

Why can't we find goldsmiths alongside contemporary artists?

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With a remarkable history in the field of art, gold has always been a challenge for artists. Although we more easily associate it with ancient Egyptian and Byzantine art, with flamboyant royal Baroque or Tsarist interiors, the material surprises us with its versatility in contemporary art. It never ceases to renew itself in terms of discourse, aesthetics and symbolism. In many examples, gold supports the concept of creation even through its absence¹. But more often than not, it lays the foundation of the artistic concept, without which the message would not reach the public.

Over the last 30 years, the number of artists using gold has multiplied, and gilding techniques in secular art have diversified. Gold is also used in solid form through the technical process of casting. With the help of new discoveries in the field of chemistry and physics, it is applied to metal surfaces by means of electrolysis. However, in most cases, it is more cost-effective to use it in laminated form, in the form of sheets.

Willing to go beyond the realm of craftsmanship, artists who have gained experience in the field of gilding bring this *modus operandi* into their art, making it truly unique. Thanks to globalisation, the ease with which we can access information, travel and come into contact with the works of renowned artists of all times, although still with some reluctance, there are master gilders who have shared their experience. In the field of Byzantine sacred art, at least in the workshops of Mount Athos, gilding has always been done with bole (bolus), which is why this *modus operandi* has not been lost.

Like Gustav Klimt, in terms of the volume of their work and their preoccupations, we find many contemporary artists. Gold has become a constant element in the works of Yves Klein, Linda Benglis, James Lee Byars, Cristian Eckart, Jim Hodges, Giuseppe Penone, Barry X Ball, Willy Verginer, Gabriel Orozco, Damien Hirst, Yoan Capote, Brad Kunkle, Twany Chatmon, Simon Allen, Stephanie Rew, Michael Bergt, Bernard Delaval and others.

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¹ Piero Manzoni's work, *Artist's Shit*, is a good example in which gold, although not physically present, conceptually represented the currency of exchange for the contents of the can, with the intention of criticising consumerism.

The most difficult aspect of my doctoral research was identifying information about the people who gilded various works by more or less established artists. This led me to conclude that we are dealing with an ethical issue, because in most cases, the gilding is not done by the artist.

Finding a gilder is not as easy as it seems. While everyone knows a painter, sculptor, architect, doctor, etc., I challenge you to name a gilder or a gilding workshop. In Romania, there is one gilding workshop that performs chemical gilding through electrolysis, the Romanian Patriarchate Workshop, the only one accredited for gilding church objects. If there are other workshops, they are not well known because they are small and belong to jewellery shops. And yet, most priests are unaware that they can have locks or other religious objects gilded there. I have witnessed unintentional vandalism due to collaboration with amateurs in the field of gilding, who did not have sufficient technical knowledge about the types of gilding suitable for a particular material. Others have sent items to be gilded abroad, to Russia or Greece.

There is no institution that teaches gilding techniques, either in the country or abroad. No educational institution trains gilders in exchange for a diploma.

How is it then that this craft has not disappeared? First of all, the main reason is the continuous demand for gilded objects.

This type of training has been carried out for thousands of years under the guidance of practicing gilders, who do not and will not have a diploma certifying their skills. Finding someone willing to share their experience as a gilder is another challenge. As a researcher, I was not allowed access to the Patriarchate's workshops. Although I made all the necessary arrangements, I was only offered the opportunity to contact the chemical engineer for any questions I might have, but I was unable to attend the gilding process inside the workshops. Although the request came from the George Enescu National University of Arts, along with assurances that the purpose was scientific research, not creating competition, the answer remained the same.

In our country, if you want to find a gilder, the surest way is to look in the field of sacred art. But none of them were trained as gilders in educational institutions.

Therefore, gilders are rare and hard to find. So why is it that not only do artists forget to mention their collaborators, but journalists also fail to ask questions about gilding, especially when this stage is absolutely crucial to the final message the artist wants to convey?

In this paper, I do not intend to place art on the same level as gilding, or the artist on the same level as the gilder, but I want to point out that the public has the right to know that gilding does not appear on the surface of a work of art without effort; it is done by a person who, naturally, has an occupation. This person can be called a gilder, a gold leaf artist, a goldsmith or whatever you like,

because this occupation does not have an official name in the Romanian occupational code, although it is not among the newly-established professions.

Following my doctoral research, I have not discovered any names of gilders who have gone down in history, although evidence shows that there is a history of approximately 7,000 years of rolled gold.

