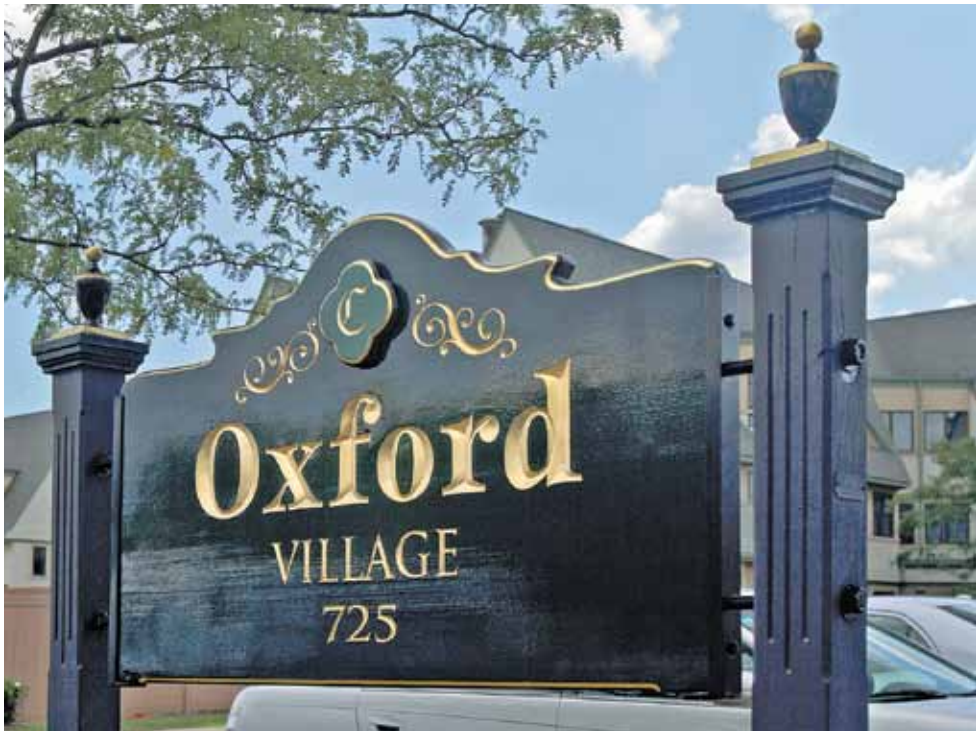
Important accents for post-mounted-sign installation

The final piece of our "trilogy" about installing post-mounted signs is, of course, the finial. Having illustrated how we prepare, detail and install posts (*see* ST, *May 2012, page 24, and May 2013, page 24*), we're ready to explain these signature accents.

Although I've handcarved, molded and cast finials for special occasions, the finial we customarily use is the stately urn, made of Spanish cedar and lathed in New England. We believe this finial provides a dignified, imposing complement to our detailed posts and elegant, handcarved and gilded substrates. Your local, home-improvement store might have finials, but, invariably, they'll be low-quality pine not suitable for exterior use. When prepared properly, cedar finials prove very durable in all exterior conditions.

In addition to the finial, we also use a cedar "cap" to cover the top of the post and complement it. Before coating and decorating the finial caps, we must soften all sharp edges. A sharp, 90º edge won't hold paint for very long, so we first ease the edges with 60-grit sandpaper. We follow this initial, aggressive grit with a milder, 120-grit abrasive. The softening of right-angle edges pertains to any substrate: wood, HDU or plastic.

To attach the finial to the cap, we first determine the cap's top



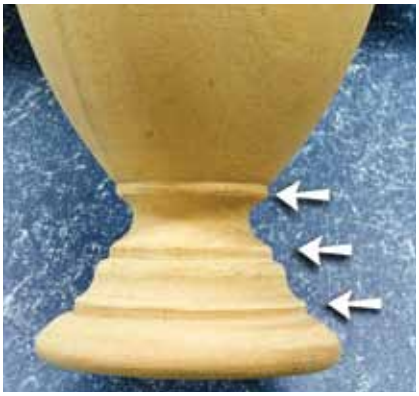
Francis Lestingi, proprietor of Signs of Gold (Williamsville, NY), fabricates 3-D, wood signage for churches, commercial and residential developments, and business storefronts. Custom finials add a dash of classic elegance to these signs. This column describes the finial-production process.

I handcarved the finials on the extreme left and right, and I created the castings in the center from molds made from the original carvings.

The high-quality, signature finials and caps are fabricated from Spanish cedar and carved in New England.

All finial edges and caps must be smoothed with 60-grit sandpaper to preclude paint chipping off sharp, 90° corners.

After sanding with the initial aggressive grit, we finish with finer, 120-grit abrasive.



All 90° corners must be smoothed down, as shown by the arrows.

To permanently attach the finial to the cap, we first determine the cap's center by drawing intersecting diagonals.

Using a 9/32-in. drill bit for a ¼ x 3-in. lag screw, we drill a hole completely through the cap.

With yellow carpenter's glue at the finial base, to create a watertight fit, we tighten the lag from inside the cap.

center by drawing intersecting diagonals and drilling a hole to accommodate a ¼ x 3-in. lag screw. After we've inserted the lag screw into the hole, we apply yellow carpenter's glue to the finial's base and tighten it into place with a wrench or pliers.

