

Put the power of gold leaf to work on your signs

Nothing matches its appeal, beauty and durability

By Mike Facemire

Gold is a natural marvel. It has many properties that make it unique. First and foremost, it is the most light reflective substance in the world. This is the factor that makes gold so popular and so valuable. Everyone likes the beauty of gold, but few understand why. If you are wearing a gold band on your finger, sit in a room with very subdued light. After your eyes acclimate, look at your ring and notice that it is reflecting whatever light there is. Polished brass will do the same, but not to the same degree, and of course, brass will tarnish, where gold, a noble metal, will not.

Second, gold is the most malleable and ductile substance in the world. This means that it can be made into extremely thin sheets, approximately three-millionths of an inch thick. Stack up 500 sheets of gold leaf and it will be about equal in thickness to a single sheet of paper. Even that thin, it holds together and is flexible enough to apply to intricate contours such as carved picture frames, architectural filigree and, of course, dimensional sign letters.

Now, let's look at how gold is used for sign work. There are two techniques used in our field: water and surface gilding. Water gilding, the way gold is applied to glass, uses a film of gelatin dissolved in water to hold the gold leaf

to the inside or back of a pane of glass. The graphics are painted on the film of gold leaf in reverse, then the excess gold around them is gently removed.

Glass gilding is the domain of some of the finest craftsmen in the history of sign work. The late Stephen Parish, the great Al Grand, my dear friend and mentor Punch Belvin, as well as notable Letterheads such as Noel Weber, the late Rick Glawson (master of everything gold) and another mentor, Dusty Yaxley, use a variety of techniques too numerous to mention to create museum-quality signs on glass.

But for this discussion, let's look at surface gilding, the other common use of gold leaf for signs. For vehicle lettering, carved and sandblasted signs, and flat sign panels, a varnish size is applied to the surface, allowed to tack up, then gold leaf is laid on the nearly dry size.

As I see it, there are three types of surface gilding, and I've included a few photos to show them and how they are affected by light. (The photos were shot from the same angles for the sake of comparison.) First is simply applying gold leaf to a flat surface and burnishing it. This is used on vehicles, flat substrates and sandblasted signs with raised letters. This is nice, but the performance



Here's flat burnished gold, photographed from two angles. At some angles, the gold can appear very dark as the example at right shows.



The performance of flat gold can be improved by using a burnishing effect such as engine turning, shown here. The example at right shows how it is more reflective at the same angle that was quite dark in the previous example.



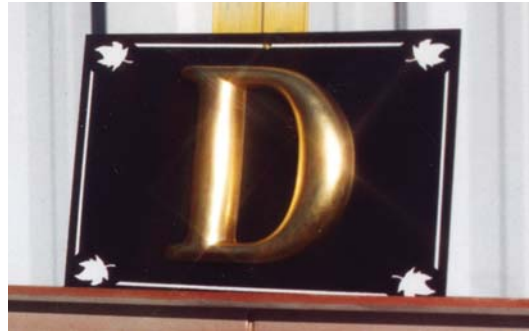
Prismatic burnishing is another effect that makes flat gold leaf graphics more visible from all angles. I showed how to do it in *Creating a convex effect with gold leaf* in the January/February 1988 issue of *SignCraft*.



Incised letters (carved into a substrate) when gilded, create angled surfaces to reflect the light, adding to the dimensional effect.



Gilded raised prismatic letters do the same thing, creating angled surfaces to reflect the light, increasing their effectiveness.



My favorite is gilded round-faced letters and graphics, because of the constant transition of highlights and shadows no matter what angle they are seen from.

of the gold depends on the angle and direction of the light source. Flat surface gold is improved by tooling the gold, such as engine turning or other burnishing techniques.

The second type of surface gilding is applied to carved or beveled letters. Study these letters and you will see that the gold identifies the facets in the carved or beveled letters, making more defined highlights and shadows. These letters aren't nearly as dependent on the angle of the light source.

The third type (and my favorite) is round-faced letters. Notice how the gold makes a

constant transition of highlights and shadows, regardless of the angle of light source. So what does all this mean? If your client is looking for a sign that can be read, there are many options. But if they understand the value of a sign that will be noticed, they should consider using the amazing power of gold. •❧



Mike Facemire operates Gold Leaf Letters [www.goldleafletters, 877-233-4587], a wholesale supplier of gilded graphics, and Pro Signs, a commercial sign shop, in Port Richey, Florida.

There's more on www.signcraft.com

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- n **Creating a convex effect with gold leaf** by Mike Facemire, January/February 1988
- n **Creating prismatic gold leaf lettering** by Bruce Deveau, January/February 1991

Why do gold leaf signs cost more? Three points to remember when selling gold leaf signs

It does cost more to incorporate a gold leaf finish in a sign, but it delivers much more value. You can buy many other types of signs that are cheaper in initial cost than a gold leaf sign. But choosing a gold leaf sign isn't a buying decision to be made on the dollars and cents of the initial cost. It is the place to look if you want great value for your money.

To me, the three key benefits of gold leaf are its natural appeal, its power to attract attention and its remarkable durability. There are plenty of other benefits, too—including that it connotes stability and quality.

n **Gold has almost a magical appeal to the human eye.** It picks up reflected light and comes to life as no other material or finish can. That's why we use it for jewelry. Gold makes something deep in the viewer's brain say, "Wow—gold!"

Gold has captivated mankind since its discovery. There's been no end of wars and conquests and train heists for it. It's always been the symbol of prestige and wealth and power. There is no imitation or substitute for real gold.

n **A gold leaf finish naturally attracts attention**—and that's what we want signs to do. On a curved surface this effect is exaggerated even further. It's a dynamic finish. Even when illuminated at night it picks up other reflected light and draws our eye.

n **A gold leaf finish is exceptionally durable**, because it reflects UV light and doesn't oxidize. It's not unusual for gold leaf signs to be around for 20 or 30 years. Properly maintained gold signs on glass can last almost indefinitely.

Most of the things that people buy are stock items—right off the shelf. We may get to choose the color of our shirt or new car, but it's not custom made for us. We're not accustomed to buying custom-made products. So one of the first things to get across in the sales process is that this gold leaf 3-D sign is custom made, tailored to your business and your specific need.

If a customer has seen a gold leaf sign and comes to you to buy one, they're already sold on the power of gold. If not, you'll have to be prepared to present the benefits of gold leaf. Good samples are essential. You can't expect the prospective customer to know what you're talking about or to buy on the strength of your description. Seeing is believing, so you need something for them to see.

After 20 years of selling gold leaf signs, I've heard countless stories from customers who have seen a significant increase in their business as the result of their new gold leaf signs. They're really gratified by the results. I know how powerful gold leaf signs can be from what I've seen them deliver to customers

You can't sell it to everyone, but there is a significant market for this work. And the fact that every other sign out there isn't a gold leaf sign makes the jobs you do even more appealing. —Mike Facemire