

GILDING IN TRANSITION:

SOURCING, INNOVATION, AND THE FUTURE OF A TRADITIONAL CRAFT

By Lauren Sepp and Madeline Hare

The practice of traditional gilding has long relied on a careful balance of legacy, material knowledge, and consistency. The gilder has always been rooted in a close relationship with materials, learning how they behave, how they feel, and how they respond over years of practice.

Today, sustaining that balance requires more effort than ever before. The diminishing availability of long-trusted gilding products has introduced a new level of uncertainty for gilders and frame makers who depend on their stability and performance. At the center of traditional water gilding is poliment, or gilders' bole, the smooth foundation beneath the gold leaf that gives a finished surface its depth, warmth, and soft, luminous glow. In recent years, new European boles and poliment powders have gradually found their place alongside traditional materials, offering dependable alternatives that still feel true to historic gilding techniques.

For many artisans, these materials represent a way of carrying tradition forward while preserving the richness, beauty, and tactile character that have long made gilding such a remarkable craft. More than anything, they reflect a shared commitment to keeping the art of water gilding alive and accessible for artists, frame makers, and conservators who care deeply about its history, craftsmanship, and luminous character.

As sourcing challenges continue to affect the availability of traditional gilding materials, many gilders, frame makers, and conservators have found themselves searching for dependable alternatives that still feel true to the craft they know so well. In response, new materials such as Sepp Leaf's Poliment Powder and Manetti's Type S Bole have begun to emerge, carefully sourced from Europe to help fill the gaps left by diminishing supplies of long-trusted clays and boles. Developed with traditional gilding techniques in mind, both materials are designed to preserve the smooth, responsive foundation essential to water gild-



● Courtesy of Sepp Leaf/Manetti

ing, supporting the delicate application and burnishing of gold leaf while honoring the character and beauty of historic methods.

Sepp Leaf's Poliment Powder is designed to be mixed with prepared rabbit skin glue, creating a smooth, easy-to-work bole that applies beautifully and burnishes to a rich, luminous finish well suited for both restoration projects and new work. Manetti's Type S Bole was developed as a thoughtful replacement for traditional Selhamin clays. Formulated as a clay-based paste for gesso-prepared wooden surfaces, it creates a dense, highly polishable layer that supports strong adhesion, beautiful burnishing, and the warm depth and glow so closely tied to the tradition of water gilding. Free of binders and composed of natural clays, it can be adjusted with rabbit skin glue to suit each artisan's preferred working method and feel.

Together, these materials reflect a thoughtful continuation of the craft, helping artists and conservators adapt to changing sourcing realities while preserving the richness and warmth that make gilding so enduring. As these materials continue to evolve, Sepp Leaf remains confident in the next chapter of clay boles and in the future of traditional gilding itself.

Alongside these developments, innovations such as the Kölner Instacoll System offer new approaches to achieving a high-gloss finish, and the Manetti family con-

tinues to expand the range of compatible materials, from specialized sizes for stone and canvas to patinas and adhesives for metal leaf.

Against the backdrop of tightening supply chains and evolving shipping regulations, the craft is not diminishing, but adapting, finding continuity through thoughtful changes. As materials evolve and sourcing becomes less predictable, contemporary gilders are increasingly working at the intersection of tradition and efficiency, seeking solutions that preserve the visual language of gilding while responding to the practical demands of modern workflows. Systems like the Kölner Instacoll System offer a compelling example of this balance. Designed as a water-based base and adhesive for both interior and exterior applications, Instacoll allows gilders to achieve a high-gloss, mirror-like finish without the labor-intensive process of traditional water gilding. Its two-step application simplifies the workflow while maintaining a refined result, and its reactivatable surface provides flexibility in timing, an advantage in both studio and on-site conditions. Particularly for projects requiring durability or exposure to the elements, Instacoll offers a reliable alternative that expands what is possible without abandoning the aesthetic goals rooted in tradition.

