

How to Gild Leather

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Sizing

You'll also need an adhesive or glue to stick the leaves to the leather. This glue is called size. A commercial-based size works perfectly. In addition, cheesecloth or other lint-free cloth, a stiff artist's brush to apply the leaf and some Q-tips to remove excess gold leaf are needed, as are a pair of square-ended rather than pointed tweezers for moving and positioning the bits of gold leaf.

Dye The Leather First

In order for the gild leaf to adhere, the background of the leather carving should be dyed first. Alternatively, you can apply dye to the entire carving. Either way results in interesting effects once you apply the under-finish. By dyeing only the background, you preserve much of the fine detail. Alternatively, the texture and grain of the leather can be enhanced by the extra wetting involved in dyeing the entire area.

Go Slowly!

Apply the under-finish only to those areas that will receive the gilding. Go slowly and carefully here. If you make a mistake, wait until the under-finish is tacky, and then gently scrape it off with the point of an x-acto knife. Wait until the under-finish is completely dry before applying the size.

Getting Tacky

Glues vary in the length of time they require to achieve a tacky state and remain workable, and this time is generally indicated on the tube or bottle. When gilding a small carving, you probably need glue that is tacky within an hour and remains workable for another twenty minutes or so. Use a small brush to

apply the glue only to those areas that received the under-finish. Then check for tackiness, bearing in mind that the glue might reach that state earlier than indicated on the bottle, depending upon environmental variables such as heat and humidity.

Go for the Gild

Now it's time to apply the leaf. Wash your hands to remove any oils that can affect adherence, and carefully lift the sheet with the tweezers and your hands. Do this in a draft-free room, as the leaf is thinner than tissue-paper. If you need to trim the sheet, use a dull butter knife or your finger nail, placing the leaf on a pad of buckskin. Then take the sheet and apply it over the area that has been sized, patting it down with a wad of cheesecloth, gently at first, then gradually increasing the pressure, pressing the leaf into the carving.

Use an artist's brush to tamp the leaf into the detail of the carving. A stiff brush, ¼ to ½ inch wide works well. Pay attention to the edges, making sure they are well tamped down for a nice finish. You can brush the excess bits of leaf away, saving them in a jar for touch-ups later. Brush along the edges until all the pieces that didn't adhere are swept away.

The Final Touches

You can now rub the gold leaf with a soft cloth to bring out the burnish and smooth any wrinkles. Once the glue is completely dry, you can rub the gilding a little more vigorously to achieve an antique appearance. This will rub away some of the gold leaf, revealing the sizing and antique under-finish. Don't overdo it though, and rub only on the high spots of the carving by rubbing in a line across those high parts and ridges. An antique finish can then be applied, followed by a lacquer or clear finish to protect the leaf from wear and tarnish.

Tools to Use

- Gold (or other metal alloy) leaf
- Antique under-finish
- Antique finish (Leather Glow)
- Leather top finish (Super Sheen)
- Cheesecloth or other lint-free cloth
- Glue
- Square tweezers, artist's brush
- Q-tips

- Lacquer or clear finish
- Dull butter knife

Summary

- Dye the leather to be gilded and/or surrounding areas
- Apply an under-finish to the areas to be gilded
- Apply glue to the under-finish; wait until tacky before gilding
- Pat the gilding down, gently at first, then more firmly into the carving
- Buff the gilded area with a soft cloth
- Apply an antique finish, followed by a lacquer

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