EQUIPMENT AND MATERIALS

Adhesives: Titebond III® carpenter's glue, available at home-improvement stores; Bondaflex adhesive silicone, available from Chemical Concepts (Huntingdon Valley, PA), (800) 220-1966 or www.chemical-concepts.com

Brushes: White and red sable lettering quills, available at sign- and art-supply shops

Coatings: WOW!® liquid polish, from AutoTech Mfg. LLC (Grants Pass, OR), (800) 545-8624 or www.autotechmfg.com; T.J. Ronan bulletin colors, available at sign-supply stores; Rapid Prep Application Fluid®, available at sign-supply companies; Jay Cooke's water-based sign primer, available from sign-supply shops

Finials/Caps: Post finials, from Boston Turning Works (Watertown, MA), (617) 924-4747 or www.bostonturningworks.com; post caps, from Nantucket Post Cap (Randolph, VT), (888) 758-7678 or www.nantucketpostcap.com

Gilding: Goldleaf and slow size, from Sepp Leaf (NYC), (212) 683-2840 or www.seppleaf.com; kaolin whiting, from New Directions Aromatics (Cheektowaga, NY), (800) 236-7817 or www.newdirectionsaromatics.com

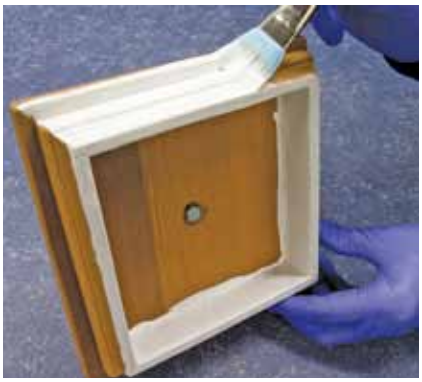
Hardware: Lag screws; sandpaper; Makita drill and bit; and lag bolts, nuts and pegboard, from home-improvement stores

Ready for decoration

After we've bonded the finial and cap, we start the coating process. This involves three primer coats, smoothed by 220-grit sandpaper after the first coat. The inside bottom of the cap isn't primed or painted; during installation, silicone will adhere to the cap and post's bare wood. To aid the coating phase, I create a bed for the finial with pegboard and bolts.

The finial piece "floats" on the bolts, and the bed provides a very convenient means to move and store the unit during the coatings. We follow the primer coats with two coats of bulletin-color, high-gloss black enamel, with a roughing between coats using a synthetic-steel-wool pad.

When the coatings are complete, we begin the decorating phase – gilding. I was once asked by a customer to gild an entire finial, which I foolishly did. Never again! That was a perfect example of the Shakespearian warning about "gilding the lily." Any gilding should be



We apply three coats of primer to the finial/cap unit. We keep the inner base of the cap bare to allow better adhesion with silicone when it's installed on the post.

To allow the fin/cap to "float" during the coating process, we built a "bed of bolts" on a pegboard base.

A light sanding with 220-grit sandpaper after the first primer coat removes any raised wood grain. We tint the second coat to ensure complete coverage.

After the three primer coats, we apply two topcoats of high-gloss, bulletin-color, oil-based, enamel paint. Between these coats, we rough-up the surface with synthetic steel wool. This helps the second coat's adhesion, and improves its coverage.

Dusting the finial and the upper portion of the cap with kaolin USP prevents goldleaf from adhering where it shouldn't (known as "shiners"). Also, it eliminates the need to contaminate the size with pigment.

Because of the kaolin dusting, the black surface looks gray. When pure size is applied, it appears that one is painting with high-gloss black paint. The size becomes perfectly discernible.

For simple elegance, we only apply size to the finial ball, the top rim and the cap's top base rim.

We use 23.5k, looseleaf gold and a gilder's tip to adorn the finial ball. Patent goldleaf doesn't work well on curved surfaces.

For the flat rims, use patent goldleaf, which we cut into pieces of appropriate widths using a paper cutting board.

done to embellish tastefully and aesthetically, not garishly.

Kaolin is key

Before applying the size (the goldleaf adhesive), we dust the finial and the upper portion of the cap with pure kaolin USP. This allows us to use size in its pure, unadulterated state by eliminating the common practice of adding paint or other pigment or foreign material. Kaolin particles are 0.0002mm in diameter, which is 1,500 times smaller than a talc particle. These infinitesimal particles dissolve in the size and allow us to see where it's applied. It looks as though one is applying gloss black against the grey-dusted area.

In addition to keeping the size uncontaminated, and providing visibility while sizing, kaolin prevents goldleaf from adhering in

To help the cap's flat surface reflect light more attractively, we etch the goldleaf by engine turning with velvet-covered cotton.

The tastefully decorated fin/caps were ready to be taken to the installation site on a (borrowed) cafeteria tray.

unwanted spots. Simply put, kaolin prevents "shiners." We always use slow size; it cures for 24 hours or longer because it produces a more brilliant, longer-lasting luster. For the ball on the finial, we use loose-leaf gold; for the two striped areas, we cut patent leaf to size using a paper-cutting board.

On the cap stripe, we burnish the surface with a power-tool bit sheathed with velvet-wrapped cotton balls, which is called engine turning. Because the finials' balls and stripes are curved surfaces, light will reflect

After spreading a coating of adhesive silicone on the inner cap's bare wood, we attach the fin/cap to the top of the detailed post, which is also bare to ensure a good bond.

The finished product. Our thorough process helps finials play a strong complementary role in a post-and-panel sign's effectiveness.

widely off the gold highlights. On flat surfaces, such as the cap stripe, engine turning captures and reflects light and causes the flat-gold surface to dazzle.

When the gilding is complete, we remove the kaolin with blue shop towels and prep-application fluid. Finally, we polished the decorated finials with liquid wax. After transporting them to the installation site on a cafeteria tray, we use silicone adhesive to attach them to the posts as a final finial touch for all to admire. ■