


Sgraffito & Granito: Revitalizing an Ancient Technique

By William Bruce Adair

Today's framers are combining contemporary creativity with this historic style



Frame maker Bob Kulicke was perhaps one of the great masters of our time. His sgraffito frame is a classic example of his mastery, not only in the sgraffito technique but also in imitating antique patinas (top, facing page). Even his imitation wormholes are cleverly done to complement his masterfully imprecise sgraffito design. There is an inherent beauty in such objects. He seems to have tapped into something great in his quest for the ultimate frame during his life (1924-2007).

Art historian Dr. John T. Spike wrote in *Dissimilar Revelations* that the beauty of a work of art is derived directly from the quality of the idea from which it is created. He says, "Great works of art encompass ideas which resonate like silent, mighty chords across the barriers of

An early Italian Renaissance frame made in Siena incorporated sgraffito stars in the frame panel.

of time, traveling on a universal frequency of our shared humanity.”

There are works of art throughout the centuries that become great forces of human expression. Among the pantheon of these forms is that humble appliance, the picture frame.

One of the oldest designs is the simple zigzag chevron. Made by scratching, incising, punching, and embossing on early bone tools, these patterns may be as old as 20,000 years and can be seen in the museum at the famous caves at Lascaux, France.

It's no surprise that artisans still employ techniques developed by our prehistoric ancestors. Take, for example, early Italian Renaissance frames, such as those made in Siena. These were created by artisans who understood the importance of integrated design, linking a painting and frame with sgraffito stars similar to a star emblazoned on the cloak of the Virgin, linking her with the celestial realm.

Sgraffito and Granito

Such designs are among the many techniques used in sgraffito and granito decoration on frames, first popularized during the Italian Renaissance but still common today. In sgraffito—which means “to scratch,”—the surface of a burnished water-gilded frame is painted over with egg tempera. When dry (or “leather hard”), the thinly applied paint is skillfully scratched off with a sharp wooden stylus, creating intricate linear designs that reveal bright gold lines and what appears to be a “thread” of the underlying brilliance. Historically, it thus imitated rich, embroidered fabrics that were among the most valuable commodities of household inventories of the time.

Sgraffito is akin to “estofado,” a Spanish frame decoration technique that literally goes over the top of carved and gilded ornaments. The addition of few drops of olive oil to the pigment and egg tempera allowed for a longer scratching time before surface hardens, allowing an artisan to work at a less



This Bob Kulicke sgraffito frame is a great example of a modern craftsman's interpretation of an ancient craft, with green egg tempera over gold leaf and a sgraffito design.



This antique Italian combination of sgraffito and granito was used to make a pattern of richness and beauty, with an insignia of a family crest.

frantic pace.

Granito is another related technique in which surface embellishments are added that resemble grain or little bits of grain and reflect small points of light. There are also a myriad of other related artistic techniques used on gilded frames, including detailed stamping on painting in the background of duecento and trecento panel paintings and their mouldings.

Many of these gilding techniques are produced by various metal tools applying pressure the gold surface, both with and without an over-layer of paint. These designs have become a great source for contemporary moulding designers to draw on for inspiration.

One of the most useful and rewarding methods of frame embellishment is punch work or granito. This was an early Italian technique used for creating texture and patterns in the background of gilded surfaces. Exquisite beauty of the gilded surface was created when a variety of tonal effects were made by using texture to produce light and shadow. Just as a good painting has distinct values ranging from dark to light, so should the frame, which surrounds the art. To amplify the effects of different textures, a thin glaze might be applied to the surface. Granito requires a great deal of patience. Once mastered, it is a most satisfying decorative process, second only to burnishing gold.

Punching the freshly laid gold with metal stamping tools is also one of the

oldest techniques of surface decoration. In the early fourteenth century, elaborately punched backgrounds were created to embellish the halos of holy family icons or the textured clothing of the saints. Many of the early craftsmen made their own tools. A bird's-eye punch, stars, and hearts are among the multitude of punch work patterns. A less-expensive and very available source of punch tools are leather supply stores. Crude tools can also be fashioned by hand by fil-



A contemporary Max Kuehne design used silver leaf along with tempera paint to create a luxurious surface pattern. The silver was coated with an orange varnish called "mecca" to give the silver the look of gold.



In this antique Italian design, translucent paints were used over the gold to create the effect of small jewels embedded into the surface of the frame.

ing nails or other pieces of metal and mounting them on a stick.

Most punch work is done after the gilding is complete and while the gesso is still relatively soft. It's still difficult to get all the painstaking punching done while the gesso is moist, especially if you live in a dry, hot climate. If the punching is done when the gesso is hard, there will be fissures that may cause the surface to deteriorate prematurely.

The best way to prevent this is to lay a moist (not wet) cloth over the area to be tooled. You can also put a frame in a plastic bag; the moisture will gradually penetrate the layers and give you a perfect consistency for punching without cracking. Italian master Ceninno Ceninni suggested placing a frame in a damp basement for several days to soften the surface prior to punching. The tool should be held perpendicular to the surface with one

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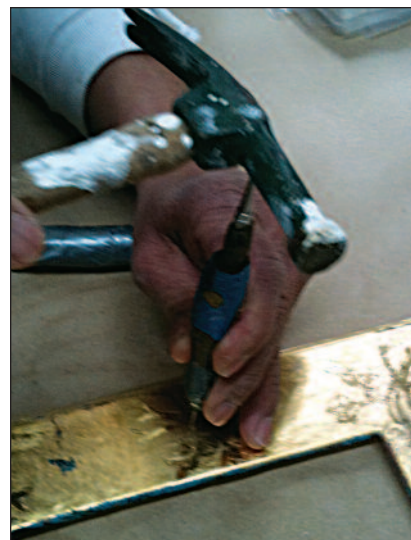
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hand, and with the other, a light mallet is used to gently tap the punch. It takes some practice to obtain even and consistent results.

