



Artists with the golden touch

Layers of gleaming gold leaf on architectural detail has lifted rooms into the sublime for centuries. Matthew Dennison talks to leading exponents of this glittering craft

Photographs by Stephen Brooks



Top left, left and bottom left: The volutes, ceilings and cornices of Holkham Hall have been enhanced by gilding. Above: The Royal Barge Gloriana was intricately decorated by Paul Humphreys

nice frieze of gilded peacocks probably designed by Matthew Cotes Wyatt. Gilded wall sconces and giltwood furniture augment the glittering impact. 'It is the most magnificent room I ever saw,' wrote Harriet Arbutnot in 1829, 'fitted up in the style of Louis XIV in panels of blue silk damask and the most beautiful carving and gilding.'

A breathtaking visual punch of this magnitude has long been the purpose of much interior gilding. Tasked with the restoration of Spencer House in 1985 by Lord Rothschild, David Mlinaric recognised that the series of rooms of parade on the first floor of this splendid London palace demanded a bravura treatment to allow them to appear at their best in the evening. 'Their gilding, as well as their colours,' wrote Mr Mlinaric, 'would need to be affirmative and extrovert and perfectly balanced.'

Any visitor who has paused to gaze at the Great Room ceiling, in which Mr Mlinaric retained traces of original gilding, ensuring they toned harmoniously with newer elements,

can testify to the extrovert affirmation of this magnificent scheme.

Restoration projects like that at Spencer House, combining old and new gilding, demonstrate the extent to which it remains a traditional craft, carried out today much as it would have been centuries ago. Unlike paint, which has changed in consistency, sheen and composition and which reacts noticeably to long-term exposure to light and environmental conditions, metal leaf has not altered. Nor does gold leaf tarnish, allowing it ideally to retain much of its original freshness and lustre.

Today, gold leaf is widely available, in different thicknesses, carat values, weights and colours. Individual gilders have their favourite suppliers and materials. Paul Humphreys, of Hare & Humphreys, learned to gild three decades ago with Campbell Smith & Co, the Victorian firm responsible for interiors in the Palace of Westminster, as well as High Gothic schemes for Lord Bute at Cardiff Castle and Mount Stuart. His commissions have included the restoration of Windsor Castle



Rupert Coke grew up at Holkham Hall and has been gilding since 2006

following fire damage in 1992 and the Royal Barge *Gloriana*, which, in 2012, led the Thames River Pageant of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations.

'Different manufacturers make vastly different qualities of gold,' he cautions. 'At the moment, the cheapest source of gold leaf is China, but the quality isn't a patch on Italian or German gold. If you're gilding heavy ornament 65ft up on a ceiling, then the cheaper gold is perfectly adequate, but for flat mouldings at eye level, the best gold is always preferable.'

Mr Humphreys believes that, for most applications, single-thickness leaf is absolutely fine. 'We only use extra-thick or double-thickness gold leaf on external gilding of weather vanes, clocks, gates and railings, where the gilding is exposed to the elements and the inaccessibility of the gilded elements means the treatment needs to last a long time.'

For the layman, part of the miracle of gilding lies in the painstaking application of metal finer than a hair on one's head to a tacky, treated surface, often of considerable textural complexity. 'Many gilders generate static to



SEDUCTION by decor is among the themes of Jean-François de Bastide's novel of 1762, *La Petite Maison*. The little house in question is a love-nest on the banks of the Seine, belonging to the Marquis de Trémicour, where he overcomes a courtesan called Mélie. He dazzles her with a sequence of ravishing Rococo interiors, dimly lit and delicately scented, beginning with a circular *salon*. 'The panelling is lilac coloured, with fine looking glasses,' writes de Bastide. 'Its beauty is heightened by the shine of the gilding.'

Since ancient times, the shine of gilding has heightened beautiful interiors. More recently, architects and interior designers have used gilding to highlight three-dimensional details, from the carving of a cornice to fluted pilasters. The use of wafer-thin metal leaf, applied over a layer of adhesive called size, emphasises pattern and texture and, due to its reflective qualities—bouncing, trapping and refracting light—animates a space.

In the century before the invention of electric lighting, interiors such as Trémicour's glittered in the flickering illumination of candles, tongues of flame glinting off accents of gold, bronze or silver. Gilding is a luxurious treatment. For award-winning architect Clare Craven, it imparts 'the hope of light, opulence and scarcity: a visual feast'.

Little wonder, then, that in Britain, gilding has traditionally been associated with the grandest interiors. The Hon Rupert Coke, a gilder since 2006, who grew up at Holkham Hall in Norfolk, now the home of his brother—the 8th Earl of Leicester—associates gilding with 'lavish opulence'. 'Not only is gold leaf very beautiful, it also expresses wealth and power,' he says.

