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HOW TO ACHIEVE **Renaissance Luminosity**



COVER:
La Mia Gioia (detail)
by Fred Wessel

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Use Egg Tempera
& Gold Leaf
to Achieve

Renaissance Luminosity

After a trip to Italy, **Fred Wessel** learned more about egg tempera painting and adding gold leaf to his panels. He now teaches those procedures for emulating the dazzling beauty and inner glow of 14th- and 15th-century pictures. | **by M. Stephen Doherty**



ABOVE
Tunic and Pearls
in its frame.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Tunic and Pearls
2000, egg tempera and gold
leaf, 16 x 12. Private collection.

The process that Massachusetts artist Fred Wessel uses to create his magnificent egg tempera portraits and still lifes is complicated and time-consuming; but the reason he is so enthusiastic about using paints that predate oils and adding gold adornments to his paintings is that, in his opinion, there are no other materials that yield quite the same results. "After seeing the beauty, sensitivity, harmony, and especially the preciousness of the early Renaissance work of artists such as Fra Angelico, Duccio, and Simone Martini, I realized that, as artists, we may have abandoned too much," he says, referring to the modernist idea that less is more. "The ever-changing inner light that radiates from gold leaf used judiciously on the surface of a painting, and the use of pockets of rich, intense colors that illuminate the picture's surface, impressed me deeply. It was preciousness elevated to grand heights: semiprecious gems such as lapis lazuli, malachite, and azurite were ground up, mixed with egg yolk, and applied as paint pigments, producing dazzling, breathtaking colors! The surface of these colors forms a texture that sparkles and reflects light much like gold does, but in ways that are much more subtle than gold.



DEMONSTRATION: BECCA (SUNDIAL)



Step 1

The silverpoint drawing of Becca holding the sundial.



Step 2

Wessel began drawing with India ink.

OPPOSITE PAGE

La Mia Gioia

1996, egg tempera,
25 x 19. Collection
the artist.

"I look to the early Renaissance as a source of inspiration that I can use along with contemporary content and image-making," Wessel declares in his artist's statement. "I look to the Renaissance as the artists of that time looked back to early Greek and Roman art—not as a reactionary but as one who rediscovers and reapplies important but forgotten visual stimuli."

All these possibilities became clear to the artist during a two-week trip to Italy in 1984. After retuning home, he researched egg tempera painting, beginning with the classic 14th-century book by Cennino d'Andrea Cennini, *Il Libro dell'Arte* (Dover Publications, Mineola, New York) and continuing with information provided by contemporary artists and manufacturers. He subsequently developed procedures that he first described in a 1995 article in *American Artist* ("The Visual Poetry of Gold Leaf," by Ginny Baier, April, 1995) and recently documented in the step-by-step demonstration *Becca (Sundial)* reproduced in this article.

Preparing the Panel

Wessel is always thinking about his next painting, and when one of his students at the Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford reminded him of a woman from a Leonardo work, he made drawings of her and asked if she would pose for a painting after the summer vacation in 2005. In preparation for that piece, Wessel ordered a tabernacle-style frame from Troy Stafford of Stafford Frame Makers (www.staffordframes.com) and prepared a Baltic plywood panel.

His procedure for preparing the panel was to glue a piece of linen canvas to the seven-ply plywood, size the surface with rabbit-skin glue, and then apply six layers of traditional gesso made from rabbit-skin glue and whiting. After allowing the layers of gesso to dry, Wessel rubbed the surface with charcoal dust to reveal imperfections and then carefully scraped them with a sharp, two-inch blade from a carpenter's plane. When the gray left by the charcoal dust was gone, he knew the surface was perfectly smooth.

Drawing in Silverpoint and India Ink

Once the model returned to school in the fall, Wessel drew her image in silverpoint on the prepared panel. That process involved drawing with a thread of sterling silver in such a way that the metal deposited small amounts of silver that darkened as they tarnished. The advantage of this process over graphite drawing is that the silver does not dissolve and smear in the layers of ink applied over it (as it would with graphite).



DEMONSTRATION: BECCA (SUNDIAL)



Step 3

Washes of India ink were applied to the model's face, hair, and dress.



Step 4

Wessel applied the red clay bole in the areas of the panel that would be covered with gold leaf.

OPPOSITE PAGE

La Giovanotta

2000, egg tempera and gold leaf, 11 x 12.
Private collection.

As soon as Wessel had done enough drawing with the silver to feel confident about the image of his model, he began drawing the figure and dress with black India ink. "This part is really critical for egg tempera painting because the white gessoed surface and the washes of India ink establish the range of values that will influence the relationship of the colors in the painting," he explains. "It's like a grisaille [gray and white painting] one would develop for an oil painting. The India ink has shellac in it that seals the lines of the drawing and makes them impervious to the layers of water-based paints that will be applied on top.

Gilding the Panel

The next step of the process was to apply layers of *bole*, a red clay that serves as a cushion for burnishing the layers of gold leaf and for establishing the underlying warm tone that comes through around the edges and the transparent areas of the thin gold. Before painting that bole, Wessel applied sheets of frisket paper around the outside edge of the area to be covered by the clay so it would be easier to keep the nongilded sections of the panel clean.

