

Faux Tortoiseshell Frames

By Mark Guthrie and Peter Werkhoven

Adding a touch of nature is one of the newest things on the front line of gilded frames



1

Interviewed in a 1995 New York Times article, the internationally renowned interior designer Mario Buatta observed; "All of a sudden, clients want gold. They are gilding everything. Mirrors. Picture frames. Drapery poles and finials. The legs of ottomans." Paraphrasing the Times columnist, the "guilty 80s" had become the "guilty 90s."

For those selling anything gilt during the 1990s, there was a profound surge in sales during that bullish decade. Of course, many of those sales came from the agonizing process of a) luring clients with beautifully gilt samples, b) repeating (endlessly) an educational speech about the production stages of gesso, bole, and gold leafing, and how wonderfully historic the process is, and c) watching clients' eyes roll back in their heads when they heard the price for their oh-so-special frame.

Not all clients in the 1990s, going through that process, ended up with gilt frames, but a significantly increasing number did. Moreover, because of that decade's heightened interest in hand-crafted framing and the diligence of quality-conscious framers across the country (spreading the gospel of the gilt surface), framers are all now enjoying the benefits from a clientele with a finely tuned

awareness of and appreciation for the age-old art form. If asked if today's clientele has a better understanding of the quality, fabricating process, and cost for a hand-made, gold-leafed frame than they did in the 1990's," most dealers in gilt frames would say "yes."

Today some maturation has occurred in the level of sophistication in the market. More clients seek out hand-made gilt frames. They also know enough to request specific attributes of detail and finish and have a more accurate expectation of the cost.

Despite having created an appetite, sellers of gilded frames still find themselves subject to the capricious nature of the public. They want something fresh.

What's the best way to anticipate the next hot thing? As evidenced by Mr. Buatta's statements, even he cannot dictate public taste. He can only respond to trends and offer guidance. What he and his design colleagues can provide is an ability to interpret and discern client taste, then broadcast those findings.

This process goes on throughout the entire home décor segment. Pick up any home decorating magazine or a catalog or visit your closest design center where the decorator and the resource interact face-to-face. What you see is what the public wants to buy. And what they want is something familiar with a slightly updated twist that fits in with an over-arching popular theme.

Nature and Gilding

For the moment, the theme is "Back to Nature," which contains a wide range of sub-interpretations including historic, tropical, and ecologically green. And because the public prefers long affairs with each decorative theme (10 to 14 years is the life cycle of most carpet and drapery materials), this won't end for a while but will evolve slowly into the next closely related theme.

At *Ædicule*, our relationship with a decorator showroom, with which we have created a line of mirrors, has led to an answer to the call for gilded frames that include a specifically naturalistic look. Among a number of historic frame designs that offered viable solutions, the one material that has piqued the most interest is tortoiseshell.

The design community and their clientele are apt to respond positively when seeing tortoiseshell incorporated onto gilt frames for mirrors or for art. This decorative material might be seen as "rich and elegant" and "so old that it's new."

Faux Tortoiseshell

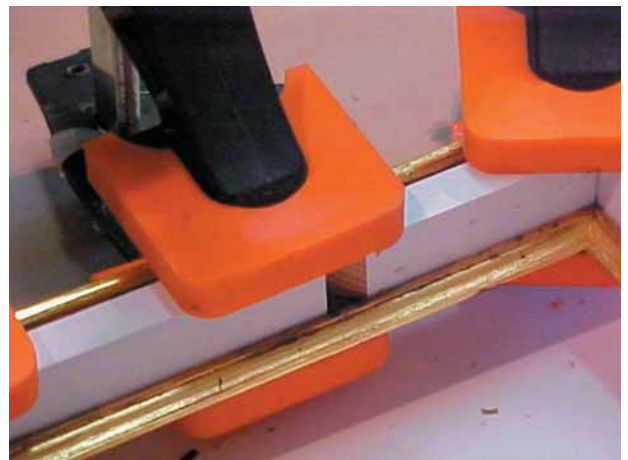
The problem is, of course, actually making tortoiseshell frames. Tortoiseshell is not a material that can be ordered. In 1973 the trade of tortoiseshell worldwide was banned under the



2



3



4

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. Sure, there are products available in the marketplace called “tortoiseshell,” such as guitar picks, eyeglass frames, and even painted effects. But none have the texture, luster, and workability of the original material. The challenge was to fabricate a satisfactory, replenishable substitute.