I will therefore present two examples where, due to the fact that the works were re-created after the artists' deaths, their physical involvement in the gilding process seems almost impossible.

One of these is the work of Jannis Kounellis *Untitled (Civil Tragedy)*. Jannis Kounellis (1936-2017), expressing himself within the *arte povera* movement, used this precious metal to transform mundane and anonymous objects into monuments to a person's life.

In order to be exhibited in different places, this work must simply be recreated, as the gilded wall is part of the gallery/museum building. For example, in order to be exhibited one year after the artist's death at the Harlem Gavin Brown's Enterprise gallery in New York, someone gilded the wall of that gallery, a former brewery. Coincidentally, Sarah Douglas, author of an article for ARTnews, caught the person who did this. This man was described as “an art installer”², climbing a tall ladder to apply gold leaf to a huge expanse of wall. This action is correctly defined in the article as the “finishing touch” to the work, continuing with the idea that the lighting of the brick walls would have been too dim compared to the light provided by the gold, a light that shines from within. So, recognising the importance of his action on Kounellis' work, this man is not even mentioned by name or profession. *Art installer* is not equivalent to the role of gilding technician.



Fig. 1 Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled (Civil Tragedy)*, 2018³

² Sarah Douglas (2018). *Ashes and Gold in First Substantial Jannis Kounellis Show Since Artist's Death*, published online on 3 November, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/ashes-gold-first-substantial-jannis-kounellis-show-since-artists-death-11274/>, accessed on 17 May 2023.

³ Jannis Kounellis (2018). *Untitled (Tragedia civile)*, gilded wall, coat, hat, photo: Thomas Muller, Courtesy of Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York/Rome, published on <https://sculpturemagazine.art/jannis-kounellis/>, accessed on 30 October 2023.

The author of the article creates the impression that any “art installer” could gild a wall using some unknown technique. There is no question of identifying the adhesive medium or even whether the laminated metal used in the version in Figure 1 is gold or slag metal⁴. The public is misled by the omission of this absolutely necessary information.



Fig. 2 Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled (Civil Tragedy)*, 1989⁵



Fig. 3 Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled (Civil Tragedy)*, 1986⁶

⁴ Slag metal is a substitute for gold, an alloy of copper and aluminium which, unlike real gold, reacts chemically to environmental factors, resulting in oxidation. Its appearance is kitschy, shinier than gold, which has a pearly sheen. Slagmetal sheets are much larger than gold sheets (I have not seen any gold sheets larger than 12x12 cm);

⁵ Jannis Kounellis (1988-1989). *Untitled (Civil Tragedy)*, view from the exhibition organised by Castello di Rivoli, Turin, 28 October-12 February, curated by Rudi Fuchs and Johannes Gachnang.

⁶ Jannis Kounellis (1986-1987). *Untitled (Civil Tragedy)*, view from the exhibition *A Retrospective in Five Locations*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 17 October-4 January, <https://www.gladstonegallery.com/artist/jannis-kounellis/work-detail/7490/em-civil-tragedy-em>, accessed on 30 October 2023.



Fig. 4 Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled (Civil Tragedy)*, 1975⁷



Fig. 5 Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled (Civil Tragedy)*, 2019⁸

If I publish a photograph of this installation without the consent of the person who took the photograph, not recreated the installation, I risk being accused under copyright laws. Comparing the time and effort involved in taking a digital photograph with gilding a wall, as a practitioner of both, I can say the difference in terms of effort is enormous.

None of the versions of this work mention the name of the person who carried out the most difficult and important part of this work. This is not an error, but a practice. This custom is common in modern and contemporary art.

⁷ Jannis Kounellis (1975). *Untitled (Civil Tragedy)*, view from the exhibition in Naples, Lucio Amelio Gallery, photo: Mimmo Jodice, published in <https://www.platocontemporary.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2021/09/JANNIS-KOUNELLIS-at-The-Numismatic-2023-Website-Presentation-.pdf>, accessed on 30 November 2023.

⁸ Jannis Kounellis (2019). *Untitled (Civil Tragedy)*, gilded wall, coat rack, coat, hat, lamp, Fondazione Prada-s Ca Corner della Regina, Venice, Photo: Agostino Osio, <https://brooklynrail.org/2019/09/artseen/Jannis-Kounellis>, accessed on 30 October 2023.

Another example is James Lee Byars' last and most voluminous work, created posthumously based on sketches he had conceived during his lifetime, *The Golden Tower*. James Lee Byars (1932-1992) used gold extensively in his art, for reasons related to its symbolism of spirituality.

