

FRAMING

Picture Frame Makeover—Easy Gold Leafing

Nearly everyone probably has an old wooden frame that is in dire need of a "facelift." Although there are many finishes that could be applied, one of the most dynamic and striking is shiny gold. While there are paints that offer a great range of gold finishes, some lack the fire and excitement of gold leaf or any metallic leaf application. For this reason, if you want a bright, fresh, gold finish, your choice could be actual karat gold leaf or the less expensive choice of composite leaf. Visually, there is very little difference between the two and, frankly, as a learning experience, composite leaf offers a great introduction to the processes. It is handled exactly the same as karat gold leaf as far as application. One must understand, however, that there are some differences between karat and composition metal leaves.

The first and the most noted difference between the two is the cost. Karat leaf costs are based on the price of gold, an average of around \$35 to \$55 for a standard "book" of 23-karat gold leaf. Second, composite leaf will tarnish with time. Sealers can be used to delay the process, but karat leaf is the only sure way to avoid eventual tarnish. The third difference between karat and composite leaf is their size. Karat leaf comes in books of 25 pieces that are roughly 3½ inches square. Composite leaf has 25 pieces per book and is 5½ inches square.

Metals that can be used in leaf form include silver (more pure than sterling silver), aluminum, copper, and variegated composition. Silver leaf of a superior grade is best used in glasswork, where it can be properly backed up and protected from the air. As a framing material, it will tarnish quite quickly due to its high silver content and the reaction of that silver to the atmosphere. Aluminum is a better choice for framing applications and wherever a silver color is desired. Copper leaf is 100% copper and gradually changes to a natural patina if left unsealed. Creatively, it will react to certain atmospheric chemicals and to handling, but these changes can be real attributes. Consider experimenting with household chemicals like ammonia or salt to achieve some exaggerated results.

There are a myriad of special tools available to assist in the application. Some are very valuable and some are less necessary unless you intend to do a lot of gold leaf work. One important assist is a gilder's tip lifting tool. It is a very thin 4" wide "brush" made of pure squirrel hair that is especially made for lifting and laying gold leaf on a prepared surface. It works with static electricity and gently lays the fragile gold or composite sheet in place. Using one's fingertips is very difficult, as the leaf will adhere to any moisture or oil on the fingertips, and the leaf is so light and wispy that it nearly floats from your fingertips. The gilder's tip holds the sheet and allows its placement in exact locations.

Surface preparation, prior to laying on of gold or composite leaf, is essential. There are a number of very easy steps that you might choose to use. In the case

of your picture frame, as much old finish should be removed as is possible. This can be done by stripping or sanding. Clean residue from the stripped/sanded wood, repair damage, and then apply a base coat. This base coat could be a rich oxide red (characteristic of the wonderful Chinese gold leaf work). Black base coat is another possibility, also used in quality gold leaf work and very popular with contemporary frame manufacturers. Some leafing experts use a yellow ochre color as a base coat, allowing a more golden tone to show where there might be a crack or skip in the leaf application.

Adhesives that join the gold/composite leaf to the frame include a variety of materials. Gloss acrylic painting medium can be used to adhere gold leaf for small repairs, but does not allow a large enough window of work time to be a practical adhesive application for large projects. Another option includes quick gold leaf sizing. When it is brushed on, it stays tacky for one to three hours, so you must work quickly. Slow gold size gets tacky immediately and will remain workable and "sticky" for about 15 hours. And last is gold leaf size, which is tacky within two minutes of application and stays workable for about 36 hours. One of these choices should afford you a workable window of time.

Once the adhesive is ready and the gold leaf is set into place, it should be lightly pounced with a soft brush. Squirrel hair or camel hair brushes do very well. Work the gold leaf into the crevices and details of the frame. Piecing the leaf may be necessary, as it tears easily and might not fit readily into some of the dimensions of the profile. Once the leaf is in place, rub it gently with a soft cloth. This will effect a polish on the surface and remove any excess leaf that may be lingering.

Don't hesitate because you think gold leafing is too difficult. As you see, it can be more direct and quicker than some sources would indicate. The bottom line is the results you get, and with a little practice you can do it!