
JIMMY
HORNET
Magazine
NO FOMO
ELEVEN

Marcus Walkley

Gold Alchemist : gilding new life.

By Karla Pincott



In a world increasingly dominated by digital imagery and mass production, there remains a quiet, almost sacred art form that defies time and trends. Gilding — the ancient practice of applying thin layers of gold or other metals to surfaces — has endured for millennia, whispering its way through history in temples, palaces, icons, and now, a revival in contemporary art and architecture. At the heart of this living tradition is Melbourne-based master gilder Marcus Walkley, an artist and craftsman whose work bridges between centuries of heritage and bold, modern expression.

Walkley's journey into gilding didn't start in a studio or workshop, but with a childhood fascination with ancient Egyptian artefacts. "It began when I was a small child, utterly captivated by the treasures of the Tomb of Tutankhamen," he recalls. "There was something profoundly moving about those golden surfaces — how, after over 3,000 years in darkness, they still shimmered with such intensity when struck by light." That early fascination would evolve into a lifelong devotion to a craft that demands both precision and poetry.

Over more than three decades, he's refined his skills across architectural gilding, furniture restoration, and contemporary fine art - both his own and in collaborations with other artists. His hands have burnished walls and ceilings, sculptural installations, and art canvases. But it's not just the material that defines him. It's also the philosophy behind the process itself.

"Mastery, I've found, comes not from perfection, but from a deep and evolving conversation with the materials themselves," he explains. This humility before the medium is evident in every piece he creates, whether restoring a historic building or collaborating with contemporary artists like Sam Jinks. It's this balance between reverence and reinvention that makes Walkley's work so compelling, not only for connoisseurs of traditional craftsmanship, but also for those who seek meaning beyond the surface.



Gilding, at its core, is about light. It captures it, bends it, amplifies it. In Walkley's hands, gold becomes more than ornamentation; it becomes a visual language.

"Gold, for me, is not just a surface treatment — it's an emotional medium," he says. "It holds weight, both visually and symbolically."

"On canvas, it becomes a kind of silent language: it reflects light, yes, but also presence, memory, and even silence. It has a way of drawing the viewer in — not just with its radiance, but with the stillness and gravity it imparts.

"There's something inherently spiritual about gold. Historically, it's been used to depict the divine, the sacred, the unreachable. In my work, that legacy is always present, but I try to reframe it — not as an icon of worship, but as a kind of emotional amplifier.

"A gilded surface on canvas has the power to suspend time. It invites contemplation. It changes as the light shifts or the viewer moves, revealing new details and impressions—like watching a memory resurface.

"Silver, by contrast, is more transient, more ethereal. It speaks in softer tones, often cooler and more elusive. I use it when I want the work to feel reflective in a different way... less about permanence, more about fragility and movement."

"In exterior works, particularly with gold, the effect becomes even more primal. Gold's ability to reject infrared light makes it almost explosive in sunlight. It doesn't just glow — it asserts itself. I call it smashing light. It's not just beauty... it's power.

This understanding of gilding as a conduit for emotion informs much of Walkley's artistic process. He often works with translucent fabrics like ramie, gilding both sides to create shifting layers of light. "I gild both sides of open-weave fabrics — positive gilding on the face, reverse gilding beneath — so the light passes through and interacts with the metal in unexpected ways," he says. The result is a kind of living canvas, one that changes with the viewer's movement and the ambient light.

While Walkley's work is undeniably rooted in tradition, it is far from static. His collaborations with contemporary artists and designers continually push the boundaries of what gilding can be.

One particularly memorable partnership has been with sculptor Sam Jinks, whose hyper-realistic figures were transformed by the addition of high-burnished 24kt gold leaf. "Applying 24kt high-burnished gold leaf to his hyper-real sculptures was profoundly moving," Walkley remembers. "His figures already walk a tightrope between the real and the unreal, but the gilding pushed them further — into the ethereal."

This fusion of classical technique with cutting-edge vision is a hallmark of Walkley's practice. He describes gilding as a "dance between precision and intuition," where technical skill must be tempered by creative spontaneity. "The gold demands care and respect — but once it's in your hands, it also wants to be part of something unexpected."

That unexpectedness has led Walkley to experiment with unconventional materials — from builder's plastic to resin — to challenge preconceptions about gilding's place in contemporary art. "I've never felt that gilding should be confined to tradition or reserved for the ornamental," he says. "Pushing the boundaries of what gilding can be is at the heart of my practice."

"Some of my most interesting work comes from embracing the way metals age, oxidise, and react to the environment — intentionally allowing time and air to become part of the artwork. Each metal — and how I prepare and apply it — brings a different narrative to life. That's why material selection is a deeply intuitive and technically strategic part of my practice. It's where alchemy meets intention."

Another revelation came during a residency in Bali, where he created 161 works exploring Balinese iconography. "The narrative was vital, and so was material experimentation," he says. Shortly after, another series saw him gilding with lustrous rosined silver foil on canvas "pushing both aesthetic and technical boundaries. These large-scale projects gave me room to stretch, to question tradition while remaining anchored in it."

