

Mission to Mars

Meet several 2002 International Letterheads Meet project leaders.

From professor to signmaker

A native of Queens, NY, and the owner of Signs of Gold Inc. (Williamsville, NY), Francis Lestingi first made signs as a high school student while working on the World's Fair grounds, a remnant of New York City hosting the event in 1938. One drugstore in his neighborhood displayed its signs on the outside window. This proved to be too much temptation for Lestingi.

"At two in the morning, I'd remove the handlettered paper signs from the window and take them home to study brush strokes and techniques," he recalls. But [the shop owners] didn't know, because I returned everything by 5 a.m."

After high school graduation, Lestingi joined the Christian Brothers order where he taught high school science courses.

After leaving the order, he matriculated to the University of Wisconsin, where he remained until he earned his doctorate in physics. For the next 25 years, he taught physics at the State University of New York (SUNY) in Buffalo.

Towards the end of his SUNY career, Lestingi added computer illustration to his repertoire. When he learned that the university wouldn't furnish equipment for his work, Lestingi made an unusual career move. Having admired gilded signs while traversing New England, he decided to learn how

to create them.

"I just admire simple work that's done by hand," Lestingi says. "I will never buy a CNC router. My goal is to produce signs that are beautiful, not to run a production line."

During the summer of 1993, Lestingi met Jay Cooke, proprietor of the Jay Cooke Vermont Sign School in Stowe. After taking early retirement from SUNY, he enrolled in Cooke's signmaking course. Lestingi learned handcarving techniques and "developed a good business sense" during the sessions.

Lestingi also credits Dimitrius Klitsas — a New England sculptor who created pieces for Bill Gates' palatial house — for teaching him myriad carving techniques.

Lestingi plies his trade exclusively with mahogany. He's used butternut and redwood in the past, but when he tried mahogany, he never looked back.

"Mahogany holds detail very well; you can cut carefully, and you won't bend the wood," he explains. "It is heavy and can be a challenge to install, but it's a wonderful substrate."

Lestingi uses LeFranc Charbonnel's slow size, allowing it to cure for 48 hours. After testing, he determined the size held tack for up to 20 days. He uses 23k surface leaf exclusively.



Francis Lestingi, proprietor of Signs of Gold Inc. (Williamsville, NY), uses a casting system for decorating handcarved elements. Using a single mold, he can cast thousands of copies.

Lestingi also credits Klitsas with showing him techniques for molding and casting handcarved elements, such as scrolls and finials. He begins the process by handcarving the graphic, which must be completely nonporous before casting. To do this, he applies glossy paint or sprays on SuperSeal™ molding material from Smooth-On (Easton, PA).

Next, he encloses the piece in a walled box, which is back-screwed onto a panel. To prevent leakage from the molding material, he fills the box with water until the graphic is submerged by 1 in. Then, he dumps the water, dries the containment box and graphic, and applies a liquid-rubber, mold-release agent.

The rubber cures for 16 hours and forms a mold from which thousands of copies can be cast. According to Lestingi, sign enamels make great primers. After applying black, Krylon™ spraypaint, he's ready to size and gild.

For the Mars meet, Lestingi is fabricating a sign for the town's railroad station. The 30 × 12-in. sign comprises a mahogany panel and features a sun that's been fabricated via the polyurethane-casting process.

To create the sign's pattern, Lestingi used Adobe Illustrator® software to formulate a design, which he printed on drafting paper. Then, he tiled the pattern on 8½ × 11 sheets, and transferred it to the bare wood using a heating iron.

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After three coats of Jay Cooke's primer and two or three coats of T.J. Ronan's bulletin enamels, he covered the coated panel with Gerber Mask II®.

Next, he attached his carving pattern to the mask with 3M™'s Spra-Ment™ adhesive on the back of the tiled sheets. Carving through the paper, the masking and several coats of paint, he created the lettering. Lestingi painted his carved work, applied the size and gold, and carefully removed his mask to reveal another methodical masterpiece.