

Golden Gates to the Roofless Church of New Harmony

by Luke Randall



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Approximately fifteen years ago, a friend and client named Jimmy Coleman told me about a church in New Harmony, Indiana with a gate that needed to be gilded. I pictured a cemetery with a surrounding fence and large sage bushes drifting by, something like a scene from the Clint Eastwood movie, “The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly.” Last summer, I was pleasantly surprised by a caller from New Harmony asking me if I would be willing to go out to Indiana to do a gold leaf job, and I knew, right away, that this was going to be an exciting project. I had already imagined the setting.

Preparing for this challenging project involved a review of the process and the materials I would need. My choice of a gold size and its application was a serious concern for me as well as a source of anxiety. When undertaking large exterior gilding projects, your size must work properly. Years ago, Lefranc & Bourgeois Charbonnel had reformulated its 12 hour gold size and removed the lead. The new formula was nothing like the original size that I had so much experience using successfully. The amount of time for the new formula to reach a point where the tack was workable varied greatly, especially in humid conditions, and I had already written-off

this new product years ago. I knew it was necessary to be able to apply the size at 5:00 P.M. and begin gold leafing the next morning at 8:00 A.M. There was so much gilding to do that I needed to be able to work all day and depend on a size that was cured properly. I had almost a pint of the old product and needed more. I asked The Historical Society of Early American Decoration (HSEAD) to broadcast a call for help from membership requesting old leaded Lefranc size.

Members graciously responded with two quarts of the old size, and my testing process began. The tack was consistent, but I found that it was not drying completely. It was still tacky a week later! The new Dux size I had previously found dried much quicker, in fact it dried too quickly to hold a tack all day. Then I decided to mix the old size with the new Dux slow size, a half-and-half mixture. Although it worked, I decided to test different mixtures to see which one worked best and used a number of small containers of the old size that I had from different time periods. My testing process took a couple of weeks before I finally went back to the half-and-half mixture that was going to work beautifully.

Choosing my gold leaf was a consideration. The thickness of the gold leaf is rated by the amount of gold used to make 1000 leaves. The most commonly used leaf has 18 grams of gold per 1000 leaves. I decided to use an extra heavy weight of gold leaf, 24 grams per 1000 leaves. My choice was a 23.75 k, Rosenoble (it has a little copper to give it a rosy cast) by an Italian manufacturer, Gisto Manetti. Manetti stated that this weight/thickness would 'stand-up' to the weather much longer than a regular weight. I was ready to leave for Indiana with nine boxes of gold leaf and begin gilding.

Arriving in New Harmony, I found myself in one of the most beautiful places I had ever been. It was so peaceful and serene, nothing like my imagined wild west scene. The community was founded in 1814 by the Harmony Society and George Rapp, the Lutheran leader, and settled next to the Wabash River, surrounded by fields and trees. In 1824 the community moved back to Pennsylvania and sold the town to a social reformer named Robert Dale Owen who imagined a utopian community. He named it New Harmony, but within two years his utopian experiment failed. Although these early communal experiments did not last, they created an innovative platform upon which scientific, intellectual, artistic and spiritual endeavors prospered. Today, New Harmony's rich history still informs the sentiment of the town.

My connection to New Harmony is through the Owen Family. Jane Blaffer, a Texas oil heiress, married Kenneth Dale Owen, the great, great grandson of Robert Dale Owen. She fell in love with New Harmony when she first arrived in 1941 and spent her life restoring and revitalizing the town. Her children and extended family are friends of mine. In 1962 Jane Owen commissioned Jacques Lipchitz to design the gates for the Roofless Church, a non-denominational place of worship designed by architect Philip Johnson in 1960. Lipchitz, internationally recognized as one of the great 20th century modern sculptors, had seen palatial gilded doors in Europe and brought that aesthetic into his design for the gates in New Harmony. The gates open into a walled garden with flowers followed by trees, grassy areas and sculptures that surround the modern architectural masterpiece which is called The Roofless Church. The Lipchitz Gates were first gilded in 1962, and I was the one chosen to bring them back to their original condition. Unfortunately, the gold leaf had long since disappeared, and the gates were covered with bronze paint many years ago.