On collaboration, he adds: "Collaboration brings fresh perspectives and keeps the work dynamic. Every artist or client brings their own vision, vocabulary, and emotional intent — and that naturally challenges me to step outside of my own habits and see gilding through new lenses."



"Whether it's a sculptor like Sam Jinks, an architect pushing for innovation in surface design, or a curator with a clear thematic brief, each exchange reshapes how I think about the material."

"These collaborations often push me into unfamiliar territory — new substrates, unusual environments, unexpected applications. That's where growth happens. I might be asked to make gold behave in a way it traditionally wouldn't, or to create a finish that feels ancient but is entirely contemporary in construction. Those are the moments that expand the language of my craft."

This extended to a collaborative project with his son, Phaael. "Instead of following the formal plan, he began humorously 'storyboarding' each piece into playful and fictional vignettes... titles like Sex on the Beach, The Morning After, Rugby Rules, and Mafia. Each panel became a miniature drama, composed of souvenirs, kitsch, and gilded scraps fished from the suitcase of a well-travelled young Mediterranean locals."

"The result was irreverent, energetic, and oddly touching. What had started as a sophisticated gilded decor colour scheme transformed into a visual anthology of souvenired lives — gilded snapshots of nostalgia, mischief, and memory. The installation was a hit, and a few months later we were called back to create two more walls of what became affectionately known as 'the trashy tales of treasured moments.'"

"It was a lesson in letting go... allowing humour, spontaneity, and storytelling to drive the gilding process. It reminded me that gold doesn't always have to be serious or sacred. Sometimes, it can be cheeky, messy, and gloriously human."

Among Walkley's most significant projects is the restoration of Hamer Hall in Melbourne, a cultural landmark that carries both public and personal meaning. "Knowing that my work would be experienced by thousands of visitors, performers, and audiences gave the project a profound sense of purpose," he says. "But on a personal level, it held even deeper meaning. My parents sat beneath those ceilings."

This intersection of history and intimacy is central to his restoration work. Whether reviving a centuries-old mirror frame from Peru or uncovering hidden layers in a John Truscott-designed 'brass bauble' ceiling or chandelier, he approaches each piece with a sense of reverence. "You're not just reviving something; you're unearthing a story hidden in its layers," he explains.

Restoration, he argues, is not simply about repairing damage — it's about preserving intention. "I study the original techniques, materials, and aesthetics, aiming to restore without overshadowing," he says. "The goal is to breathe new life while honoring the original vision." This philosophy extends to ethical considerations, particularly around how much to intervene. "The temptation to over-restore can compromise authenticity," he warns. "I believe in minimal intervention, ensuring the piece retains its historical integrity."

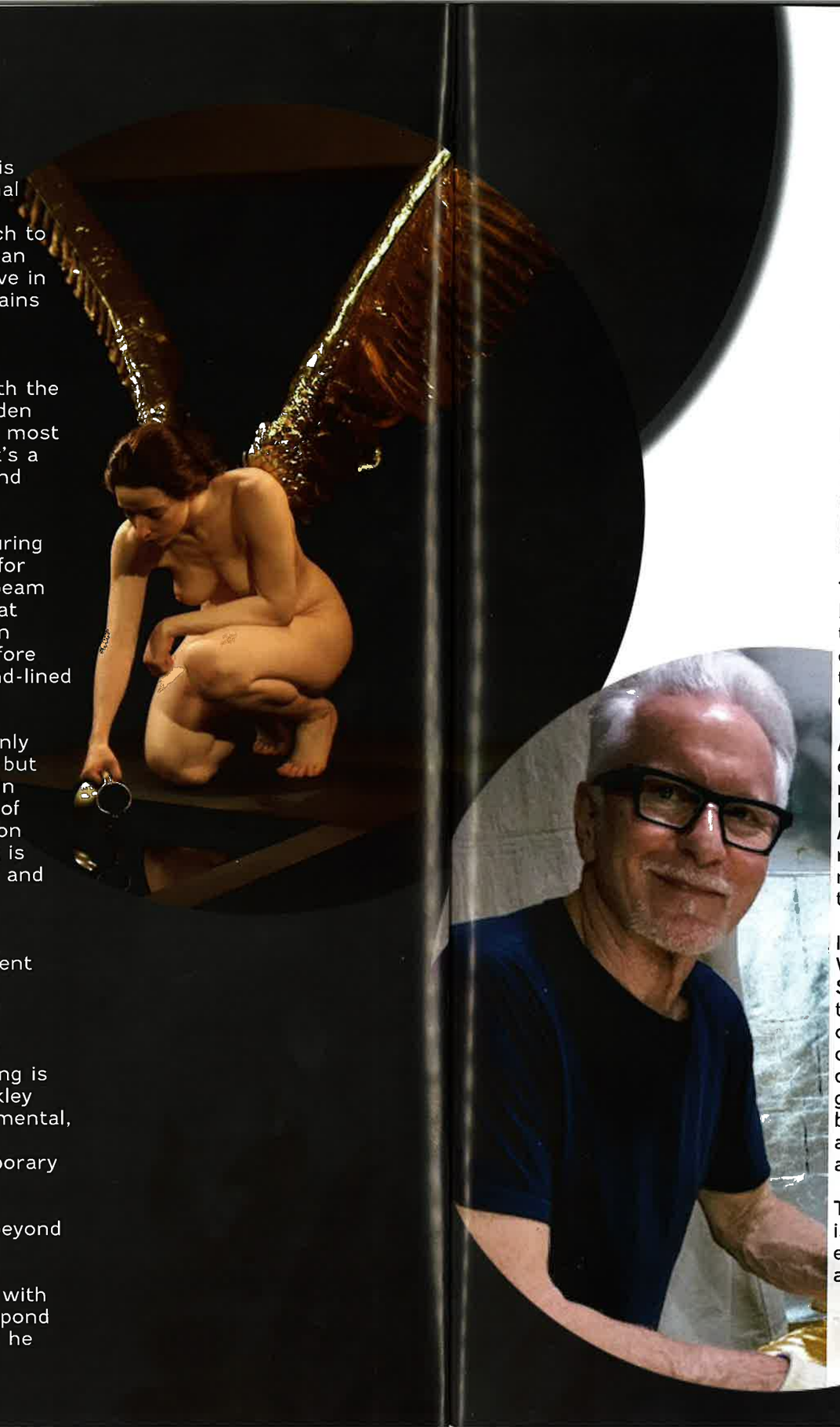
Yet, for all its challenges, restoration offers Walkley a unique opportunity to connect with the past. "Uncovering previous restorations, hidden layers, or forgotten techniques is one of the most fascinating parts of the work," he shares. "It's a direct connection to the hands, decisions, and aesthetics of another era."