In 2017, for the 57th edition of the Venice Art Biennale, this version was created. The sculpture, 21 meters high and 2.5 metres in diameter, with a surface area of approximately 170 square metres, is made entirely of gold-plated steel. It symbolizes a colossal lighthouse, the oracle that unifies heaven and earth⁹. Unlike Kounellis' work, we were able to find out who was responsible for the gilding process, but not easily. Gilded using the mixtion gilding technique, the work was carried out in 2017 by gilding technicians from the Reduzzi workshop¹⁰. How did I find this information? While browsing the website of the gold leaf supplier, Giusto Manetti Battiloro, I found a “gallery” section containing various works of art that have been gilded with gold from this supplier and references to the Reduzzi workshop. On the same website, there was a recording of the gilding process. Lino Reduzzi, the narrator, presented the entire process, although he did not mention the entire team. So, the question remains: what are the names of those who glued at least 26,520 sheets?

Even though gilding is an activity that falls more within the realm of craftsmanship and artisanship, this work would not have had the same appearance if it weren't for those gilding technicians. But Lino Reduzzi is not just a technician without artistic training. Before setting up his workshop, which does not deal exclusively with gilding, but also with glassware and mosaics, Lino Reduzzi graduated from the Carrara di Belle Arti Academy in Bergamo, so he is an academically accredited artist. Unfortunately, however, in the articles published on the website of the Michael Werner Gallery, the gallery that supported the creation of this work, as well as on the ARTnews website, where the subject of the “Golden Tower” was discussed, there is absolutely no reference or even allusion to the person(s) who carried out the gilding process. Only the Reduzzi workshop website provides technical information about the materials used.

So, is it ethical to give all the credit to Byars, even though he wasn't even there when it was made? While I'm not saying the Reduzzi workshop should take credit for the work, I think it's really important to give these gilders the credit they deserve, especially since the gilding is such a big part of Byars' concept. Without gold, we cannot discuss of the *Golden Tower*.

⁹ Uma Nair (2017). *Bridge between heaven and earth: James Byars' Golden Tower showcased at the 57th Venice Biennale is a modern day totem*, May, <https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/bridge-heaven-earth-james-byars-golden-tower-showcased-57th-venice-biennale-modern-day-totem/>, accessed on 12 December 2021.

¹⁰ <http://www.studioereduzzi.com/en/portfolio/james-lee-byars-the-golden-tower/>, accessed on 14 January 2022.



Fig. 6 James Lee Byars, *Golden Tower*, steel gilded with 24 K gold, 21 m high, 2.5 m diameter, approx. 170 square meters of surface area, Venice, 2017¹¹

Unfortunately, I have encountered this approach to gilding very often, even though gilding is the final touch and perhaps the most important stage, both in terms of aesthetics and concept.

Extrapolating, I propose a different situation: if an artist receives a commission for a work and is given precise instructions regarding the subject, color scheme and form, whose work will it be? The person who had the idea but called on a specialist to give it form, or the person who executed it? But what if the person who commissioned the work has studied art and identifies as an artist? Can they take full ownership of the work, as is the case with the works of Damien Hirst, Niclas Castello or Jeff Koons? If Byars' sculpture had remained unplated, where would the “gilded machine to honor the gods”¹² have been? How would the “allusion to the symbol of the sun” have been made, and how would it have become a symbol of inner enlightenment, intellectual knowledge and spiritual experience? How would the concept of divinity have been conveyed?¹³

Another ethical issue is raised by the art of Hubert Duprat (b. 1957), a French artist who stands out for his totally unusual way of creating art using *Trichoptera* larvae from the *Rhyacophilidae* family, which he forces to build cocoons out of gold, pearls and precious stones.

These insects resemble moths or butterflies, which, in their larval stage, live in the aquatic environment of rivers. Until they reach the butterfly stage, in

¹¹ <http://www.studioereduzzi.com/en/portfolio/james-lee-byars-the-golden-tower/>, accessed on 14 January 2022.

¹² Alberto Salvatori – curator of the work, <https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/bridge-heaven-earth-james-byars-golden-tower-showcased-57th-venice-biennale-modern-day-totem/>

¹³ *Idem.*

order to protect themselves from predators, they build “houses” similar to snails' shells - out of pebbles, sand, plant debris and silk (which they produce with the help of glands).

