

The woman who works in gold

Hidden away behind closed doors, Wendy Slade spends hours restoring antiques for the home using an ancient tradition she aims to keep alive. Regional property editor **CAROLINE CULOT** reports.

In a small dusty workshop in Bowthorpe, Norwich, one Norfolk woman is reviving an ancient tradition and at the same time restoring beautiful items, undoing the ravages of time with each stroke of her tiny brush.

Wendy Slade is an experienced gilder, using an age-old painstaking method of restoration which restores gilt framed objects such as mirrors and pictures. In fact, her skills have been used to restore the front decorative facade of the Winsor Bishop jewellers in Norwich and she was thrilled to clean and restore a frame for a Rubens painting being displayed at the Castle Museum. Sometimes the job requires Ms Slade working on site, up scaffolding and ladders. For instance she restored the Winsor Bishop facade on London Street in Norwich in front of bemused passers by and shoppers. Another commission to restore some large gates saw her working at a plush residence - albeit outside in the cold! Ms Slade tirelessly works away for hours with only her beloved dog for company, is absolutely devoted to her artistry. She said: "Many young people just don't seem interested in old items, instead they go to Ikea and there is nothing wrong with that but I just love working with beautiful objects, I feel I am a temporary custodian of something really old, which may have been battered by time. I enjoy undoing the damage, taking away the dust and dirt of years and years and seeing the result." Ms Slade graduated from university and went to Norwich Art School, followed by a stint in a city gallery, all the time perfecting the art of restoration over many years. She worked for a while in Paris where she really got to grips with the gilding technique before returning to Norwich where she worked at the Castle Museum before setting up her own business. When I visited her, she was working on an enormous gilt mirror, the surround



of which included intricate mouldings, some of which had been damaged. Ms Slade will, over hours and hours, go round the entire frame, using the gilding method to clean it up as well as, where necessary, repair the actual mouldings herself, replicating delicate patterns of woven acanthus leaves and other patterns. She never knows exactly how long a commission will take because at one glance, you cannot understand how many layers of dirt and dust there are to clean and one thing is for sure, her job requires incredible patience and a steady hand! Many

of the items brought to her have been painted over or 'distressed' with people trying to modernise antique items and not realising the artistry they are undoing. Ms Slade said: "The worst things I see are items which have had 1970s gloss white paint used on them; it takes so long to remove. Also when people try and clean items, they can often make them worse, using harsh sprays and products on them. It is often best to leave them and bring them to me.

"I like saving something which has been neglected, it's very satisfying. This is not a job which has a fast pace, but I really enjoy it."



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The ancient art of gilding



Wendy Slade battles on a daily basis with the ravages of time; the worst enemy to antiques are warmth and moisture. To restore gilt items, Ms Slade uses a tradition which actually dates to the Egyptian times. It involves using fine gold leaf, a small padded cushion and a squirrel hair brush. Using a painstaking process, she rubs the brush under her chin and picks up tiny amounts of the gold leaf and using the water gilding technique, carefully applies the gold leaf, followed by burnishing using an agate stone which creates the shine. Water gilding also involves distressing with wire wool where necessary. Oil gilding creates a more matt appearance on objects. Ms Slade buys books of gold leaf; there are about 25 leaves in a book and they cost around £1 a sheet. As part of the gilding process, Ms Slade may have to replace some of the intricate mouldings using a composition of animal glue, chalk and resin. It's again a painstaking process of warming the product and pressing it into a mould. All kinds of techniques are incorporated to enhance the gilt colour; for instance red clay or bole enhances the colour of the gold leaf. Also, the lighting in which an item is displayed also needs to be considered as it can make a difference to how bright the gilt can look.