

Making Your Mark

Signing an inkjet print changes it into a work of art – discuss!

The world of art and indeed the world of high-value photographs is obsessed with 'provenance' – where the piece has come from. Many tens of thousands of pounds can be spent establishing who made a piece of art and if some respected expert deems it to be by a famous artist then the value can increase by almost bewildering amounts. Signing work is therefore important; it provides a starting point in the case of dispute – if the signature says Picasso then you have to prove things about Picasso and make the links!

Now it has to be recognised that most photographic prints do not carry such weighty matters around with them. However, as photographs become more mainstream in the auction rooms then provenance starts to matter. Signing work then becomes important but with that comes the realisation that the signature has to last as least as long as the print. Either way a signature adds gravitas to a print.

Adding Your Mark

The first thing to decide is what your mark is to be. Today it is recommended by many that you should not add your legal signature to a piece of work that will go for public display. By legal signature we mean the one you use on your cheques and in Sainsbury's! It is regarded as too simple for anybody with bad intentions to whip out a smart phone and obtain an exact replica of your signature for fraudulent use. With your signature, your name and place of living from the exhibition catalogue (and perhaps some biographical details) the identity snatchers are well on their way!

The other reason for using a different signature might be that your legal signature is a mess! The writer's is – it has never recovered from his days as a company director when signing cheques 200–300 at a time was a regular chore – such activities eventually reduce your mark to a scrawling line! No – for a print, something stylish is required and so you should work at it and generate a new one, preferably with a bit of style. A broad-nibbed pen will add more style and these are discussed later. Normally this 'special' signature is known as your 'autograph' although in this feature we are using signature to cover the term.

Additionally you may wish to add an embossed stamp to your print and today, even a hologram – this too is discussed later. There is also the position of the autograph on the print to be decided. Convention says that the edition number goes on the left, below the image (but on the actual print), the title sits in the middle and the signature and date go on the right, again on the printed surface's border. If used, an embossing stamp might also be applied close to the signature.

Making Your Mark

The favoured medium for adding your marks to a print is a soft pencil. This only works on matt prints. The barytas, lustres and gloss papers are quite a different challenge. Ball-point is an absolute no-no – it fades, bleeds and looks very tacky, even at first. It also can bleed right through a print from the back given a fair chance. Fountain pen inks too are problematic so let's start from the beginning and go through the options.

Pencil

Some people use a clutch pencil armed with a soft lead at about 0.7mm diameter. If a more stylish signature is required then a soft pencil sharpened and shaped into a chisel point will give an italic flow to the strokes of the letters. A 2B pencil is about as hard as you dare to go.

Inks

Assuming that ink is to be used then an old-fashioned dip pen with a slightly broad nib produces a stylish result but some experimentation is needed before you go anywhere near the print! We'll look at inks first, then nibs.

The relationship between ink and nib is complex. Too much flow and you flood the letters, too little and it is hard work to get a neat result. The ink, though, has to last as long as the print and this refines the choice.

Quink Inks

These are the classic fountain-pen inks introduced decades ago and still widely available. They are quite unsuited to ink-jet surfaces as the complex media coating diffuses ink constituents at different rates and can in some instances produce a spectacular yellow rim around your lettering! They can also fade very quickly.



Ink-jet Ink

An obvious choice is to use the same ink as that used in the printer itself. Most cartridges have a residual amount of ink when they are changed out. Save the black cartridge and carefully get the ink out of it – government health warning; this is a hazardous process that can result in a very sore bottom if tried in the kitchen or even worse the lounge; do it in your potting shed and don't wear your white tuxedo!



Another option is to purchase a bottle of black ink from a provider of continuous ink-flow systems. We tried a bottle of PermaJet FS Chrome Universal Black, a medium that is about to be discontinued and so PermaJet kindly supplied the replacement Imagelife ink for us to try as well. Using a legacy nib Brandauer (see later) produced a good clean signature onto baryta papers. The ink was also quite 'leggy' in that we were able to write four lines across an A4 page before the ink ran dry – this compares with just a single line using Quink Ink. This is quite important because one of the things you have to do is make a trial signature before you approach the real print, to ensure everything is running smoothly. If the pen runs dry you are in trouble as your flow is interrupted and it can show!

