

Gilt Leathers: Recent Studies and Investigation Methods On Some Historical Decors

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Gilt leathers, ancestors of our wallpapers, are luxurious decorations used all over Europe mainly between the 16th and the 18th century. Despite their name, gold is not present in the composition of these artifacts. A silver leaf covered with a yellow varnish was applied to the leather which then presented a gold-like appearance and could be painted, punched or embossed.

Stylistic studies to distinguish provenance or date of production existed since 2004 [1], however, analytical studies on these decors remained limited.

In 2011-2012, a team of professionals from different backgrounds was established and set up a research to investigate the different material components within historical gilt-leathers decors. An analytical methodology was developed, involving non-invasive ion beam analyses at the AGLAE facility (C2RMF) that provided promising results in the silver leaf analyses [2].

Subsequently in 2014-2016, the focus was put on this silver leaf, analyzing historical samples and on mock-ups made based on an ancient recipe [3]. Within the project, the collaboration between the leather conservator, the historian of art and the scientists was essential to interpret the results obtained and led to several joint publications. .

Organizing these successive projects has been challenging, as the positions, the professional backgrounds and working contexts were very different between all the members of the group. Currently, this “gilt leather team” is pursuing the work by extending the study to different gilt leather collections in Europe and examining other parameters in order to clarify the question of the provenance of these artefacts.

[1] J.-P. Fournet, *Les cuirs dorés anciens en France. Mémoire de Recherche approfondie, PhD dissertation, Ecole du Louvre, 1739 pp., Paris, 2004. Unpublished.*

[2] C. Bonnot-Diconne, L. Robinet, C. Pacheco, M. Ioele, M. Paris, *Multi-technique analysis of gilt-leather wall coverings (16th-18th centuries), ICOM-CC 17th Triennial Conference Preprints art. 0701, 8 pp., 2014.*

[3] A.D. Fougeroux de Bondaroy, *L'art de travailler les cuirs dorés et argentés, Description des arts et métiers, 42 pp., Paris: Guérin et Delatour, 1762.*

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