

# Hotelier & Hospitality Design

## Reimagining Gold in Contemporary Art 13th July 2020

As international art consultants, Artelier specialise in curating art for luxury hotel, residential, yacht and aviation projects. Artelier's approach to art consultancy is rooted in understanding each art project's unique context, in order to commission art that has a deeper significance and goes beyond interior design. Collaborating with truly original contemporary artists who are masters of their materials, Artelier seeks to provide artworks that speak to the past, whilst innovating for the present.

### The Universal Language of Gold

Across continents and cultures, gold has fascinated peoples for millennia - the rarity, physical properties and unusual beauty of this metal has led to its use in all manners of ancient artforms. It has been revered by widespread ancient civilisations as they all recognised the potential of its extraordinary physical characteristics: it is the only metal that does not tarnish with time, it is malleable and so is applicable to varied artforms, and it can be beaten out to create gold leaf. Gold's bright colour and natural reflective properties give it an ethereal glow when illuminated. These characteristics have inspired many civilisations to associate gold with the eternal, from Ancient Egypt to Byzantium, Buddhist China to Vedic India.

More than just a precious resource, gold holds a unique place in the cultural imagination. Its universal symbolism - which connects it simultaneously to the otherworldly and divine, as well as to power and material wealth - seems to be understood regardless of culture or language. Gold's symbolism has been alive before distant nations were even aware of each other and still endures today. For this reason, the use of gold in contemporary art is much richer and more complex than simply ostentatious, flashy embellishments. Instead, contemporary gold artworks

participate in a transhistorical art history, deeply rooted in the belief that gold represents what is sacred.

In this feature, Artelier's curators draw on the traditions of gold in art from diverse cultures and examine the subtle ways that gilding techniques and the symbolic connotations of gold emerge in the work of contemporary artists, situating them as inheritors of this ancient craft.

Each of these contemporary artists push the boundaries for their materials, creating innovative large-scale artworks. As striking feature walls, their artworks are ideally suited as installations in hotel and hospitality contexts, where they immerse viewers in a mesmerising atmosphere and leave a memorable impression.

## **Transforming Raw Gold into an Artist's Medium**

The history of gold leaf alone spans at least 5,000 years; due to gold's resistance to tarnishing and the masterful application of ancient craftsmen, plentiful gold leaf artefacts have survived. The Ancient Egyptians developed techniques for beating gold to create gold leaf, as they discovered gold leaf achieved a similar effect to solid gold whilst being a much more economical use of the material. Its lustre is not compromised by being very thin - it still shines and reflects light and is opaque when applied to another material. As a result, gold leaf is a much more accessible way for gold to be incorporated into artworks, allowing the beauty of the natural material to not be reserved for excessively expensive commissions.

Gold leaf can also be finely ground and made into gold paint. Crushed gold flakes are mixed with a binder to create a liquid pigment, often known as "shell gold." This ancient process for creating a natural gold paint is not only economical, but practical. Shell gold can be brushed onto a wider range of materials, such as porous surfaces like leather or linen, and can achieve a finer and more expressive level of detail than gold leaf.

Since gold leaf and shell gold can be applied to both two-dimensional artworks and to sculptures, its decorative uses are incredibly varied - from illuminated manuscripts and panel paintings, to wooden sculptures and gilded porcelain. Today, this makes gold leaf suitable for large-scale and commercial commissions, as gold leaf is a versatile and effective way of utilising gold's alluring qualities in artworks, while being far less costly than solid gold.

## **Eternalising Sacred Objects: Gilding on Wooden Sculptures**

Due to their opulent royal tombs, the Ancient Egyptians are closely associated with gold; less widely acknowledged, however, are their pioneering innovations in gold crafts. Most surviving

Egyptian artefacts that use gold are in fact gold leaf on wood, and not solid cast gold. This is despite the fact that the Egyptians had much access to gold. As revealed by the Turin Papyrus, an Egyptian map from 1150BC that the oldest topographical map in existence, the Egyptians had an extensive number of gold mines along the Nile.