Ink-jet inks are fundamentally different to all the more traditional types of ink, they are formulated with various organic chemicals as typified by this list from a US patent:

- 5 to 30 parts ethylene glycol mono butyl ether
- 0 to 40 parts diethylene glycol mono butyl ether and/or triethylene glycol mono butyl ether
- 0.1 to 20 parts pigment and
- 20 to 84.9 parts water

In general then, various forms of glycols are used along with substantial percentages of water. The glycols act as wetting agents, anti-freezes (for transport) and to slow drying to prevent nozzle clogging. Small wonder then that the way they react to a dip pen is both variable and unpredictable!

Calligraphic Inks

Calligraphers like a nice dense black ink which also has to run smoothly out onto the media used for this type of art. Real vellum is highly specialised and might require the use of Oak Gall inks or some Ox Gall into the mix to make it stick on the rather unabsorbent surface. We had Higgins Calligraphy (from L. Cornelissen & Son, London) and tried it out with various options and papers. We managed to separate the constituents by over flooding the ink onto a baryta paper so in some ways it is not as good as ink-jet ink – we do not, for example, know if the inks would continue to migrate sideways over an extended period of time.



Registrar's Ink

This ink should be familiar to wedding photographers as it is the one used by registrars to sign marriage certificates and parish registers. It is a traditional Iron Gall ink made by mixing iron sulphate with tannic acid (obtained from oak galls) and then dissolving iron nails into the mix. Gum Arabic is added to suppress the flow and make it manageable. The ink dries to a rich purplish-black and cannot be erased; it has to be scraped back to bare paper if a correction is needed (that is why the register is always a single detached sheet, you can start again if needs be!) The ink has stood the test of time, the original recipe is attributed to Pliny The Elder (Gaius Plinius Secundus (AD 23 – August 25, AD 79)). The acidity of the ink can disintegrate the paper if not formulated correctly but there are manuscripts of greater than 1,000 years in existence in museums around the world. Supplies may be obtained from Ecclesiastic Stationery Suppliers (www.registrarsink.co.uk).

Authentic Ink ("Encre Authentique") also known as "Lawyers' Ink." This intense black ink was used by French notaries to write official acts. It contains Campeche wood tannin for exceptional preservation. Lettering done with this ink is said to be legible for 300 years. www.JHerbin.com.

Sharpie Permanent Markers

We have seen these recommended on forums, so be warned! Although they will write on a gloss or lustre ink-jet media surface, they do not last! They are suitable for your DVDs and leaving notes for the window cleaner, but keep them well away from any fine art prints!



Sakura Pigma Micron Fineliners

These Dutch pens have a reputation for doing the business. They are reputed to be permanent and are available in a variety of nib diameters. The nibs are simple, rounded felt tips and so the signature lacks the style that might be produced by an italic dip nib. Ours took well on baryta but smeared on the surface of a proof label out of a Brother label printer. The lack of style would not matter if this type of pen was used for edition numbering only. As always, though, test on a scrap piece of paper first.



Uppers and Downers

We anticipated trouble with some of the ink formulations we intended to try. To this end, we purchased both Gum Arabic and Ox Gall ahead of testing. Gum Arabic is used to thicken an ink and restrict its flow; Ox Gall is added to ink in very small quantities (a drop in a whole bottle) and promotes both wetting and flow. Ox Gall has the reputation of making anything stick to anything else (and is traditionally used when applying ink to vellum) – but you would need to experiment.



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Pens and Nibs

The choice of ink and nib (together) is crucial to success. Nibs are complex things. They were made in vast numbers in Birmingham and the designs were refined there for 130 years or more. The Jewellery District of Birmingham once used to make about 75% of the world's nibs and pens, delivering 10 million of them in 1930. The wonderful old buildings still exist and are being converted to housing today.



The plain dip pen nibs we tried were a Brandauer, gold-plated No1 F, a lacquered Hinks Wells No2 M and a Hinks Wells, Rob Roy 2687M-Stainless Steel. As far as we can tell by eye, the two Hinks Wells are the same design. All carry the crown logo of the Stationery Office (later to become HMSO) and are probably at least half a century old. We had a plastic pen holder of the same vintage but found it too thin for comfortable use and swapped to a more modern design.



The Brandauer nibs worked well with FS Chrome, and had much more character because it was a straight tip rather than the round-hand shape of the Hinks Wells. Both are masterpieces of nib craftsmanship (see call-out), but the Hinks Wells flooded the page with FS Ink (see below).

