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Hicham Ghandour's gilded strokes

LEBANESE-BORN HICHAM GHANDOUR IS A MASTER GILDER WITH CLIENTS ACROSS THE GLOBE. HIS ACHIEVEMENTS INCLUDE THE RESTORATION OF THE GUBBIO STUDIO AT NEW YORK'S METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



It took Hicham Ghandour a career in sales and marketing, followed by work as a real estate agent to finally realize that his passion lay elsewhere. So, he followed that passion and for the past 12 years, Ghandour has gained a reputation, not to mention a growing number of clients both in the United States and in the Middle East, as a renowned gilder, which means he takes old work and restores and finishes it so that it looks, well, old. Or in more illustrative terms, Ghandour is a beautifier of antiques, of ceilings and virtually every other surface.

"A gilder works on glass, wood, metal, furniture, ceilings, frames and practically everything else that has a surface that needs restoring," Ghandour explains to me as we sit in his spacious Chelsea apartment in New York City, surrounded by photographs and actual pieces of his craft, a large gold frame, chairs, a door and tables, among others.

As a kid, Ghandour always loved antiques. He has been collecting Roman coins since he was 10, and his dream was to one day own his own antique shop. But, the necessary investment for that was out of his range.

At Syracuse University, he still wasn't sure what to do with his life, so he majored in economics and minored in art history. After graduating, he moved to New York City and worked with Ralph Lauren in sales and marketing, and then in real estate, but found it too cutthroat and unfulfilling. His heart just wasn't in it.

He finally decided to do something about that yearning he had had since childhood and began taking weekend classes in furniture restoration; he found not only an outlet for his passion, but that he had talent. So, he took the next logical step: he went to Florence to specialize. After graduating, he returned to New York and founded his own gilding restoration company called Antiquariato.

His first commission was the restoration of a 17th-century frame. He was scared. Twelve years later, he admits that he's still nervous about beginning new jobs. Not because he lacks the professional skills or the necessary talent – he clearly has both, in abundance – but simply because "every job is a new challenge. Every piece is different."

Restoration work is not cheap, neither are the pieces or surfaces that are in need of restoring, so the work is demanding, meticulous, and, in the end, rewarding. How long each job takes depends on the piece or surface (walls, ceilings) and the weather.

"If the work is on a ceiling, for example, then the ideal climate is not too

humid and not too dry," says Ghandour. "Preparation is very important, especially if the surface is not already smooth."

People bring in their own pieces, like for example the 17th-century frame, or want to add moldings to their ceilings, and Ghandour, who boasts Ralph Lauren and Lenny Kravitz among his clientele, gets to work on preparation, then on the finishing. If it's a large job, he works with other gilders.

His biggest contract to date involved architectural moldings to a three-storey townhouse in New York. That particular job involved the work of 10 people over a four-month period.

A much larger undertaking, and one that took 10 years to complete, was the restoration of the Gubbio Studio at New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Ghandour, one of several gilders commissioned, worked on the ceiling for two years. The completed work, which is breathtakingly beautiful, is featured in a commemorative book published by the museum and sold in its bookstore, and in which Ghandour's name is listed among the gilders.

But the museum's publication is not alone in displaying his name and work. Ghandour has been photographed and written up in a number of highly regarded and specialized magazines, including *House and Garden*, *Design Times*, *Architectural Digest*, *Oprah* and *New York Magazine*.

Despite his continued and growing success, Ghandour untiringly stays on top of his craft.

"You can never say I'm done, I know how to do it," he says. "I always go to antique shows for ideas and attend seminars on new discoveries of gilded pieces and techniques."

With an established name and increasing business in New York, Ghandour began to expand his focus to the Middle East about three years ago. Working with a number of known interior designers, he has already been commissioned for several jobs in Beirut and is now looking to the lucrative Gulf market – Dubai, Saudi Arabia and Qatar – to expand even further.

Although he has some competition in New York – there are about 20 registered and recognized gilders – he is one of only a handful of specialists in Beirut and the Middle East. "The ideal situation for me," he says, "would be to split my time between New York and the Middle East."

May Farah