At the same time, ongoing innovations from the Manetti family reflect a broader commitment to supporting gilders with materials that meet a wide range of surfaces and applications. New products such as water-based stone size provide strong adhesion for gilding on marble and stone, while canvas size offers a flexible, glossy foundation suitable for paper,



● Sepp Leaf's Poliment Powder

parchment, leather, and textiles—particularly valuable for delicate or functional surfaces like illuminated manuscripts. Complementary materials, including aging patina finishes and specialized metal leaf adhesives, allow for greater control over surface character and final effect, whether aiming for pristine brilliance or an antiqued finish.

Alongside these innovations, traditional oil sizes, such as quick-setting three-hour and slower 12-hour formulations from both Manetti and Dux, remain essential tools, offering versatility depending on project scale and working time. Together, these developments illustrate how the craft continues to adapt with intention, equipping gilders with a broader, more flexible toolkit while preserving the integrity and beauty that define the discipline.

While foundational materials such as bole are essential to the structure of water gilding, gold leaf itself remains at the center of the practice, both artistically and economically. Today's gilders are working with an increasingly complex range of options, where decisions around leaf are shaped not only by aesthetic goals, but by availability, cost, and application requirements.



● Manetti's Type S Bole

One of the most immediate considerations is format and sizing. Variations between manufacturers can influence both the working process and the finished result. Differences in leaf size, handling characteristics, and packaging formats require gilders to adjust their techniques, particularly when transitioning between projects or suppliers. Gram weight also plays a role, with books typically ranging from lighter weights, such as 14 grams, to heavier 23-

gram books, affecting durability, coverage, and overall cost.

Color and composition further expand the range of possibilities. Genuine gold leaf spans from lower karats to pure 24 karat, each offering subtle shifts in tone and working properties. Alongside gold, materials such as palladium and platinum provide non-tarnishing alternatives for exterior or high-wear applications, while silver and colored silver leaf introduce additional visual range, though often with different conservation considerations.

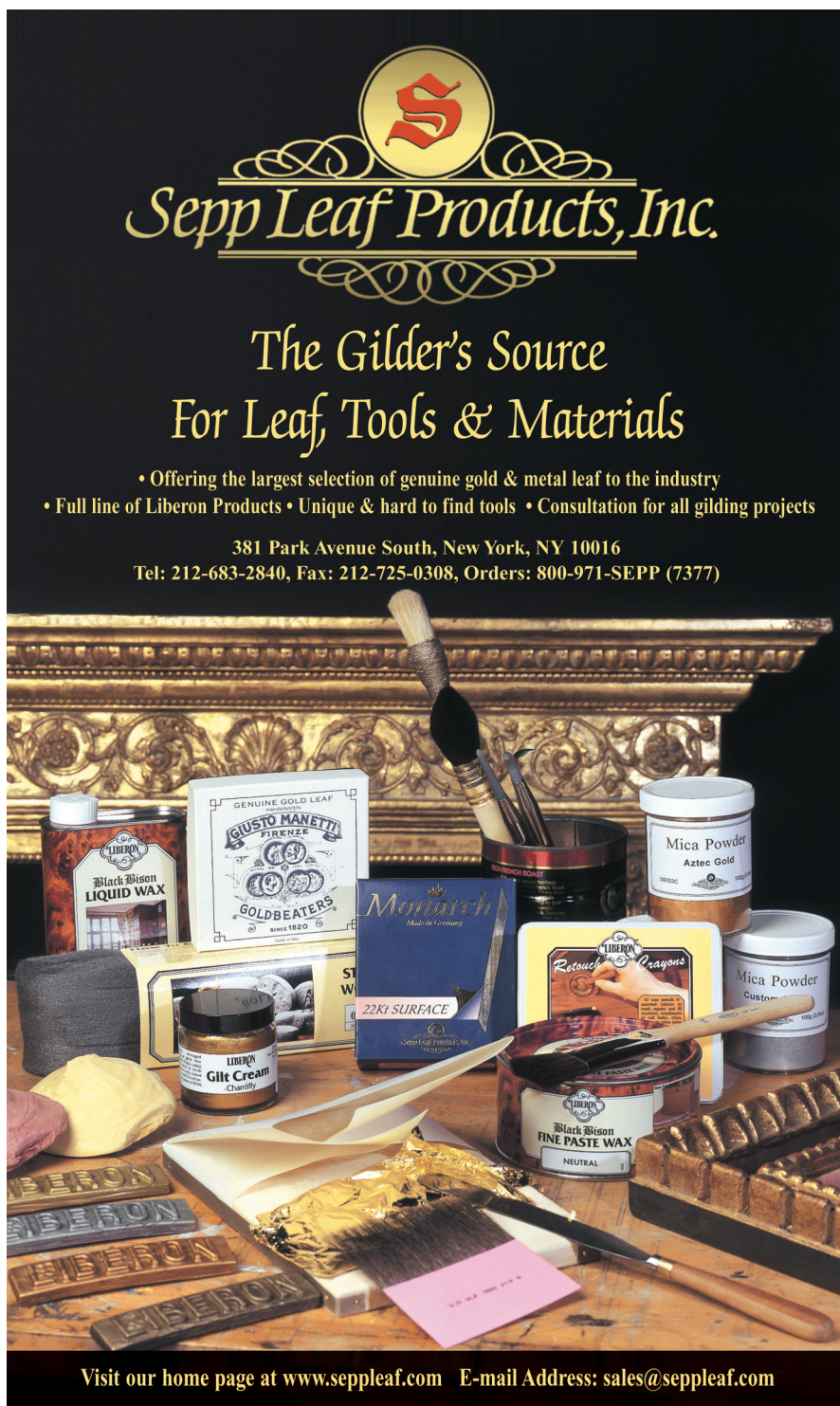
At the same time, sourcing high-quality gold leaf has become more complex. Rising gold prices continue to impact the cost of genuine leaf, while global supply chains, shipping constraints, and import tariffs add additional layers of unpredictability. These factors have made it increasingly important for suppliers to maintain strong relationships with multiple manufacturers, ensuring both consistent quality and a range of price points that can meet the needs of different projects.