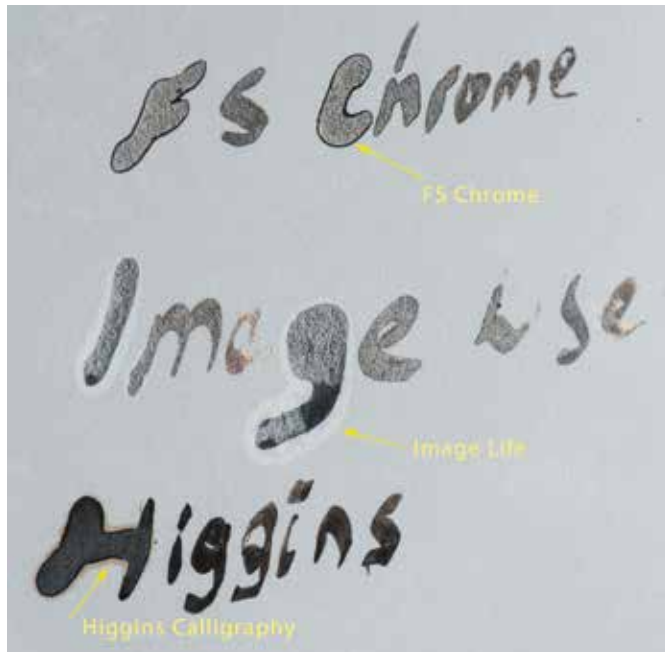
FS chrome and Hinks 'to wells' nib
hopeless!

We also tried a Leonardt Round calligraphy nib and a Wm Mitchell Pedigree Roundhand, each with a clip-on reservoir. Most calligraphic nibs are rather too large for signatures; too large an area of black ink is rather dominant in the corner of a print, something a little more subtle is required. A nib size of 5½ is as big as you might wish to go.



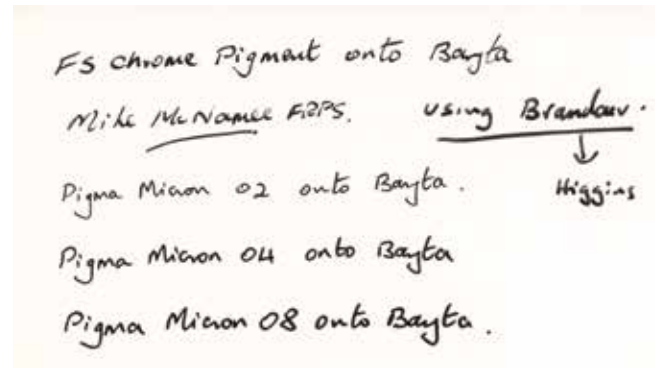
Nibs may be obtained from www.penmandirect.com who carry a range of new and vintage nibs. Also you will find lots of materials, inks, nibs and resources at <http://www.calligraphy.co.uk>.

Calligraphic pen strokes are usually slow and deliberate so it is highly unlikely that the signature you bash out with a ball-point at the supermarket checkout is going to be suitable – it needs a much more measured response. You should think about this when you create an autograph.



Some of the issues associated with using ink onto ink-jet paper are highlighted in the single image, shot at a very oblique angle to the sun. The FS Chrome piles the pigment up at the rim of the letter; ImageLife has a shallow 'beach' all around the letter where one of the glycols had migrated ahead of the pigment. Higgins Calligraphy has separated a yellow pigment component and pushed this ahead of the ink boundary to rim the letter.

Ultimately then the best results were obtained with the Brandauer nib using PermaJet FS ink, providing care was taken to minimise the amount of ink on the nib. The Pigma Micron was undoubtedly the easiest to use and the most universal, all it lacks is a bit of character.



Nib Making in Birmingham

Despite the fact that pen nibs were remarkably cheap, the manufacturing process was surprisingly complicated, involving 14 or more operations. Some of these operations were themselves complex and required considerable technical knowledge or skill. Given that the Birmingham manufacturers had been developing their skills for centuries, this probably explains, at least in part, why they achieved such dominance of the world market – indeed, there are reports of would-be manufacturers in Birmingham who, despite their expertise, still failed in their attempts to produce high-quality pen nibs competitively.