Hubert Duprat put these small and precious sculptures into realization after wondering what happened if any larva found a grain of gold in the river sand. Would it use it to create its aquatic cocoon? Thus, the idea of depriving them of any other material usually found in their natural habitat took shape, providing them only with gold flakes, pearls and precious stones to work with. The result was unexpectedly beautiful. Taken out of context, the tiny sculptures appear to have been crafted by a jeweler.



Fig. 7 Hubert Duprat, gold, pearls, precious stones, 1980-2000, approx. 0.5x1.9cm¹⁴

These paradoxical artefacts, halfway between the natural and the artificial, have raised ethical controversies. Who is their author? The insect, unaware of what it is doing, or the artist who left the right materials within reach of the larvae? Apparently, without doing anything, Duprat is the author of these small jewelry sculptures.

These insects are merely fulfilling a biological function in response to environmental conditions. However, their skill and innovative ability to weave solid casings, the way they randomly choose precious stones, gold or pearls, may lead us to wonder whether they also incorporate the visual element into the structures they build. Are these larvae creative?

¹⁴ <https://ro.pinterest.com/pin/28499410114257562/> accessed on 20 June 2023.

Critic Christian Besson¹⁵ states that the result, both natural and aesthetic, transforms the larva's shell, which is more than an assisted *ready-made* or a diversion, into an object with a dual scientific and artistic exposure. He also said that these creations can be both the work of the larvae and of Duprat, and that this overlap represents in many ways the role of art and science, which, although they may seem incompatible, often work together to create beautiful things. Duprat's contribution is based on his understanding of the biology of larvae, and the science by which these creatures build their shells is brought to light by the artist providing the necessary materials. The argument that exonerates Duprat from the ethical issues raised in the case of Kounellis or Byars' works is that Duprat states his degree of involvement and admits from the outset that these sculptures are made by larvae. The public knows without looking too hard that the “technicians” of these works are the larvae and not the artist.

Gold is a very slippery material. Its material or symbolic value has often surpassed sophisticated artistic concepts. Yves Klein, however, bordered on charlatanism, loving the color golden so much that it constituted 30% of the color palette he used. He sold the space in the exhibition “The Void” called “the zone of immaterial pictorial sensibility”¹⁶ for gold. In exchange for 20 grams or even 1000 grams, according to other sources¹⁷, collectors received a certificate of ownership of an invisible work. The final stage of this action took place on the River Seine, where some of these collectors agreed to burn the certificate together with the artist, who threw some of the gold in the form of flakes into the river.

Often, the public was blinded by its brilliance and it did not matter that the name of the artist who used it was well-established, as was the case with Maurizio Cattelan's “America” (2016), when the sculpture in the shape of a toilet was stolen from the exhibition, most likely not for the beauty of its shape or the practical necessity of the object, but because it was made of solid 18K gold.

Niclas Castello, aware that the numismatic value of his gold work, *The Castello Cube* (2022), exceeds its artistic value, exhibited a 24K gold cube weighing 186kg for several hours in New York's Central Park, protected by security. He declared the value to be \$11.7 million, and we can assume that he needed publicity because the news was about the cartage, the material value, the specially designed furnace to cast that shape in a city in Switzerland – without

¹⁵ Christian Besson, statement in the article *Underwater architects: The Caddisfly Art of Hubert Duprat*, <https://underwaterarchitects.weebly.com/about-the-artist.html>, accessed on 20 June 2023.

¹⁶ Piotr Policht (2016). *How Yves Klein Played with Gold*, 15 December, <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/yves-klein-played-gold/>, accessed on 8 May 2023.

¹⁷ Jonathon Keats (2014). *This Milan Exhibit Reveals How Yves Klein Transmuted Gold into Art*, 8 December, Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathonkeats/2014/12/08/this-milan-exhibit-reveals-how-yves-klein-transmuted-gold-into-art-and-how-lucio-fontana-made-paintings-of-nothing-at-all/>, accessed on 8 May 2023.

mentioning who cast the gold into the cubic shape. The artistic concept pales in comparison to the sparkle of gold.

Another example of gold dominating the artist was Billy Apple's "apples". The Golden Apple (1983) is Billy Apple's most expensive work, a gold apple weighing 103.599 ounces (2936.98 grams), bearing the Hallmark of the London Bullion Market Association, the hallmark of the bullion and the artist's signature¹⁸. It was a solid gold object, including the core, although the artist had originally wanted the edge of the apple to be no more than 5 millimeters thick. Advised by Ray Smith, director of the Auckland Coin and Bullion Exchange at the time, the artist agreed to make it solid and gave him the right to produce one work with his signature and 19 unsigned works for which he was to receive \$1,000 each. It appears this was a scheme to export gold in a form other than legitimate ingots, which would have been subject to specific customs procedures. However, if the gold was in the form of a work of art, it was no longer subject to these procedures. Thus, the gold left in the form of golden apples, i.e. works of art, for Hong Kong and never returned, the artist most likely being used. Billy Apple did nothing more than choose an apple from a greengrocer's for which he paid 25 cents.