The Egyptians' preference for gilded, rather than solid gold, art is due to their discovery that beating gold into gold leaf was a far more efficient use of the material. Their gold beating methods were thoroughly documented in hieroglyphs, and this ancient beating technique is almost identical to how gold leaf was produced well into the Medieval European age. As master craftsmen, they could beat gold to one micron thick - 0.0001 of a centimetre. This allowed the Egyptians to gild an enormous number of objects, most notably the sacred objects discovered in royal tombs.

The process of gilding wood is an ancient technique where the basic principles have not changed for over 5,000 years: at its most simple, a natural binder is applied to the wood, and gently overlapping gold leaves are laid onto the surface. Today, this bears very close resemblance to the "water gilding" technique, widely regarded as a superior gilding technique for its delicate craftsmanship and the longevity of the gilding. In water gilding, gesso is applied to carved wood, following which an adhesive like rabbit-skin glue mixed with water is coated, in order to bind gold leaf to wooden surfaces.

Water gilding is a respected craft that has been passed down through generations of gilders, and is used by contemporary artists such as British sculptor Simon Allen. He applies gold leaf in varied colours onto his hand-carved wooden sculptures, and is inspired by the lineage of this technique. In an interview with Artelier, he commented how: "The water gilding technique that I use, the tools, the methods - nothing's really changed since the Renaissance. I love that there is no modern PVA equivalent to the glue binders and the gesso, which I make up myself... All these recipes are intuitive; it's really an ancient and imprecise way of working, which can only be learnt through repetition and experience."

As well as developing early wood gilding techniques, the Egyptians discovered and exploited the possibilities for the natural colour variations of impure gold. Artefacts often show evidence of metal alloys of gold and silver, where a higher content of silver would create a paler, softer gold. Since the Egyptians valued the iridescent colours of alloys, they developed fire assaying processes to test the purity of gold, and thereby the art of intentionally alloying gold to create colour variations.

Today, gold leaf is commercially available in a wide variety of tones, ranging from whiter Moon Gold to bright yellows, or incorporating tones of rose or silver. These possibilities provide a greater range of gold for contemporary artists such as Allen, who are able to express varying effects with these options. Simon Allen in particular also pushes this further by experimenting with rubbing away applied gold leaf, so as to reveal a painted colour underneath, and play with the possibilities for colour variation.

Beyond the techniques used, however, there are also parallels between the art of Ancient Egyptians and Simon Allen's work in their symbolic significance. Gold was considered a deeply symbolic material for the ancient Egyptians gold represented immortality, and as such was frequently described as being the skin of the gods. The use of gold was therefore almost entirely reserved for temples and for possession by royals, because of its connection with the divine. Indeed, it was due to this belief that gold was so prevalent in royal tombs, since gold represents the immortality of royals who passed into the afterlife. In representations of royalty in the afterlife, both on sarcophagi and in paintings, Egyptians would depict their skin in gold, immortalising their bodies.

Allen's monumental sculptures speak to notions of immortality. While not depicting deities or royals, his work likewise is inspired by something considered timeless - the movement of water, the natural elements, the drama of coastlines. In their own way, his artworks render immortal these fleeting moments of nature, by crystallising the impression of momentary experiences like ripples on water's surface in wood. By gilding his artworks, Allen exaggerates the light and shadows of the carved shapes; as light moves across their surface, the sculptural ripples and waves are almost reanimated. Gold's associations with the eternal become inherent in the sculptures, as the transient shapes of water are captured and immortalised.

The dramatic effect of Simon Allen's gilded carvings is particularly powerful on a larger scale as their monumentality captures the force of nature, which is vividly illuminated by expanses of gold. The artworks therefore benefit from being specially commissioned for larger walls, such as lobbies, stairways or presidential suites, creating impact in hospitality spaces.

## **Transcendence through Gold: An Immersive Experience**

The reflective property of gold gives the material an extraordinary glow when illuminated, leading it to be widely used in religious artworks - gold transports the viewer to an otherworldly space, as depictions of heavenly realms appear to glow from within.