Balancing quality with accessibility has become a central challenge. As costs rise, many gilders and designers are working within tighter budgets, requiring thoughtful material choices without compromising the integrity of the finished surface. In response, efforts to offer both premium and more economical options, whether through different karats or alternative metals are essential to keeping the practice viable and inclusive.

Despite these pressures, the goal remains consistent: to provide materials that allow gilders to achieve the visual richness and longevity that define the craft. As sourcing, shipping, and tariff-related costs continue to evolve, maintaining access to reliable gold leaf is not only a logistical challenge, but a critical part of sustaining the tradition itself.

As the landscape of traditional gilding continues to shift, the strength of the craft lies in its ability to adapt without losing sight of its foundations. From evolving sources of bole to the complexities of gold leaf production and pricing,

today's challenges are prompting thoughtful innovation across the field. With a commitment to both material quality and practical support, Sepp Leaf Products remains dedicated to helping gilders, designers, and conservators navigate these changes with confidence. Alongside Gilded Planet, we are your number one resource for gilding products and technical help, ensuring that the knowledge, materials, and beauty of gilding continue to endure for generations to come. **PFM**



The advertisement for Sepp Leaf Products, Inc. features a dark background with a gold-colored logo at the top. The logo consists of a stylized 'S' inside a circle, flanked by decorative flourishes. Below the logo, the company name 'Sepp Leaf Products, Inc.' is written in a large, elegant, gold-colored script. Underneath, the tagline 'The Gilder's Source For Leaf, Tools & Materials' is displayed in a similar gold-colored font. A list of services is provided in a smaller, gold-colored font: 'Offering the largest selection of genuine gold & metal leaf to the industry', 'Full line of Liberon Products', 'Unique & hard to find tools', and 'Consultation for all gilding projects'. The contact information, including the address '381 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016', telephone number 'Tel: 212-683-2840', fax number 'Fax: 212-725-0308', and order number 'Orders: 800-971-SEPP (7377)', is listed in a gold-colored font. The bottom half of the advertisement shows a collection of gilding materials and tools, including boxes of 'Genuine Gold Leaf' by 'Giusto Manetti Firenze', 'Liberon Black Bison Liquid Wax', 'Liberon Gilt Cream', 'Liberon Monarch 22Kt Surface', 'Liberon Retouch Crayons', 'Liberon Fine Paste Wax', 'Mica Powder Aztec Gold', and 'Mica Powder Custom'. A gilder's brush and a palette are also visible.

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