This raises the question: is there such a thing as an ethically ideal artist who works with gold, has the practical skills of a goldsmith and does not need to collaborate with anyone, who is not caught up in technical demonstrations and completely outside the realm of craftsmanship? The presence of such an artist would further legitimize the claim that there is an ethical problem in this field and on this issue.

Is there an ideal artist who uses gold in order not to dazzle the public, but as a means of rendering the subject/ unique, without which the message could not reach the public?

Well, the artist who fits any ethical standard exists and his name is Simon Allen. This British artist, like Klimt, after graduating in Fine Arts, devoted part of his life to learning how to gild frames in the best frame gilding workshop in London. Later, having mastered the technique of bolus gilding, he opened his own gilding workshop in his city. Simon Allen could not resist the urge to create, and he took advantage of his experience as a gilder, using it to create true landscapes that are seemingly abstract, yet figurative, his art lying on the border between painting and sculpture, between figurative and abstract.

From a technical point of view, Simon Allen is the only one who touches every layer of his work, from creating the wooden volume, to preparing the primer, sanding it, applying layers of bolus, sanding them, and then gluing one or two rows of gold, depending on the effect he is seeking to achieve.

¹⁸ Apples and People (2022). *Who bit the apple, Billy? Billy Apple-s apples*, published on 24 November, <https://applesandpeople.org.uk/billy-apple/>, accessed on 20 May 2023.

Allen's works are beautiful and valuable in themselves, whether they are plated with silver, gold or platinum. The emotion and charge with which the audience leaves are purely contemplative in nature. The audience does not leave Allen's works remembering only the cartage and amount of gold glued to the work.



Fig. 8 Simon Allen in his studio, photographed while gilding a work¹⁹

This artist offers time and commitment, and in the end, all this effort imbues the works with warmth and craftsmanship. Not everyone can do what he does.

It is encouraging that there are artists who enjoy every stage of transforming a piece of wood into a work of art, although only a connoisseur can assess the amount of time this involves. It is ethically correct that the artist does not replace himself with an anonymous person when the work goes through the stages where the creative hands get dirty and work clothes must be worn. Allen's art is a positive example of the ethics of creation and execution that counterbalances and contrasts with the attitude and manner in which so many other artists use gold, both in terms of the symbolism and the way they work.

We find the same ethical attitude in other artists who use the bolus gilding technique. Only a practitioner of this gilding technique knows what can be achieved and how to prepare the stages. Knowing the technique, they know how to exploit certain technical flaws to achieve certain surfaces, as we see in the "Cloud study" series. Here, he was not interested in technical perfection, but in the unique visual effect that can only be created through a technical flaw, by means of the bolus technique. He is not interested in exhibiting gold as Maurizio Cattelan, Marc Quinn, Niclas Castello and many others do. The gold is merely the means by which the subject is presented to the public.

¹⁹ <https://www.baxterbradford.com/media/76bc6fa3-f998-41e8-9f59-f6ac1e046b75-simon-allen-sculptor-gilding-in-his-studio-near-penzance> accessed on 2 June 2023.



Fig. 9, 10, 11 Simon Allen, *Cloud study* no. 6, 14, 15, diameter 47.5 cm, 12 K white gold and 22 K yellow gold carved and primed wood, 2020²⁰

We live in a world where photographers who photograph Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* claim copyright for the image they have taken. If this is correct, then it is not right to ignore the importance of goldsmiths who collaborate with artists, implying that they do not even exist.

Unfortunately, I have not been able to find out who gilds the sculptures of Willy Verginer, Linda Benglis, James Lee Byars, Jim Hodges, Giuseppe Penone, Barry X Ball, Damien Hirst or the paintings of Gabriel Orozco, Yves Klein, Cristian Eckart, Yoan Capote and others.

Why don't we see gilders alongside contemporary artists? It's a rhetorical question, but at the same time, it is legit and totally fair.

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²⁰ <https://www.simonallensculptor.co.uk/artworks/categories/7/9518/> accessed on 2 June 2023.

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