The manufacturing process is as follows:

1. Cutting or Blanking
2. Piercing
3. Annealing
4. Marking
5. Embossing
6. Raising
7. Hardening
8. Tempering
9. Scouring
10. Grinding
11. Slitting
12. Point forming
13. Polishing
14. Colouring
15. Lacquering
16. Looking over
17. Boxing



C. BRANDAUER & Co. Ltd

The original company Ash Petit & Co was founded in 1850. In 1861 the company's agent in Vienna, Carl Kuhn sent his relative Charles Emmanuel Brandauer to Birmingham to build a new factory. Brandauer & Co produced steel pens for over a hundred years. The company is still in business but they don't make pens today.

Leonardt nibs are presently made by Manuscript (<http://www.calligraphy.co.uk>) and are based in Bridgenorth. The image below shows today's multi-station stamping press in action.



Seals – Making an Impression

Seals have been used for time immemorial. The Mesopotamians carved limestone cylinders that were then used to make impressions into clay. Signet rings were introduced by the Egyptians and tended to show just hieroglyphics, indicating the name of the king. These were then impressed into wax and while they may have been relatively easy to forge, the potential loss of your head probably reduced the number of forgers!

Seals were often impressed into documents with or without wax and often a ribbon was encapsulated by the wax to further preserve the integrity of the document. An unbroken seal was a sign that the document was from the bearer of the seal and untampered. Wax seals ranged in size from signet-ring size up to the diameter of a small dinner plate.

The sealing device itself has always been valued. Today's company seals (not strictly needed since 1989) are usually kept in the company safe and a log book records when it is taken out and used. The Lord Privy Seal's job was to look after the King's seal and this office goes back to the reign of King John. On a more mundane level MOT certificates used to carry the seal impression of the issuing garage and, again, these were valuable tools. The ultimate marriage that we have seen combining the old and the new is a USB stick with the cover and the body wax-sealed together.

There are lots of seal-makers in the UK and we approached a couple for advice during our research. They may be found at:

www.citycoseals.co.uk
and
www.speedystamps.co.uk.

Adding an embossed seal to a wall portrait or limited edition print is a neat and impressive way to complete the curation of the image. Within limits you can have almost any shape of motif in your seal, along with a few lines of writing. The writing should be at least 2mm in height, preferably in upper case letters and using a simple sans serif font – Arial Rounded is perfect.

You have a choice of circular or rectangular shape, the size of impression depending on the capability of the press and the weight of paper to be impressed. The reach of the press (ie how far into the print the mark is made) also affects the design, cost and weight of the press. Don't forget that you can have the motif set at right angles so that the press may be used from the side of the print. A press is normally equipped with only one die set; changing them is difficult, but can be done by returning the press to the maker.

The sizes and estimated costs of presses and dies are set out in the table below. More complex patterns such as coats of arms cost more and would need to be quoted individually, simple arrangements can normally be designed on the maker's website. Otherwise a crisp JPEG, PDF or Illustrator image will suffice. In our experience the alloy-bodied presses are a bit weak; we would always go for the heavier, more robust, cast-iron ones – quite a lot of force is required to impress an art paper.

	Reach	Diameter	Paper Weight	Cost	Alloy
Speedy Stamps					
	55mm	38mm	120gsm	£49.99	
	88mm	44mm	200gsm	£149.99	
		60mm or 75x80mm	600gsm	£199.99	
CityCo Seal					
		50x25mm	300gsm	£199	
		42mm	280gsm	£199	
		45mm	260gsm	£199	
		50mm	260gsm	£199	
		40–50mm	400gsm	£299	Iron
		up to 60mm	350gsm	£299	Iron

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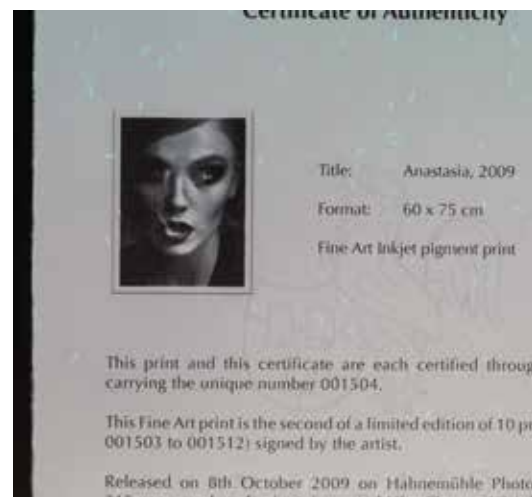
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The Hologram

