

Essay by  
Carolyn Fraser

# BRUCE JACKSON

♦ *signwriter* ♦

SPECIALIST IN VERRE ÉGLOMISÉ



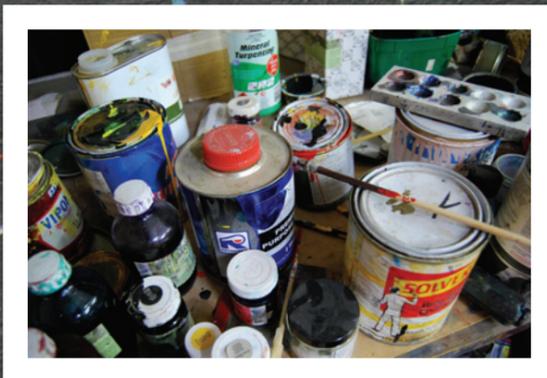
Until 2007, a team of powerfully-built Tongan men worked in a factory in suburban Melbourne beating gold all day for a living. These men beat stacks of small, interleaved squares of thin gold three separate times, dividing it after each beating into quarters, progressively flattening the gold from its original thickness (about that of tinfoil) into gossamer-thin filaments known as gold leaf. The hand-beaten gold leaf now available in Australia is imported from China or Germany. When I meet Bruce Jackson for the first time, there is a Chinese language textbook open on his kitchen table, marked in pencil with carefully formed ideograms. His studies put Bruce at slight advantage sourcing gold leaf in China, and might potentially lead to commissions for work. Learning Chinese

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it does its job well. That’s good craftsmanship.”*

follows naturally from Bruce’s interest in Chinese calligraphy (*shufa*), unsurprising in a craftsman whose work displays such consummate brush skills.

Bruce Jackson is a pre-eminent practitioner of verre églomisé, the technique of reverse gold-gilding on glass. Glass gilding was one technique among many in the arsenal of the nineteenth century signwriter, satisfying a huge appetite for decorative signage and typography in Victorian architecture. It is

a technique which exploits light and reflection with an interplay of matte and mirror finishes. Named for Jean Baptiste Glomy, the eighteenth century picture framer who popularised a framing technique using gold-pin-striped glass mounts, verre églomisé is a term more commonly used in reference to antiques. Bruce, however, believes it best describes the combination of gilding techniques he employs in his work. It remains unmatched in its brilliance and the subtlety of effects used to create letterforms.



The piece Bruce is working on when I visit is a commission that will be installed in a Japanese restaurant. It is a female figure, vaguely menacing and tentative at once, evocative of both Klimt and butoh. Bruce's work extends from traditional hand-lettering into highly imaginative painting, a range of skills shared with his nineteenth century antecedents. He is commissioned just as often for an interior design feature as he is for a traditional painted sign. In addition, he produces artworks that layer gilding and pigments in complex abstract forms. But, he says, pointing to the letters across the front windows of his shopfront studio, the letters are really the purest expression of his art, even though they are often dismissed as simply signage. "A single, perfectly-executed letter. It's neat, it does everything it needs to do, it does its job well. That's good craftsmanship."

Bruce's entry into signwriting was serendipitous. At the time, he was a computer operator, feeding mainframe computers. A friend saw a graphically bold wall-hanging Bruce had made and suggested that Bruce's design skills would be of use in the friend's signwriting business. They were "backyarders", working outside the trade apprenticeship system. Bruce himself isn't aware of having developed a particular style—he trained on the job, watching and learning from other signwriters. He doesn't feel compelled to make images—he'd be happy, he says, doing something else. Art, he says, requires both skill and imagination; he favours skill—the engagement with the craft and its technical challenges, experimenting with materials and rediscovering techniques.

A hundred years ago, Bruce tells me, it would be normal and expected to have "an army of men working, all hand-lettering." But not only have commercial imperatives changed: so

have aesthetic tastes. Even in a city like Melbourne that values its gold-fuelled, boom-era Victorian architecture, typical so-called historically accurate renovations erase all the typographic detail that was such an important component of Victorian style. The house names in gilded script above the transom, numbering, the signage painted directly onto the brick: all erased. Bruce points out that "they just become blank. All the details are lost."

Bruce's studio is the large front room of his late Edwardian-era house, the space that used to be the grocery store in Warrandyte, a hilly, bush suburb on the outskirts of Melbourne. When the light hits the front window just right, Bruce tells me, you can read the word GROCERIES still faintly etched in the glass.

One wall of the studio is a false wall, covered with brush marks and glyphs and trial gestures. His teenage daughter has painted ZARA ROCKS; there is the perfectly gilded name MICHAEL, which Bruce applied to the wall to demonstrate the technique to a visitor. Signwriters use a mahl stick (wall, in German) to help support the hand when lettering on a vertical surface. Bruce tells me that these are known as "cripple sticks" in the US, due to "misplaced snobbery" that the ability to work without one is evidence of superior skill. Bruce points out, however, that in the US, bench (versus wall) work dominates—of course, working flat, there's no need for a mahl stick at all.

A lot of work however, does not allow the luxury of working in the studio. Glass gilding outdoors presents particular challenges, not least the wind. Gold leaf is supplied in little pink tissue paper booklets. Applied to glass prepared with a water size, the gold seems almost magnetically attracted to the surface and leaps toward the glass. Laying it down

flat and unbroken takes steady nerves. I ask Bruce if it is disconcerting to have the client right there, peering at you working through the glass. Fortunately, Bruce jokes, if you are messing something up, they generally don't know what you are doing.

Bruce belongs to the Artisans Guild of Australia. Established in 1994, it is inclusive of a range of trade crafts facing similar issues, particularly that of passing on traditional skills to younger artisans. Bruce suggests that the group has "never quite fulfilled its professional destiny"—it is now mostly a social group—but that it's still a valuable referral network. He's also been involved with Letterheads, a loose worldwide network of signwriters who hold informal weekend meets to trade skills and information. Early on, Bruce was very active on the Letterheads online forum, lately though, his participation has fallen off as the same questions get asked over and over.

I'm wondering how best to photograph glass when Bruce asks if I'd like to try applying some gold. Around the neckline and sleeves of the vaguely Japanese figure, he's applied an oil-based gold size with a brush in a checkerboard pattern. My job, which both thrills me and makes me nervous, is to lay the gold leaf on top of the gold size and transfer the leaf with gentle pressure. Memories of applying Letraset come rushing back; here though, I'm using 23 carat gold. I use some cottonwool to buff away the shaggy edges; I tell Bruce that I hope he won't have to redo this bit when I'm gone.

I ask Bruce his thoughts about the future of verre églomisé. He says he hopes "it continues to be rediscovered." Laughing though, he notes "I've been saying that for years." 

*Bruce's website includes detailed technical notes about verre églomisé. [www.goldreverre.com](http://www.goldreverre.com)*