A particularly memorable discovery came during the restoration of the steel beam structure for Hamer Hall's John Truscott-designed steel beam structure. "During the work, I discovered that every steel beam had been first painted in an enamel copper tone, then entirely gilded, before the now-iconic classic red borders were hand-lined over the surface," Walkley says.

"This kind of layered discovery reveals not only the craftsmanship behind the original work, but also the thought process — the care taken in sequencing finishes to achieve the richness of Truscott's vision. It deepens your appreciation of the piece and reinforces how important it is to approach every restoration with curiosity and respect."

Walkley's work, both architectural and his works on canvas, show that despite its ancient origins, gilding is undergoing a renaissance in contemporary art and design. Artists and architects alike are discovering its potential not just as decoration, but as a medium for conceptual depth and sensory impact. "Gilding is absolutely experiencing a renaissance," Walkley affirms. "It's no longer confined to the ornamental, the sacred, or the historical — it's being reimagined and recontextualised by contemporary artists and designers across disciplines."

He envisions a future where gilding moves beyond physical objects into immersive, interactive environments. "Imagine creating interactive environments where the viewer can engage with shifting surfaces... where gold and silver respond to movement, light, or gesture in real time," he suggests.



Technology, too, is opening up fresh possibilities. Walkley sees promise in hybrid approaches that combine traditional gilding with laser cutting, digital fabrication, and mixed media. "These technologies open up new possibilities for precision, intricate patterns, and design complexity that were previously impossible or extremely time-consuming by hand," he says.

But even as he embraces innovation, Walkley remains grounded in the tactile nature of the craft. "Some things can't be rushed," he reminds us. "And even the most delicate gestures can leave a lasting impact."

Perhaps the most enduring lesson Walkley has learned is the importance of patience, humility, and openness. "Gold leaf is incredibly delicate and has a personality of its own," he reflects. "It demands patience, attention, and a steady hand, but more than that, it demands humility. You can't force it; you have to work with it, not against it."

This philosophy extends beyond the studio and into life itself. "Gilding has taught me to notice nuance, to work with care, and to stay open to unexpected outcomes," he says. "It reminds me that some things can't be rushed and that even the most delicate gestures can leave a lasting impact."

As Walkley looks to the future, he continues to explore new collaborations and concepts; most recently with young Indigenous artist Aretha Brown and international creators from Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Each partnership represents a continuation of gilding's long narrative, weaving together past and present, tradition and innovation.

If given the chance to gild any object in the world, Walkley dreams of returning gold to the Benben Stones atop the Great Pyramids of Egypt. "Imagine the sun once again shining like shafts from heaven over the sands of Egypt, the gilded surfaces catching the light, smashing it and reflecting it deep into space," he muses. For Walkley, such a gesture would be more than aesthetic — it would be "an act of storytelling, a bridge between time and culture, a celebration of humanity's shared artistic spirit."

Through his work, Walkley proves that gilding is not merely a relic of the past, but a vibrant, evolving art form. One that continues to illuminate and inspire.

walkleyart.com
@walkleyart