



Handicraft Lesson

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For our handicraft lesson, we will be gilding a picture frame. Working with gold leaf is an intricate and sometimes tedious process that requires a great deal of patience. We suggest practicing on a smaller frame or object, and not one as ornate as the frame we used in this project.

For younger students wanting to learn, simply use a canvas or watercolor paper. Let them “paint” a design on it with glue or ModPodge. Then, as it begins to feel tacky, lay the gold leaf over it to produce their gilded design. The same process of brushing found in the following instructions will apply.

"I've filled him with the Spirit of God, giving him skill and know-how and expertise in every kind of craft to create designs ... he's an all-around craftsman."

~ Exodus 31:3-5

Gilded Frame



A Brief History of Gilding

Gilding is the art of decorating objects with thin sheets of real gold, called “gold leaf.” Artists could press this delicate gold onto wood, stone, metal, or even paper to make things look rich and glowing. Because gold doesn’t tarnish, it always looked fresh and full of light—perfect for religious art and fancy decorations.

Gilding wasn’t new in the Renaissance Era. People had used it in ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, and all through the Middle Ages. In medieval Europe, churches were filled with gold-covered statues, altarpieces, and even handwritten books with glowing golden letters (illuminated manuscripts). Gold symbolized heavenly light and God’s eternal presence.

However, during the Renaissance, artists began painting more realistic scenes with perspective and natural backgrounds, so huge golden backdrops faded out of style. But gilding didn't disappear. Instead, it was used for halos, highlights, fancy frames, wedding chests, and even palace ceilings.

Renaissance craftsmen had strict training in guilds, learning techniques like water gilding (polished shine) and oil gilding (softer glow). In fact, in workshops of that time, gilders had to train for years before they were allowed to touch real gold leaf. Mistakes were costly since gold was one of the most expensive materials.

Gold continued to represent both the divine and worldly power, especially for wealthy patrons like the Medici family and the popes, who wanted art that showed their importance.

By the High Renaissance, artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo used less gold, relying on natural light and shadow instead. But gilding stayed popular for frames, furniture, and interior decoration, leading to the dramatic golden designs of the Baroque era.

In short, gilding in the Renaissance shifted from dominating paintings to enhancing details, balancing sacred symbolism with displays of wealth and beauty.

Supplies Needed:

- Small object (frame, craft box, etc.) **NOTE:** We do *not* recommend a frame as ornate as this one for beginners.
- Imitation Gold Leaf sheets
- Adhesive Size (water-based)
- Clear Acrylic Sealer
- Paint brushes in various sizes and stiffness
- Tweezers
- Paper towel or baby wipes
- Cover for work surface



Instructions:

1. Using a medium-sized paint brush, apply a thin, even coat of the adhesive size to your piece. Make sure to absorb any puddles of the adhesive left with a paper towel.
2. Allow the size to dry for at least 30 minutes to an hour (follow the instructions on the brand you use). The size is ready when it is clear and no longer milky in appearance. It should feel tacky to the touch, but not leave a residue. (**TIP:** Keep baby wipes handy.)



3. Using tweezers, gently lift a sheet of gold leaf along with the tissue paper protecting it. The leaf is fragile and can easily rip, crumble, or crinkle up.
4. Carefully, "float" each sheet of gold leaf over your frame until it is completely covered, slightly overlapping the sheets.



5. Use a soft mop/makeup brush or flat brush to press the leaf into crevices and along edges. Lightly tamp, but don't scrub.
6. Use small scraps, called "skewings," to fill bare spots while the size is still tacky.
7. After a few minutes, use a clean, soft brush to whisk away excess and loose bits. The design will look crisp and shiny.



8. Allow the leaf to set per your adhesive size's instructions (often 1-2 hours for water-based; longer for oil-based). Don't handle the surface yet.
9. Apply a clear acrylic sealer to protect your beautiful gilded piece.

