

Gilding Factsheet

Gilding is a traditional technique used for applying fine gold leaf or powder to solid surfaces such as wood, stone or metal to give a thin coating of gold. A gilded object is often described as gilt.

There are two types of gilding; water gilding and oil gilding. Oil gilding uses a tacky glue to make the gold leaf stick, water gilding uses layers of gesso and bole to bind the gold onto the surface.

Gold leaf is made by rolling thin sheets of pure gold in presses between vellum (animal skin paper). The thin sheets are then placed between a Goldbeaters' Skin (made from a calf's intestine) and flattened with hammers. The hammering is carried out until the gold is about 1/300,000 of an inch thick.

Gilders tips are thin flat brushes made from badger or camel hair, the hairs are held together between two pieces of cardboard. These tips are used to pick up the gold leaf from the cushion and transfer it to the work. The gold is so fine that it can not be picked up by hand. Sometimes tips need a little bit of natural grease to help them lift the gold leaf, so the gilder might run the tip across their own hair to pick up some grease.

Gilders knives have long, narrow and straight blades like table knives. The cutting edge is not too sharp and is free from notches and rust.

Burnishers are made from agate stone and are shaped like dog's teeth. The stones are set into a wooden handle. They are used to make the gold leaf shine by rubbing or polishing the gold once it has been applied to the object.

Clay bole is a mixture made from hydrous aluminium silicate, glue and water and is used to bind the gold leaf to the surface that is being decorated. It is brushed over the gesso that is ready for gilding. There are many different shades of bole clay including ochre, red, black, orange, blue and green. Depending on which colours of bole you use you will get a different tone or effect under the gold leaf. In the 18th century it was traditional to use one layer of yellow bole and three layers of red bole which gave the gold a nice warm colour.

The **Gilders cushion** is an oblong, rectangular board that usually measures 9 inches by 6 inches. It is covered in calf skin that has been stretched over two or three layers of flannel (a soft woven fabric). Underneath the board are straps for fingers and thumb so that it can be held easily and securely. One end has a screen of parchment (paper made from animal skin) which stops the gold leaf blowing away.

Gesso is a traditional mix of an animal skin binder, usually rabbit-skin glue, chalk and white pigment. It is used as a base on surfaces as it can be carved to create fine detail before gold leaf is applied.