Christian Byzantine art, dating from the 4th - 15th Centuries, utilises this aspect of gold in its stylised gold backgrounds. Heavily gilded Byzantine artworks, such as paintings and mosaics, were intended to be viewed within the candlelit interiors of churches, which highlighted the warm shine of gold leaf. The intention was to create an immersive, spiritual experience for a largely illiterate congregation of lay citizens, enabling them to transcend the everyday.

The surviving golden mosaics in Hagia Sophia, Istanbul date back to the 9th Century, and exemplify the mastery of gold leaf that had been reached by artisans in the Byzantine Empire. Together, the complex mosaics inside Hagia Sophia constitute approximately 30 million gold tiles. Gold leaf used so extensively in this context accentuates the expansive domed architecture,

so that candlelight reflects between the walls and ceilings, guiding the eye upwards into the dome.

In their compositions, Byzantine artists used gold leaf principally as the background for depictions of holy scenes, as well as for haloes. The highly stylised figures would float against an expanse of gold; naturalism was consciously averted, favouring instead evocative, mystical depictions. The style was so widespread it became referred to as 'gold-ground' paintings; this use of gold continued for hundreds of years, and was the favoured style for much of early Christian art until the Renaissance. Painters such as Giotto di Bondone (1267-1337), significantly advanced the realism of figures from the more stylised Byzantine depictions, yet continued using gold backgrounds for major religious artworks. Gold was seen to represent the light of God; rather than material wealth, it referenced the immaterial aspects of divinity. As altarpiece paintings, rather than mosaics, the gold glow would attract the congregation to the focal point of the religious space.

Gold's naturally ethereal shine, which can be enhanced by careful consideration of light, is also source of inspiration for contemporary artists. Janine Lambers creates large-scale wall installations from intricately applied flecks of gold leaf. Not dissimilar to mosaics, Lambers hand-applies small sections of gold leaf to create large artworks, revealing figurative images through a dappled sea of gold. Lambers achieves this by working with a range of differently coloured golds, building her composition with subtle colour variations.

Much like the gold walls of Hagia Sophia, Lambers' use of gold on large-scale artworks creates an immersive experience. The effect is transcendental, as the experience of being surrounded by glittering gold feels otherworldly. For their ability to create a unique atmosphere, these artworks are especially impressive as feature walls in hotels or commercial contexts.

Lambers' artworks are intended to react to light, an effect she consciously considers when designing how to arrange the gold leaf fragments. Light naturally changes in light throughout the day and the seasons, and Lambers utilises this for her art - as light illuminates the artwork differently, the piece is in a state of continual transformation. Akin to the slow progressive changes found in nature, the artwork seems to be subtly alive. As light itself is part of the natural world, the magic of the artwork is deeply influenced by the earth's phenomena.

In the same way that the shimmering gold of Giotto's altarpieces entice the eye, focussing the viewer on a key feature of the space, the gold in Janine Lambers' artworks command attention in interior spaces of hotels. By absorbing the viewer, they invite contemplation. Since Lambers' artworks depict natural imagery, it is nature, rather than holy images, that inspire a sense of reverence. The delicate qualities of gold leaf encourage us to consider the fragility of nature, as well as its unsurpassable beauty. As a result, the captivating artworks create a different kind of transcendence - this time, into an ethereal interpretation of a natural realm.

## Ethereal Veils: Contemporary Ground Gold Paintings

The process of grinding gold leaf to make paints, or 'shell gold', has been an ancient method for applying gold to surfaces, with evidence dating back to the 1st millennium AD in China. The technique involves mixing flakes of gold with an organic binder to create natural pigments, and gold is more sparingly used in comparison with gold leaf application. Shell gold is useful for applying to unusual surfaces like leather, woven fabrics or the vellum pages of an illuminated manuscript, as it can be brushed on with precision and fine detail.

