

SHOULD CONSERVATORS REGILD THE LILY? or ON THE ETHICS OF GILDING CONSERVATION

by Elisabeth Cornu, Assoc. Conservator, Objects
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Gilt objects, and the process of gilding, have a tremendous appeal in the art community--perhaps not least because gold is a very impressive and shiny currency, and perhaps also because the technique of gilding has largely remained unchanged since Egyptian times. Gilding restorers therefore have enjoyed special respect in the art community because they manage to bring back the shine to old objects and because they continue a very old and valuable craft.

As a result there has been a strong temptation among gilding restorers/conservators to preserve the process of gilding rather than the gilt objects themselves. This is done by regilding, partially or fully, deteriorated gilt surfaces rather than attempting to preserve as much of the original surface as possible. Such practice may be appropriate in some cases, but it always presupposes a great amount of historic knowledge of the gilding technique used with each object, including such details as the thickness of gesso layers, the strength of the gesso, the type of bole, the tint and karatage of gold leaf, and the type of distressing or glaze used. To illustrate this point, I am asking you to exercise some of the imagination for which museum conservators are so famous for, and to visualize some historic objects which I will list and discuss. This will save me much time in showing slides or photographs.

Gilt wooden objects in museums can be broken down into several subcategories:

- 1) Polychromed and gilt sculptures, altars
Examples: baroque church altars, often with polychromed sculptures, some of which are entirely gilt.
- 2) Gilt decorative arts objects
Examples: small carved and gilt boxes (16th cen. Italian reliquary boxes), wall sconces (18th cen. French, for example); looking glasses, mirrors (American Girandole mirror, for example); carved stands and pedestals for flower bouquets.
- 3) Furniture
Examples: armchairs, settees; tables (partially or entirely gilt).
- 4) Architectural Elements
Examples: moldings on walls, ceilings, doors (Period rooms) mirror consoles, built-in elements into walls.
- 5) Picture frames.
distinction: frames made for the original work of art (period frames); frames made later as an accessory to the work of art.

As mentioned earlier, the general approach to the conservation treatment of deteriorated gilt wooden surfaces has been quite often to partially or entirely regild--often in such a way that the restoration is not perceptible to the curator's or museum visitor's eye. The process of gilding/gold leaving is a very satisfying one: after preparing the ground with gesso and bole, the gold leaf is laid down very methodically, sheet after sheet, and after waiting the appropriate drying time, the object is burnished until it glitters, and eventually it is toned down to the appropriate surface appearance. The gilding restorer therefore

gains a tremendous amount of satisfaction from performing this work. However, should we not be more careful when approaching these deteriorated surfaces and, prior to starting conservation work, research the historic technique used: thickness of gesso, exact preparation of gesso, what type of clay used in the bole, what binder for the clay, how thick the gold leaf was, what tint; and additionally, how the gilt surface was distressed or coated after the burnishing process? Modern gilding restorers frequently have less professional preparation in this field as compared to the five-year apprenticeship gilders undergo in Europe or England--and therefore the standards of regilding have suffered tremendously. One could say that the entire goal of preserving the object, or even the process of gilding, has suffered as a result. Let us now examine the individual categories listed and discuss the appropriate conservation approaches:

1) Polychromed sculptures, altars: In Europe, polychromed sculptures and altars are generally being conserved by paintings conservators, or by sculpture conservators working closely with paintings conservators. There is another profession, that of a KIRCHENRESTAURATOR or “CHURCH RESTORER”, which practices restoration by repainting and regilding sculptures; however this profession is well out of the realm of the true museum conservator’s ethics and standards of practice. Polychromed sculpture conservators have long ago learnt not to patchgild missing areas on sculptures: instead they have developed techniques of stabilizing loose gilding flakes (with sturgeon glue, animal glue or a synthetic adhesive), sometimes filling areas of losses with gesso or synthetic gesso, and the carefully inpainting these areas, mostly with water color. Gold leaf is not used very often, and if so, in conjunction with the documented practices of the old gilding process used for this object. As a result, the restorations are well integrated into the surface appearance of the sculpture, but are recognizable as restorations. This, I would think, is a preferred way to conserve deteriorated gilt wooden surfaces of many objects.

2) Gilt Decorative Objects: This is one of the categories of objects which conservators are most frequently called on to preserve. Were you called on to conserve and treat a 16th cen. wooden box from the Medici family, the gilt surface of which has been worn, you would most likely not even conceive of stripping this object of its gilt surface and gesso and regilding it. Its surface is a valuable and important component of the object, and should be preserved with the same ethical standards as the structural parts of the object. Picture an American looking glass, with a wooden frame and a finely carved strand of gilt leaves on both sides of the mirror glass--would you then simply regild the deteriorated surfaces of the gilt leaves. Just as you may not think about replacing its mercury-silver gilt mirror, you may well not wish to regild the important surfaces of the carved strand of leaves. Instead, you may choose the approach which stabilizes the gilding: clean the gilt surface, fill some of the missing areas if need be, and integrate the surface aesthetically. This should be the museum conservator’s approach. The working techniques to achieve such a result will be discussed another time.

3) Furniture: Again, this is a category of objects which frequently requires gilding conservation work. I would make a distinction between furniture which is still in use and furniture which is being exhibited in museums. Many furniture conservators in private practice are called upon to make repairs on objects which are in use. I can see some justification in reapplying new gold leaf, and doing partial regilding on such objects in conjunction with the researched techniques used in the original manufacture. For museum furniture, however, it is appropriate to stop and think before stripping legs of their gilt surface simply because the janitor’s broom has put several nicks into the surface of a chair or table; or to strip arm rests

because there is flaking gilding. It is very difficult to do good patch-gilding on flat surfaces, or to fill missing areas and to integrate the surface aesthetically; however, as with advances in the structural areas of furniture conservation, it is time to consider alternatives to total regilding of armrests, chairbacks or legs of furniture. Instead, conservators might perform more preventive care with furniture: placing the objects into good humidity/light situations, away from janitorial brooms and public access, so as to control their deterioration better.

4) **Architectural elements:** In this category we place period rooms. Again, the intent and use of the rooms play an important role in their preservation technique. If a room is installed in a museum for exhibition purposes, then as much of the original moldings and gilt surfaces should be preserved, in the manner described earlier; if a room is subjected to heavy traffic by tourists such as in European castles, perhaps the preservation of the technique of gilding used, i.e., frequent regilding, may be appropriate. Undoubtedly, there will be other parts added to such rooms--adjustments in ceiling moldings or corner panels, often reproduced to make the room fit into a museum gallery-- which require the skilled hand of a regilder.

5) **Picture frames:** Here a distinction is made between frames made specifically for a work of art, or a period frame adjusted to fit this work of art, and frames which are made later as accessories to works of art. In the first instance, the frame is an important art object and deserves the full conservation treatment afforded all gilt wooden art objects: careful preservation of the original gilt surface, aesthetic conservation/restoration of areas of deterioration in the surface. For frames made as accessories to paintings, particularly hundreds of years after the date of the original work of art, I feel that the gilding restorer should be given a free hand in exercising the much-beloved art of regilding or patchgilding. The question will remain, however: at what point is a frame considered a historic document and should be treated as such? Obviously, each frame will require some research and the conservator will then be able to judge what technique is most applicable in its treatment.

In conclusion, you may well think why it took this long to tell museum conservators what could have been summed up in a short sentence: "Please think carefully before patchgilding or regilding deteriorated surfaces, and apply more conservative techniques if possible." Perhaps by presenting this subject in a lengthier format, more conservators will stop and think, or rethink, their conservation approach to gilt wooden objects. Thank you.