Unsurprisingly, his commissions have included schemes at Holkham. 'In its sumptuous and historic setting, to gild a dado rail, dulled by centuries of human touch, to its original quality, is extremely satisfying,' Mr Coke explains. 'The effect of gilding depends on the setting. On pier glasses, the splendour of gold leaf sparkles through reflections; against the soft warmth of tapestries, its lustre provides contrast.'

The Georgian Group's chairman Christopher Boyle (*My Favourite Painting, November 16*) concurs: 'Even in small doses, gilding imparts distinction and elevates an interior



above the mundane. Used lavishly, it can take a room into the sublime.'

Up and down the country, rooms large and small testify to the truth of this statement, from the Norfolk House Music Room, in the British Galleries of the V&A, conserved and redecorated to its original condition by specialist historic decorating firm Hare & Humphreys, to the high-octane magnificence of the Elizabeth Saloon at Belvoir Castle.

Dating from the first quarter of the 19th century, Belvoir's grandest drawing room is lined with gilded *boiserie* of about 1735, removed from a Parisian town house, beneath a co-

Facing Page:
Dusting off the
excess gold.

Above: The
gilded statue
of Neptune at
The Ritz. *Right:*
Peter Smoker,
who has over-
seen the refurb-
ishment of the
hotel's elaborate
Louis XVI-style
interiors





make the metal leaf cling to the gilder's tip [a thin card set with bristles, often of squirrel hair], by rubbing the tip on their cheek,' explains Mr Humphreys. 'In this way, you also pick up oil from the skin, which helps the gold to adhere. Some gilders put a little Vaseline on their cheek to assist the process.'

It's a procedure that requires exactitude, patience and a steady hand. Peter Smoker, who, since 1995, has been responsible for refurbishment of the gilded Louis XVI-style interiors of The Ritz, admits: 'We have to close all windows and doors and turn off any air-conditioning or heating, because, as we laid a leaf, it would just blow away and, once you drop it on the floor, it's gone.'

It is also, inevitably, time-consuming. Regilding of the trelliswork ceiling of The Ritz's Palm Court took nine months: 'The work was done through the night, as we were serving tea there throughout the day.' For Peter Humphreys, work on the Green Drawing Room at Windsor Castle took 18 weeks and Rupert Coke once spent two months gilding a state room at Holkham.

In 2008, the Duchess of Northumberland commissioned the restoration of the State Drawing Room at Alnwick

Where to see glorious gilding

Alnwick Castle, Northumberland (01665 511100; www.alnwickcastle.com)

Chatsworth, Derbyshire (01246 565300; www.chatsworth.org)

Holkham Hall, Norfolk (01328 710227; www.holkham.co.uk)

Norfolk House Music Room, in the British Galleries of the V&A, London (020-7942 2000; www.vam.ac.uk)

Renishaw Hall, Nottinghamshire (01246 432310; www.renishaw-hall.co.uk)

Spencer House, London (020-7514 1958; www.spencerhouse.co.uk)

The Ritz Hotel, London (020-7493 8181; www.theritzlondon.com)


Castle, a mid-Victorian scheme by Giovanni Montiroli. Cleaning of Montiroli's elaborate *cinquecento*-style gilded timber ceiling, a symmetrical honeycomb of octagons, crosses and elongated hexagons, took a team of five specialists five weeks as part of the room's £200,000 overhaul.

Traditionally, English oil gilding, in which gold leaf is applied directly to an adhesive-treated surface, gave

a softer, duller effect than Continental water gilding, in which the leaf is applied over layers of gesso (a mixture of melted rabbit-skin glue and finely ground chalk) and bole (made from rabbit-skin glue mixed with clay).

In some instances, however, the brightness of the gilding is its particular recommendation. Devised by John Carr of York in 1782, the decoration of the Blue Drawing Room at Chatsworth in Derbyshire included designs for a gilded cornice and gilded pelmet swags. Over time, the gilding of the carved wooden pelmet swags was painted over, but the late Dowager Duchess of Devonshire oversaw their reinstatement. The replacement of gold paint with gold leaf, she commented, 'made all the difference in the world'.

More recently, the present Duke commissioned the regilding of exterior window frames on Chatsworth's south front. At nearby Renishaw Hall, the Dowager Lady Sitwell, although in her seventies, learned how to gild. Her projects included statues in Renishaw's Italianate garden as well as interior gilding.

Gilding, Christopher Boyle tells me, 'is the very apogee of decoration. It lifts the spirit in a way that no other treatment can'. 

Above: The exterior of Chatsworth House shows the brilliant effect gilding can have when combined with sunlight