Shell gold also addresses some of the limitations of gold leaf. When gilding, the leaves are applied in blocks and achieves a flat layer. A certain amount of precision is therefore inevitably lost, as well as the fluidity and expressiveness of an artist's hand. Shell gold, as a paint, breaks free of these limits, and creates a more free-flowing and organic sense of movement.

The most celebrated examples of gold paint are perhaps Medieval illuminated manuscripts, which show an incredible decorative capability and restraint. Contemporary artists, however, who have been inspired by shell gold can push the material's expressive potential, and transgress from its traditional uses.

For artists like Michelle Gagliano, the use of shell gold paint extends beyond accented details or backgrounds, as was the case in many manuscripts - instead, gold is a major feature of her work, forming a shimmering veil over other pigments in the painting. Although using an ancient technique, Gagliano's artworks exemplify the innovative effects that can be achieved with gold paint, such as layering it to create a multidimensional shimmer. Gagliano's expressive and gestural manner with shell gold introduces great movement into her paintings, in comparison to the measured and flattened gold in manuscripts. In contrast to the small manuscript artworks, Gagliano's large-scale works feel animated and atmospheric, making them a compelling option for walls in a wide range of hospitality settings.

While diverging from shell gold's traditional techniques, Gagliano's choice of using gold is deeply rooted in its prevalence and symbolic importance within the art of historical civilisations. In an interview with Artelier, she describes how: "my use of gold is also a link to the past and its impact throughout art history, I love to use it for its timelessness and everything that it symbolises." Whilst her use of gold is distinctly contemporary, she channels the intended effects of ancient craftsmen.

Gagliano's paintings show impressions of nature, and she emphasises nature's colour palette through dappled earthy colours; these paints are likewise created by Gagliano herself, with earth-based pigments mixed with organic oils. For a hotel or hospitality commission, these colours are also specially mixed so that their hues complement the interior design scheme. The addition of gold, however, brings a sense of the ethereal, and further abstracts the image into a vision of deep earthy colours and shimmering light. As seen in Byzantine Mosaics or Early Renaissance

ground-gold paintings, the extensive use of gold is responsible for creating an otherworldly atmosphere.

Unlike the Byzantine mosaics or Early Renaissance ground-gold paintings, however, gold is not relegated to the background in Gagliano's paintings. In general, featuring gold in the foreground in this way was relatively rare in ancient gold leaf artistic traditions. In a stark transition away from this approach, however, craftsmen in 16th century Japan created an increasing number of artworks where gold was the main colour. Gold leaf art had been present in Japan as early as the 7th Century AD, when decorative techniques were imported from China and developed into an artform known as Kirikane, which was often used for gilding Buddhist art. In the 16th Century, however, the use of gold in paintings had moved away from religious depictions, and instead was used for paintings of nature on folding screens.

Although gold was a sacred colour, traditionally used for depicting deities, more broadly it "represents the bright rays of light that illuminate our world", as described by the Kyoto National museum in reference to gold in Japanese art. Gold therefore inspires reverence towards nature more broadly - encouraging contemplation on the beauty of the natural world. In hospitality contexts, the work of Michelle Gagliano invokes a similar experience - like the Japanese panels and folding screens, her large- scale artworks invite a meditative admiration for nature, and similarly immortalise its transience with veils of gold.

## Gilding the Fabric of Society: Gold Leaf Maps

Early maps were regarded as a creative expression as well as a method for relaying information, often referencing mythology and being highly decorative, making cartography in itself an ancient and practical artform. Detailed topographical maps have been created for millennia, as early as the Egyptian Turin Papyrus of 1150BC. Undoubtedly, there are even more ancient maps which have been lost. Even without maps, however, the complex structures of ancient cities are as old as the civilisations themselves - from the Inca's Machu Picchu to the urban planning of Ancient Rome, city layouts are a record of a civilisation's way of life.

In keeping with the historical significance of urban plans, Ewan David Eason's work references the timeless importance of recording spaces, as well as the evolution of cities. The British contemporary artist creates gilded Mappa Mundi of international cities. The depicted city can be specially commissioned, and so can make for an especially stirring reference to location - in a hotel, for instance, the artwork can draw upon the unique urban geography in which the hotel is situated.