To replicate something, it helps to understand the original. Our research revealed many more interesting details, but here some fundamental points:

- Tortoiseshell has been a prized ornamental material from very early times. It was one of the highly esteemed treasures of the Far East brought to ancient Rome by way of Egypt. It was eagerly sought by wealthy Romans as a veneer for their rich furniture. In the seventeenth century it was most characteristically used in the elaborate inlaying of cabinet-work known as *bouille* furniture (after André Charles Bouille [1642-1732], a French cabinetmaker).
- Commercial tortoiseshell consisted of the exoskeletal scutes (plates) covering the bony carapace (outer shell) of the hawksbill turtle, the smallest of the sea turtles. The finest tortoiseshell was obtained from the Eastern Archipelago, particularly from the east coast of Celebes to New Guinea.
- The scutes of tortoiseshell are made of a horn-like matter called keratin, but it is harder, more brittle, and less fibrous than ordinary horn.
- Keratin, an extremely strong protein, is a major component of skin, hair, nails, hooves, horns, and the teeth of mammals. The amino acids that combine to form keratin have several unique properties. It can be inflexible and hard, like hooves, or soft, as is the case with skin.

Based on this research data, it was clear that this new material needed specific properties:

1. Weight, composition, and workability—It needed to feel and behave much like a thickened fingernail.
2. Surface texture—It should look as though it had been



5



6

worked with a rasp (as originally done), then smoothed in the finishing process.

3. Mottling pattern and color—It needed to have a naturally flowing exchange from the amber-colored base into deepening brown tones, with a random spotting throughout.

4. Luminosity and translucency—There should be a distinct three-dimensional quality to the material and a “glow” to the overall tones.

Making Tortoiseshell Frames

After much trial, error, and expense, we formulated a recipe that rendered a material that closely mirrored the original. Here is an account of the process in crafting a gilt frame with the new faux tortoiseshell (sorry, but key proprietary steps have been omitted). For this example, we selected two cassetta frames, which received the material well. One frame is made from oak; the other is basswood.

Preparation

After each frame had been cut and assembled, gesso was applied to the basswood frame. The oak frame was left raw. On both frames, ochre bole was applied to the panel, and red bole was applied to the top rail and sight edge. Red bole was continued to the sides of the gessoed frame.

Gilding

On the gessoed frame, the entire surface received 23K gold. For the oak frame, only the areas that had clay bole were gilt 23K. The panels that were to be covered in tortoiseshell were gilt to give an additional “glow” through to the viewer. On both frames, the top rail and sight edge were burnished.

First Finishing

The gilt areas needed to be “set” or protected during the final stages of tortoiseshell application and final patination. After the desired levels of distressing and rub-through were achieved, a thin layer of lacquer was applied to provide this protection.

Tortoiseshell Application

The material we fabricated behaved successfully as a veneer. From the sheet, strips were cut to fit each frame’s panel area.

As with original tortoiseshell, each strip was sectioned so as not to waste any of the material. Beautifully random pieces were placed onto each frame. The sectioned pieces were adhered in the same historic manner as originally done with animal hide glue, and then allowed to cure for several days.

Final Patination

After the surfaces had been covered with the necessary decoration, the final step was to add a sense of “age” to the frames. We used a combination of waxes, paints, and/or dried pigments to complete



the transformation.

Consulting with our colleagues in the design/decorating trade has been highly productive. For their clients, we have used this method on a number of frames, surrounding mirrors and artwork. Apparently, we have hit upon one of the next hot things. And, as you can imagine, that was only a beginning. We have now been asked to develop more products using exotic materials, including sheepskin and the skin of the manta ray (shagreen). The desire for nature seems to know no bounds—even when it's a good imitation. ■



Mark Guthrie, CPF, is a 30-year veteran of the framing industry and owner of Ædicule in San Francisco, CA. He provides consultation services to industry manufacturers and retailers and has served as vice president of sales for Abe Munn Picture Frames in New York City. His background also includes management of multi-store operations and ownership of Guthrie's Picture Framing in Houston, TX. He can be reached at ae@aedicule.com.



Peter Werkhoven is owner of Aedicule Fine Framemaking in San Francisco. Peter is originally from Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and moved to the U.S. a few years ago. His frames can be found in the Rijksmuseum, the Van Gogh Museum, as well as in the homes of many European collectors. He can be reached at pwerkhoven@comcast.net.