

Authentic and warm – gold embossed leather

Gold embossing on leather always brings out a special charm and style in furniture and artefacts. Furniture such as desks, davenports, revolving bookcases and filing cabinets particularly lend themselves to this technique. Leather embossed with gold dates back to the late 1600s and conceivably even earlier, though perhaps in cruder forms.

An English writing desk or scriptor, c.1690 (Victoria & Albert Museum), and a walnut inlaid writing cabinet (the property of Alfred A. de Pass) are but two early examples of the gold embossing on leather technique. It is argued that simplicity in furniture died with the death of the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell in 1659. The restoration of the monarchy was accompanied by entirely new forms of thought as tastes were influenced by those of France and Flanders. Within decades the luxury which permeated Whitehall led to a tendency towards extravagance throughout the nation.

Today gold embossing is requested mainly for writing boxes, davenports and desks of varying descriptions. The owners of older pieces sometimes wish to replicate the original design. This is often possible with modern tools which echo the designs of the past. However customised tools may need to be especially made if this is not the case.

The foremost task in any restoration work of this kind is to ensure the rebate to accept the leather is in good order. The surface must be clean and well jointed to avoid any future movement. Any imperfections below the leather will become obvious over time. This will devalue any investment which may otherwise have been achieved.

It is interesting to note that in older pieces the rebate is quite shallow. Before improvements in the technology of the tanning and preparation of leather, the thinnest and most even leather available was basil (sheep hide). Unfortunately it does not wear well and is prone to tearing much like cardboard, particularly if it is quite aged. An additional problem associated with the use of basil is the fact that the leather does not readily cover larger desk tops without the necessity of having numerous joins.

The gold embossing usually went over such joins to 'hide' them and to distract the eye away from what might otherwise be considered an imperfection. The three piece desk tops which are not divided by solid timber are a modern day reminder of the use of smaller basil hides. Another method of covering a large desk was to actually have each small hide cut off from the others with a timber dividing panel.

Writing boxes and fold down style desk tops represent a minor challenge to the gold embosser because allowance has to be made for the fold along the hinge line. Neat pull tags also have to be incorporated in some instances where hidden sections lay beneath the leather writing surface.

In modern times we are fortunate to have European countries breeding and farming cows primarily for their hides. The processes of selecting, preparing and finishing the hide for desk tops are different to any other processes for similar thickness cowhides. The tops need to be smooth and even, in thickness, as well as in the leather grain itself. Enough give is required for writing comfort, but at the same

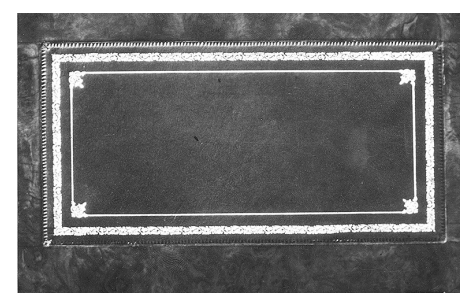
time they must be hard enough to support the paper during pressure from the pen nib.

People who own gold embossed desks and writing boxes enjoy the warmth and comfort of leather which contrasts starkly with the cold and often sweaty feel of a hand upon timber or glass. Writing is certainly more pleasurable as well.

The main leather colours to be found in antique pieces are antique burgundy, olive green, dark green, and to a lesser extent antique blue and black. Browns and beiges are occasionally encountered in some older pieces. The good news is that today practically any colour of the rainbow is available to the client, which makes the task of either authenticity or interior design far easier.

The gold embossing tools are imported from Europe. A wide range of traditional tool designs exists. It is worthwhile to get a referral to a gold embosser who has an extensive range. This simply increases your options when deciding on an overall effect or design. It is also acceptable to have initials, special tooling or even corporate logos. This does not adversely affect the value of the piece as leather can be replaced at any time. Indeed, certain buyers are delighted to get a piece of furniture with evidence of its history in plain view.

The gold is best applied in its 22-carat form. Artificial gold is a modern product which does not handle wear and tear, and starts losing its colour within the first couple of years. The method of tooling and the tools themselves work best with real leather and real gold. The two mediums work together, in synergy, to create the long-lasting final effect. Using

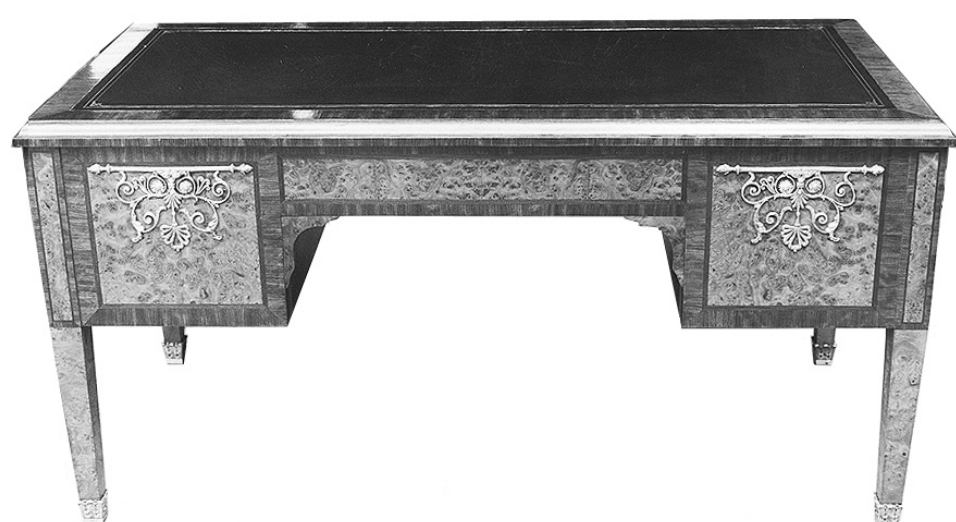


anything else requires a compromise in quality. Finally the leather can be 'antiqued' and sealed. Antiquing not only gives it an authentic aged look (lighter towards the centre of the desk and darker towards the sides) but it also dulls the 'new' look which can appear after processing at the tannery. The final appearance can be fairly motley or very even, depending upon individual taste.

The sealant is the protective coating which allows the top to endure repeated regular use over long periods of time. The only maintenance thereafter should be a wax over when doing the rest of the piece of furniture.

The whole experience of choosing the leather and gold embossing design is interesting and exciting. The final product will ideally draw the eye of the onlooker, but not be out of step with the original style of the piece ■

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