Ewan David Eason's work explores the abstracted intricate patterns that emerge from city maps once urban features are simplified and the map is unified by one colour. The title Eason has given to this series, Mappa Mundi, refers to the ancient practice of cartography: "Mappa Mundi" is a

name given to any Medieval map of the world created in Europe, and like Eason's maps, are characterized by a circular illustration.

While Eason's artworks are of contemporary cities, many have their origins in ancient settlements. The urban planning and social history of the past are deeply interwoven with current city layouts, and as citizens we interact with that history simply by walking city streets. However, Eason's response to cartography also speaks to our personal connections with the spaces we inhabit: while the maps are recognisably cities, the extent to which viewers can identify places depends upon their own familiarity and emotional connection with specific places. "Mundi" in Latin refers to "the world" - while as a series Eason's work does depict worldwide spaces, the title also references how a city becomes a personal world, which deserves recording.

In his depiction of cities, which blend cultural history with personal lives, Ewan David Eason wants to diverge from traditional cartography and unify all spaces with one colour. He describes how "Rather than defining people into different groups with multiple colours, I decided that I would oppose this by selecting one colour, a sacred colour that drew on the egalitarian nature of people rather than defining us as poor, middle class or rich. I chose Gold for its sacred and precious quality."

Eason is therefore directly addressing, and evolving, the deep connection that gold has with sacred objects in art: sacred objects have been gilded by diverse religions, from Christianity and Islam, to Buddhism and Ancient Egyptians. The sacred symbolism of gold transcends cultures, and so in a secular context gold becomes a unifier. All cities are rendered sacred and precious, and all areas of the city are equally marked with gold. In contrast to the typical exclusiveness of gold, Eason gilds the very fabric of societies with this precious material. Gold becomes a representation of the sacredness of everyday life, and encourages viewers to contemplate the history and diversity of our living landscapes.

## Re-contextualising the Allure of Gold

Gold has always balanced between its sacred connections and its use as a display of wealth. However, in the fast-paced modern era, the allure of gold has reached a new level of superficiality. As a result, some manifestations of gold in contemporary art have lost their connection to the material's rich history and the subtle qualities of the medium. It is noticeable that some artists are shying away from the material, and interior design preferences have moved away from excessively using gold, replacing it with modern and manmade metals. Yet, unlike modern materials that go in and out of fashion, the qualities of gold that drew civilisations to the material originally are still undeniably appealing. Gold possesses a unifying quality: everyone can appreciate its objective beauty and deeply understand its symbolism.



Contemporary artworks that tastefully engage with the history of artistic gold exemplify why it has been a source of fascination across the ages, utilising its beauty and enduring shine. With original ideas, artists can reinvent the material for a contemporary context, pushing the effects that can be achieved. While inherently rooted in ancient craft practises and the enduring symbolism that gold has, their artworks speak to distinctly modern aesthetics. In hospitality projects, refined gold artworks can indeed feel like a refreshing and bold statement, and further elevate cutting-edge interior design.

Due to the versatility of gold leaf and shell gold, it can both subtly enhance artworks with highlights and accents, or create immersive installations that are a statement in interiors. Increasingly, the economical potential of gold leaf and shell gold have proven that as a material, gold should not be seen as exclusively elite and only accessible to the wealthy. As a result, more artists have been able to reinvigorate the medium, and it has become more affordable for use in a wide variety of contexts. This makes gold a more cost-effective material than many would assume, opening the material up to a wide range of uses in hotel and hospitality art projects. With continual innovation, artists can continue to broaden its uses and effects, while contributing to the evolution of this ancient art form.

Artelier's art consultancy plays a fundamental role in all artwork commissions, and as the appointed art consultant for hotel and hospitality projects we bring artists and clients together to achieve forward-thinking and intelligently curated art installations.

To discover more about the artists featured in this article, explore Artist Walls - Artelier's collection of 23 artists who reinvent the concept of the mural for the modern age, pushing the boundaries.