When the bole was dry, Wessel began the water-gilding method of applying half-sheets of the microscopically thin $23\frac{1}{2}$ -karat gold that was pounded until it was $\frac{1}{100,000}$ " thick. Each leaf was bound into a small book from which it was carefully lifted with a long gilder's knife and laid on a leather cushion. The leaves will stick to anything they touch, making it very tricky to transfer them from the cushion onto the prepared panel. After wetting the bole with gilder's liquor (water, glue, and grappa), Wessel picked the leaves up with a broad brush—called a *gilder's tip*—and carefully positioned them on the panel. The leaf looked wrinkled at first, but it gradually flattened itself due to the capillary action of the water in the bole. All of this had to be done in a clean, dust-free environment when Wessel was in the right frame of mind. "In medieval times, artisans went to great lengths to purify themselves before doing gold work," Wessel explains. "I don't go to those extremes, but I make sure my work area is spotless and that I am mentally prepared to undertake the tedious work."

As Wessel applied the delicate leaves of gold, he allowed them to overlap slightly. "I like the gridlike pattern that is created, and the tiny imperfections and holes that inevitably occur add to the richness of the surface because they allow some of the red bole to



DEMONSTRATION: BECCA (SUNDIAL)



Step 5

The bole was dampened with gilder's liquor and the rectangular sheets of gold leaf were applied.



Step 6

Details of the face and hands showing areas covered with terre verte and verdaccio colors.



Step 7

Details of the painting after the bright red colors—or "apples"—were painted.

Christie

2002, egg tempera and gold leaf, 18 x 16.
Private collection.

show through," he comments. Eight to 10 hours after applying the gold, Wessel burnished areas he wanted to appear shinier. "Instead of burnishing the entire surface, I left some sections flat so there would be more variety in the finish of the gold leaf," he explains.

Applying Terre Verte and Verdaccio

At this point Wessel began to paint using a classical method of layering thin glazes of color, starting with the complementary greens in areas that will eventually be the flesh tones and appear as shaded red and pink tones. This is one of the techniques students can use when painting with oils, acrylics, watercolors, or other paints. That is, they can develop shadows by first applying the complement of the color that will eventually appear on the surface of the picture.

Wessel has jars of more than 200 different pigments he purchased from suppliers around the world, some worth hundreds of dollars because they are made from semiprecious stones. Each must be mulled with distilled water on a slab of ground glass and, when the artist is ready to paint, mixed with a 50/50 solution of fresh egg yolk and distilled water. Because of the presence of the egg yolk, the prepared paints have a limited shelf life, so Wessel has to refrigerate the paint when he isn't using it and then prepare fresh mixtures after it spoils.

The procedure Wessel follows for applying the prepared egg tempera is to load a small sable brush with a lot of the paint, dress it by touching it against a paper towel, and gently stroke the brush so the absorbent panel pulls the paint off the tip of the brush in a flowing motion. "I don't scrub the surface as I might if I were painting oils with a bristle brush," he explains. "Egg tempera depends on the building up of thousands of linear strokes of color and gently building the varying degrees of translucence."

Since green is the complement of red, Wessel established a base for the figure's flesh by painting either a transparent, cool green called *terre verte* ("green earth"), or a dark, muddy green called *verdaccio* ("bad green"). The latter is made from a combination of yellow ochre, black, and a warm red, such as Venetian red. "I used the terre verte over all the flesh tones and especially for the highlights and midtones, and I painted a small amount of titanium white to model and bring the highlights up out of the green. The verdaccio was used over the terre verte to block in the areas of deep shadow," he explains. "I also



DEMONSTRATION: BECCA (SUNDIAL)



Step 8

Wessel glazed transparent pink flesh tones made from cadmium red and titanium white.



Step 9

The artist then began painting the dress, necklace, and sundial while he continued building up the flesh tones.



Step 10

Wessel spent three weeks inscribing a map of constellations into the gold leaf.

Venetian Scarf & Tassel

2004, egg tempera,
24 x 18. Private
collection.

worked the terre verte into the hair to soften the edge between the scalp and the hair, and I painted a small amount of it where there was reflected light, such as on the chin line."

Painting the "Apples"

The next step is known as applying the "apples" because a bright red is spotted into places where the flesh tone needs to be indicated with the warmest, most intense red, as in the cheeks, knuckles, and tips of the fingers. "The painting looked really garish after this step was completed because of the contrast of the greens and the bright red, but it was necessary to establish a base color over which I could modulate the colors," Wessel explains. "I have to be careful not to rush into getting rid of that garishness because one of the keys to establishing a luminous flesh is to build the tones gradually."