Prior to my arrival, the gates had been chemically stripped by another contractor, and I was able to immediately begin applying an oil primer. I decided upon an industrial zinc chromate etching primer made by CPS Coatings in Louisiana which, in my opinion, is far superior to any commercial primers available at the local paint stores. I wanted to make sure the first layer was going to bond properly to the bronze. When gilding bronze or copper, one must use a primer and one or two coats of oil based finish paint before the size is applied. I used Benjamin Moore P 22 Industrial Urethane as my top coat material. After a few days of base coating, a local contractor erected a large staging platform and built a tent over the gates that

would serve as a wind proof shelter. I began to apply the gold leaf size and covered an area that could be gilded in eight hours the next day.

I started applying leaf at 8:00 A.M., and by 2:00 P.M. I became quite anxious; the work was proceeding slowly. Because the sculptural elements were deep and intricate, I was constantly cutting the leaf into small pieces to fit the uneven terrain. In addition, the sun had heated the tent to 100 degrees; as sweat was pouring off me, I drank over a gallon of water. However, by 6:00 P.M. I had finished gilding the section I had intended to cover that day and sized another large area for the next day's work. This was my routine, working ten hours a day in extreme conditions, for twenty days. Every few days the scaffolding and tent needed to be moved, and often the staging men had to work after hours.



It was difficult to imagine how I would complete this huge gilding project. Also, each section took almost twenty per cent more gold than estimated. Final count was eleven boxes of gold, (5,500 sheets), and most of the time the sheets had to be cut a number of times! All things considered, I only had one very bad day.

One morning, when I arrived at 8:00 A.M., the size was not cured because I had failed to properly mix a new bottle of Dux size while I was making my formula the previous evening. This caused a major delay in cure time, and it was almost noon before the tack was right, leaving me almost ten hours of gilding to complete by 6:30P.M., sunset! Tears of frustration were actually running down my face, and that was at 11:00A.M. when the size was still not properly cured....a disaster! I did finally finish this section at 8:00

P.M., under lights, and the next morning, I found areas where the gold leaf had 'drowned' in improperly cured size. Only you, the HSEAD community, would notice these areas of failure. Luckily, it was the only day that my materials were not cooperating throughout the course of the whole project. Fortunately, the weather was perfect for the following three weeks.

Despite the rigorous nature of this project, it was an honor to work on such an historically significant landmark and piece of artistic history. Over the course of twenty-five years working professionally in the decorative arts field, I had never had the opportunity to restore a master sculptor's work. Just being that close to a Jacques Lipchitz sculpture was an inspiration for me as an artist.

In this sense, my work with the Society has a similar component. The task of reproducing historical artifacts of early American decorative art is both challenging and rewarding in a way that is continually inspiring. My HSEAD teacher, Peggy Rodgers, has taught me things about gold leaf that I never knew, even after working as a professional gilder for many years. When I initially began to learn this type of early American painting, I wondered if I were wasting my time because I was already established and successful as a decorative artist. However, as I continued recording historically authentic decorative patterns, I realized the importance of copying historical works of early American decorative art. I discovered the level of craftsmanship exemplified on these simple pieces of tinware to be extraordinary and ultimately challenging to me in a way that I had never been challenged.

I am so excited to share my gilding project in New Harmony, Indiana all with the members of the Society, and I know many of you will relate to the challenges it presented. This work in Indiana was an incredible test of all my skills as a gilder. In this community, I have found a group of colleagues who share a common interest in the traditional materials and techniques used by artisans. We are all painters, and when I look around the room at a Spring Meeting, I see fellow painters everywhere, and that serves as an inspiration for me.



Luke Randall is a fine artist and works professionally as a decorative painter.