A fine art limited edition print should be supplied with a Certificate of Authenticity (C of A). These may be obtained from Hahnemühle, but a nice additional touch is to also use their hologram system. They provide matched pairs of uniquely numbered hologram stickers the size of a 50 pence piece. One is attached to the back of a piece of art, the other is attached to the C of A. There is even a free registration website, run by Hahnemühle, on which you can register your limited editions (www.myartregistry.com). A box of 25 parchment certificates and 25 sets of holograms costs £77 including VAT. The certificate itself is a fine art rag paper with a deckle edge, a built-in water mark and security UV threads within its base. Hahnemühle also provide a template on their website for filling out the certificate. Normally the certificate contains the following information:

- The title of the piece
- The name of the author
- The signature of the author
- The size of the edition
- The number of the print within that edition
- The physical size of the paper and its type
- The size of the printed area
- The date
- The ink media used





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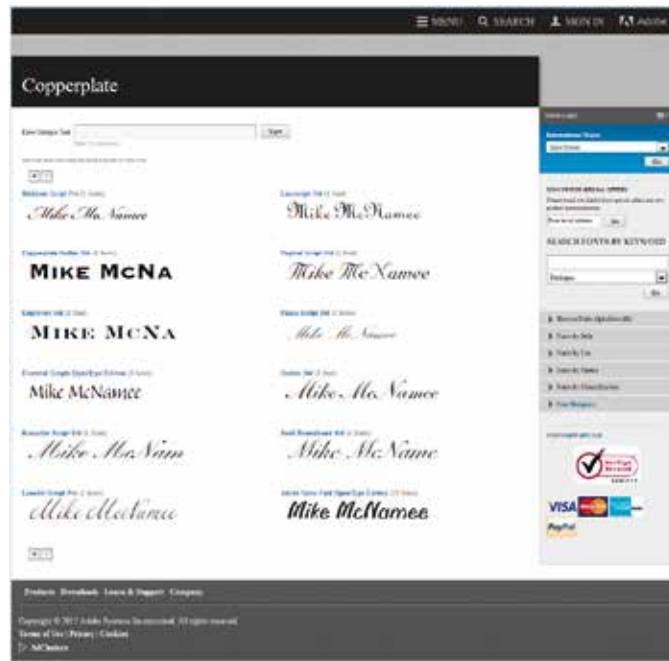







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Developing Your Autograph

Assuming that you do not have a natural ability to produce a nicely flourished signature as an autograph, it pays to take a look at some of the resources on the web including fonts that you might wish to imitate. Copperplate or roundhand writing is an old standard that has come to signify neat, pen-written handwriting. Correctly done, copperplate should have a constant letter slope of 55° (normally). On You-Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulY35OazzhQ> you can see the word Aria being written – it takes 3m 48s of wonderful skill, well worth a watch. Copperplate is not quick! There are special copperplate nibs which are cranked so that the scribe can see more easily; they are available left handed and right handed.

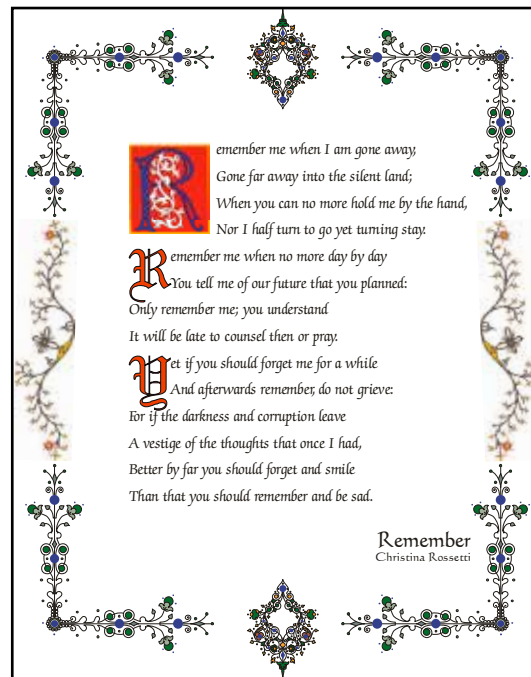


The resource at <http://www.cynscribe.com/> is truly massive and well worth browsing. If you like calligraphy as an art form you might look no further than the website of Hassan Massoudy, a wonderful calligrapher in the best traditions of the Far East.