Glazing the Pink Flesh Tones

Wessel mixed a series of five different pink skin tones from combinations of cadmium red light, titanium white, and a tiny bit of cadmium yellow light to create a basic range of values. Using a Raphaël No. 4 round sable brush, he slowly connected the transitions between the greens and the bright red "apples" using those five colors. As the flesh became more lifelike, he added permanent orange, mauve, and a series of other colors to his palette, slowly adding depth and variety to the coloration. "I usually start with the middle values, and then I model up to the light with colors that are made more opaque with the addition of titanium white. I frequently glaze cool colors over warm ones, and vice versa; or I glaze with pure color when I want brilliance."

Wessel points out that his painting process involves stating and restating areas of the picture. "I mixed sap green and alizarin crimson to make a transparent red

Sources

For more information on egg tempera, including suppliers, workshops, technical information, exhibitions, and catalogues, visit the website of The Society of Tempera Painters: www.eggtempera.com.





THE COMPLETED PAINTING:

Becca (Sundial)

2006, egg tempera and gold leaf, 30 x 24. In a tabernacle frame. Collection Dr. and Mrs. Joe Gretzula.

BELOW

**Self-portrait
(The Satyr)**

2001, egg tempera and gold leaf, 9 x 12. Collection Arden Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts.

brown that I glazed over the shadows and knocked everything down darker," he says. "I did that two or three times while working on the head of the woman, sometimes making things mellow and at other times smoothing them out. Throughout the process I had a chance to restate the drawing."

Painting Other Elements

While Wessel continued to develop the flesh tones in the face, arms, and hands, he also started to paint the model's taffeta gown with warm and cool mixtures of blues and purples. "Painting the dress, carved marble, compass, and necklace was less complicated than the skin tones, and I started building up the warm and cool colors within those sections of the panel while I continued to refine the flesh," he says.

Tooling the Gold Leaf

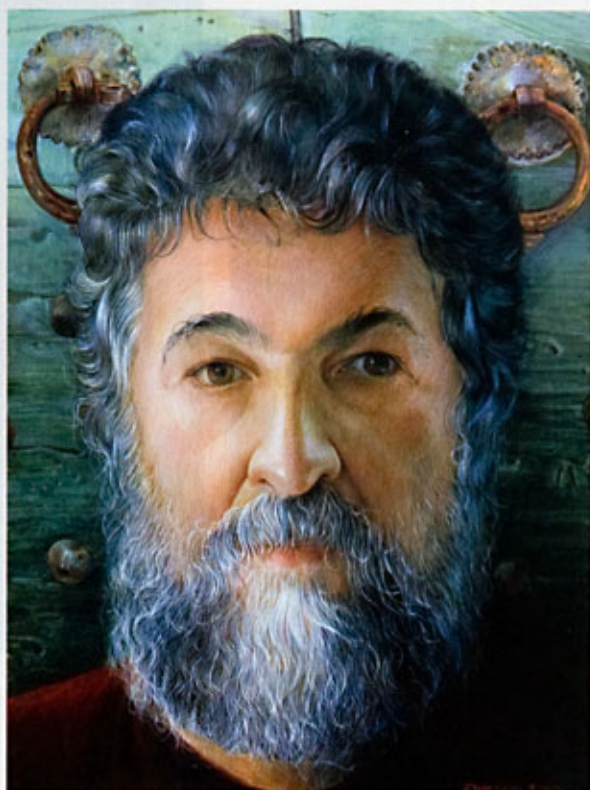
Wessel had the idea of inscribing a map of constellations in the gold leaf background to correspond to the sundial in the model's hand, so he contacted Felice Stoppa, a historian of antique celestial atlases in Italy (www.atlascoelestis.com), and acquired an antique star map by John Flamsteed. He then spent three weeks working with hand-cut acetate stencils to tool the curved lines; and he employed a number of implements for punching stars in the constellations. He ended up dissatisfied with the appearance of the stars, so he used an oil-gilding method to add platinum in those areas so the silver would enhance the appearance of the celestial bodies.

Wessel spent almost six months completing the portrait during his sabbatical from teaching at the Hartford Art School.

Teaching Egg Tempera and Gilding

Wessel offers courses in egg tempera painting and gilding as part of the regular curriculum at the Hartford Art School, where he is a full-time professor, and he conducts summer workshops in Italy with his friend and colleague, Jeremiah Patterson. This summer he offered a one-week workshop in egg tempera painting at the Evansville Museum, in Indiana (www.emuseum.org), in connection with an exhibition of his artwork (June 4 through July 30, 2006). ■

M. Stephen Doherty is the editor-in-chief of American Artist.



About the Artist

Fred Wessel earned a B.F.A. from Syracuse University, in New York, and an M.F.A. from the University of Massachusetts, in Amherst, and he also studied at the Pratt Institute, in New York City. His paintings have been included in both group and solo exhibitions throughout the United States, including The Frye Art Museum, in Seattle; the Sherry French Gallery, in New York City; the Arden Gallery, in Boston; the Turner Carroll Gallery, in Santa Fe; and the Arnot Art Museum, in Elmira, New York. He is a professor of printmaking at the Hartford Art School, and he offers annual painting workshops in Italy. For more information, visit the artist's website: www.fredwessel.com.