Most of the time the punch work will follow the outline of a frame's ornamentation—usually either pastiglia, sgraffito, or other forms of surface decoration. All you do is follow the background in a consistent, steady manner. If there is a flat panel with an elaborate design, then you must make a stencil or use carbon paper to transfer the design to the surface.

Designs from a Workshop

These techniques were practiced in a session at The National Conference this past January (Sgraffito and Granito Workshop). Attendees traced their designs from an original with tissue paper. The tissue was then used as a template to



The side of a hammer was used to stamp a granito pattern into the surface of the gilded frame with a metal punch, creating a unique surface texture not obtainable by any other method.

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transfer patterns to the surface of a new frame. A ballpoint pen with a rounded tip was used to draw a pattern on the surface, and it was ready for granito. Work produced in this WCAF session (facing page) has been used as a small exhibit at Goldleaf Studios in Washington, DC, this summer to evoke reactions from clients. **PFM**

William Adair is an instructor at The National Conference and will be teaching classes similar to Sgraffito at this year's event.

William B. Adair received his B.F.A. in Studio Art from the University of Maryland in 1972. For the next 10 years he worked for the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery as a museum conservator specializing in the treatment of picture frames. In 1982 he formed Gold Leaf Studios to make frames and conserve gilded antiques. His clients have included the U.S. Department of State and the National Park Service. He is the founder of the International Institute for Frame Study, a non-profit archive dedicated to collecting and disseminating information on the history of frames. He can be reached at bill@goldleafstudios.com.

"Mine was the dragonfly frame. I wanted to make it whimsical and beachy, so I tried to lightly paint it in blues and greens and distress it. I was hoping to catch some of the shimmer and transparency of the beautiful dragonfly."

**—Maureen Gagliano,
Madison, CT**



"Before attending the class, I had just completed an etching of a bird's nest, which I felt would be a good subject for this project. I wanted to include all three elements—trees, bird's nest, and birds. The frame shape suggested whimsy, so it seemed natural to create an asymmetrical design."

**—Marla Hoppenstedt,
Baton Rouge, LA**



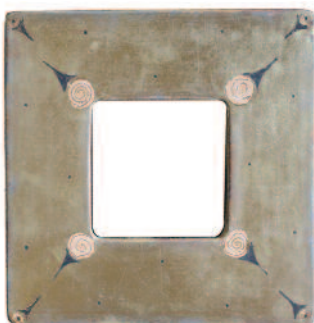
"This class helped me pull inspiration from a necklace I was wearing that was in the shape of a crown. I tried to create symmetry in the piece, while keeping it elegant."

—Rena Patel, Lancaster, CA



"My frame was probably the simplest in design of all, but I made it that way on purpose. As a custom frame builder, I am always trying to not compete with the art but complement it."

—Jim Graehl, Kalispell, MT



"My frame is a loose interpretation of art nouveau with a little rococo flair. I added my initials at the bottom to give it a more traditional custom feel. A variety of line and texture were added to increase movement and interest in the flat frame."

—Christina Harrelson, Sheridan, WY



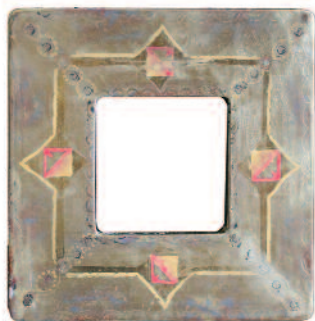
"My sgraffito 'moment' was to create many sgraffito designs with desktop software so they could be easily scaled and edited from one frame to another each time we create a new frame. For this frame I created and executed a Celtic design. I have since applied my honed sgraffito skills on an antique reproduction frame for a client. The frame is meant to look hundreds of years old with cracked joints and a worn finish but is only a few weeks old."

—Andy Stemple, Metropolitan Frame Company, Denver, CO



"This design came from the lotus flower, a symbol of all things good. The lotus allowed for me break away from the linear designs common with square frames to a radial design that emanates from the center. The bold colors are consistent with the lotus design element and arabesque shape surrounding the outside of the frame and help to bring interest in the stark contrast of the gold, black, and red."

—Elizabeth Hellsten, San Antonio, TX



"This piece was based on fabric patterns in popular interior design. It lent itself well to many of the techniques used in sgraffito, so I tried them all. Then, in all of its feverish overkill, I was able to 'wipe away' the boldness that came from not being able to contain my excitement, and this is what evolved. I have a feeling this is the way my future work will manifest itself."

—Lisa Marie Sopko, Darlington, PA



"I came up with the design for the frame by envisioning the art piece it would contain. For some reason, Marc Chagall came to mind. I knew I wanted an approach that would remain very lightweight visually and a little playful, while also keeping the design simple enough to finish in class."

—Jeff Protsman, Denver, CO

