



金箔の蝶々

(Gilded Butterflies)

By Michael Scarborough

I was fortunate enough to spend a good portion of my childhood in rural Japan in the late 1950s. A short drive off the Navy base on which we lived landed us amidst rice paddies and minka, the traditional thatch-roofed farmhouses. My father was adamant that we soak up as much Japanese culture as possible. So, every weekend, we took a drive into the country to visit a shrine or temple or some historic site. One Sunday, at the famous shrine at Nikko, I had my first exposure to gold. My mother exclaimed, “Look at all the gold leaf!”

I looked where I thought she was pointing. I saw plenty of green leaves on the trees, but if Mom thought they looked gold, that was fine with me.

My mother studied art and I accompanied her and her teacher, Atsuko Kunita, on several painting trips. As they painted, I drew. Japan was a magical place, and my exposure to the landscape, architecture, and aesthetic

in general planted a seed deep in my psyche. Over the years, many shoots have sprouted, but only recently has the tree come to maturity and born fruit by revealing itself in my work as a decorative artist.

I was recently commissioned to make a gift for a retiring

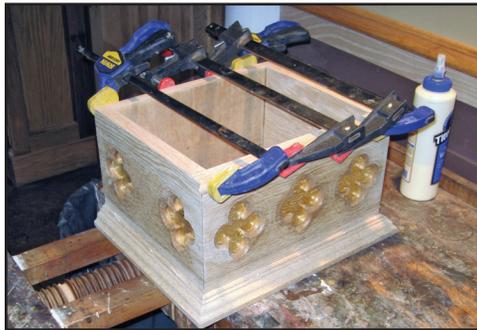
minister—“something special”. It is an honor to be given design freedom on a custom gift for an individual. As I always do in these situations, I learned what I could about the gentleman. I was told that he was an “old school” sort, an opera fanatic, and that he loved butterflies. After pondering these attributes for a while, I decided to make a gothic-inspired box decorated with religious motifs and butterflies that would hold opera CDs.

Combining Gothic design and butterflies was a challenge, but a voice from my past gave me an idea.

Increasingly, the Japanese aesthetic is creeping into my designs and onto my walls. I recently sold most of the toys I brought back from Japan all those years ago and turned the profits into block prints. One of those prints, a flock of butterflies by the artist Kamisaka Sekka (1866 - 1942), inspired my design for the minister’s gift. I decided to put gilt butterflies *inside* the box.

I have also fallen under the spell of Urushi lacquer work, especially when gold is used on clear lacquered wood. I decided to replicate this look and have it appear that a flock of golden butterflies was bursting out of the box when the lid was opened. In my stash of wood, I had the top of a beautiful 19th C., quarter sawn oak school desk. Keyake or zelkova wood might be used for a lacquer project in Japan, but I thought golden butterflies on quarter sawn oak would be grand, integrating my Eastern and Western design aesthetics.





I work across a pretty broad range of media and consider myself a cabinetmaker first and a gilder 19th. I took a water gilding class with Sheelin Wilson 11 years ago and have since had some wonderful classes with Michael Kramer and Michael Gilbert. Other than that, I have relied on Daniel Thompson's *The Practice of Tempera Painting*, recommended by Sheelin, to get me through the occasional gilding projects I have undertaken.

I wanted to give the butterflies a sense of relief, as if they were they done in lacquer, and I had decided to create them in pastiglia. I read and re-read Mr. Thompson's section on building up layers of gesso and was ready to experiment with pastiglia when the phone rang.

"He's leaving town sooner than expected and we need to present the box on Monday."

"Which Monday?"

"This coming Monday."

As it was then Thursday, I understood in a flash the expression, "blood freezing in the veins."

The construction and carving were complete, but I would have to speed up the finish and gilding. To give the box a sense of age and great visual depth, I wanted to finish it with numerous coats of tung oil and wax. Now I had to figure out how to give the individual coats of oil sufficient time to harden, while giving myself time to do the pastiglia. I had a sense that trying to apply gesso over the oil would be futile. I appealed to the unflappable Charles Douglas, master gilder.

"You have to size the raw wood first," he said in an email.

If it had not been for this bit of advice, I might have watched my butterflies take flight off of the wood and into the preacher's lap at the presentation. But there were so many butterflies! And how to size, build up the gesso, and do the requisite number of coats of tung oil? Again Charles came to the rescue.



"You have to mask them," he said.

Great. The clock was ticking.

Embracing technology, I scanned the Sekka print and fiddled with the final dimensions of the butterflies. Then, using Saral paper, I laid out the whole flock, after which I Saraled each butterfly onto blue masking tape and laid her or him into place. I then began applying coats of oil.

I had still never seriously attempted pastiglia, and there was no time to learn for this project. I recalled my model and diorama building days, and thought of Elmer's glue... good old Elmer's white glue. I knew that it could be built up in layers and would dry quickly. It doesn't sand as gesso does, but dawn was already breaking on Saturday morning, so I had to surrender some of my artistic goals to efficiency. Besides, if the butterflies looked rough and pitted, I could say it was the result of insecticides, or "an artifact of the process," as Michael Kramer would say. I wished I could grab the hands of the clock and keep them from moving. But move they did, and so did I.

After several coats of tung oil, I peeled back my blue tape and sized the raw wood with rabbit skin glue. I then built up layers of Elmer's glue, thinned with water and a drop of dishwashing liquid to aid the flow. The built up oil around the masking had created a nice little ridge to contain my glue. It was going so well with the butterflies that I decided to build up the initial "B" on the top of the lid. I had planned to water gild and burnish the butterflies, but I wasn't sure I could burnish Elmer's glue. Instead, once I had the layers built to the desired level, I used Rolco quick size. I then gilded all the appropriate areas. I used Ronan Japan paint on the colored areas and then padded on a few layers of toned French polish to homogenize the look of the entire piece. Liberon Black Bison wax with a dash of raw umber pigment added was used for the final waxing to create a feeling of age and glow, which pulled the whole piece together visually.

Dawn broke clear on Monday morning and I delivered the box. Client and Reverend were pleased. I went home and slept for twenty-four hours, dreaming of golden butterflies. ✽

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Photo of Japan by David Cresine.