We went to the Adobe fonts utility on CC and pulled out 12 copperplate fonts written with the example text 'Mike McNamee' to see how it looks. Such an exercise should give you plenty of ideas to try – all you then need to do is practise until your coordination skills enable you to repeat it time after time which is a lot easier said than done!

A Splash of Gold

Nothing to do with ink but a splash of gold leaf adds immeasurable value to a print, far more than it actually costs. In a limited edition print the issue is where to place the gold. An illuminated capital to a title or quotation is an obvious place but with limited application. The one place it does present possibilities is a wedding album or a wall portrait from a wedding sequence of images. Applying transfer gold is described in the call-out box. The only point worth emphasising is the need to obtain a decent flow out of the Ormaline. It is vital in the creation of smooth finish that the painting should be done with deft, swift strokes and little if any repetition of the brush strokes on top of the Ormaline as this tends to make it drag. We have written on the topic before but it has been brought into focus by the recent discussions on the loss of heritage by the lack of prints being made for the current generation – listen up again; we need to persuade our clients that they need to have long-lasting quality prints made, to pass down the generations. Selling a USB stick does not do the business!

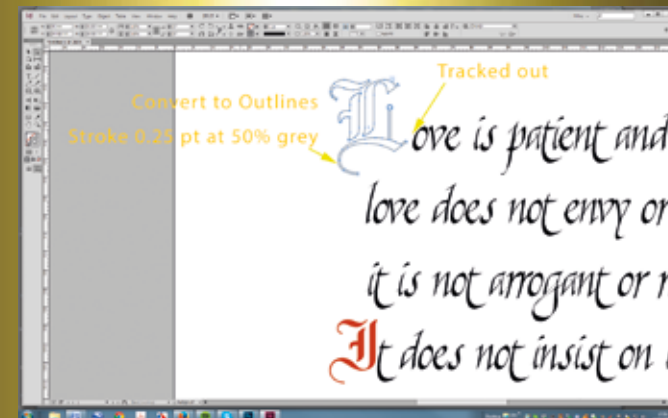


Real calligraphers will throw up their arms in horror at this piece generated in Adobe Illustrator but time is money!!

Why go to all this trouble?

This is a valid question; all that is set out above costs both time and money. The response is unequivocal – if you don't value your work highly and don't think it worth all this trouble, why should you expect anybody else to do so? All that is set out above adds to the perceived value of your prints; it reflects the care taken in production and a meticulous attention to detail – one day it might just pay off big time, although if it does the chances are your descendants or some art dealers are more likely to be the recipients!

Love is patient and kind
love does not envy or boast
it is not arrogant or rude
It does not insist on its own way
it is not irritable or resentful
it does not rejoice at wrongdoing
but rejoices with the truth
Love bears all things
believes all things
hopes all things
endures all things.



1. A mix of PVA glue with 50% distilled water and a small amount of watercolour (red in this case) is carefully painted onto the area where the gold is to be placed. The glue is available ready mixed from Wright's of Lymm as "Ormaline". In the example shown the digital calligraphy has been converted to outlines and then the opening capital 'L' has been stroked with an 0.25pt grey to provide a visual guide.
2. The PVA is allowed to dry. Note here that the finish is not smooth enough – use a fully loaded brush to achieve a rounded profile and try not to go over an area more than once.
3. This is the transfer gold leaf on a backing paper, ready for use.
4. Exhale through a paper tube onto the dry PVA to slightly moisten it. The technique is to exhale, not blow, usually three breaths.
5. The gold leaf is placed in position and gently rubbed with the back of a spoon or an agate burnisher to cause it to adhere to the PVA.
6. The leaf is pulled away to leave gold attached to the PVA shape. Any bits that are missed are breathed on again and more is applied. Excess gold is brushed away with a soft brush.
7. The gold is burnished to a high gloss with the agate, burnishing tool. These come in various shapes and sizes; a dogtooth is preferred for intricate lettering.
8. So-called shell gold may be applied by brush, dried and then burnished.

