





Emma Foale's flat in Little Venice bears witness to her enthusiasm for gilding and verre églomisé. In the sitting room, an artwork by Emma hangs above the fire; others by Jean Souverbie (on left) and Peter Lanyon hang in gilded frames. Flanking the fireplace are two lamps by Prue Lane on glass-topped tables that Emma made, using planters from Clifton Nurseries

Taking a shine to interiors

Originally a relatively quick decorative fix, gilding has become a way of life for the owner of this glistening London flat, and now a family business, too

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS **TIM BEDDOW**



When Emma Foale casually picked up a book on gilding in Boston in 1980, little did she realise the impact it was going to have on her creative endeavours. So much so that, many years later, she has passed on the craft to her two grown-up sons, and together they have formed Foale & Sons, which, unsurprisingly, produces furniture of sheeny splendour.

When Emma and her then husband, Rodney, arrived at the huge Boston apartment that came with Rodney's Harvard job, there was hardly a stick of furniture, let alone any pictures. 'We were living on the smell of an oil rag,' laughs Emma, 'and had no money for decoration.' So, with characteristic panache, Emma taught herself from the book and had soon gilded the whole bedroom with leaves. 'It was a way to make it look pretty and, using fake gold, was inexpensive.' When they returned to England two years later, few walls had escaped her treatment.

'It is a great way of decorating effectively and

originally,' says Emma, 'as long as you have the patience.' The various processes are time-consuming and cannot be hurried. Without going into the restoration business, Emma realised it was 'virtually impossible to make a living from it'. So she focused once again on portrait painting – which she had originally studied at art school – and soon built up a healthy list of satisfied sitters. Meanwhile, she continued gilding for her own enjoyment. Visitors to the couple's London house were dazzled by the shimmer of gold and silver on the walls and furniture.

The couple's next project was building a mountainside home in southern France. 'Half-way through the project, the building costs spiralled,' explains Emma. 'I decided to make the beds and the rest of the furniture myself.'

Using the technique of verre églomisé, which she taught herself, Emma designed and made three beds, each taking six weeks' painstaking work. 'It is a precise, laborious process,' she



FROM TOP Emma made the Perspex and gilded-canvas artwork in the kitchen, and the picture on the right was by her partner, Johnny Dewe Mathews; the chairs are covered in 'Ticking' by Ian Mankin. A wall of cupboard doors is hung with more framed pictures. Emma works with her sons, Archie (on left) and Jamie



says, 'but is the most decorative of finishes, does not fade and is permanent for as long as the glass remains intact.'

In 2005, after many years together, the Foaies went their separate ways. A couple of years later, Emma met artist Johnny Dewe Mathews, and, in due course, they moved into this flat overlooking a canal in Little Venice.

It had a fairly standard layout, with sitting and dining rooms at the front, and a kitchen at the back. They knocked down walls to make one open-plan living area, and replaced the kitchen with a bathroom and a small study. The width of the central corridor was also reduced, in order to enlarge the rooms. 'I believe strongly,' says Emma, 'that the kitchen, along with the bedroom, should be the most glamorous room in a house.' So apart from the essentials, this area is dominated by one of her highly decorative, translucent, abstract pictures, using Perspex squares on gilded canvases, painted with thin oil paint in varying colours.

Other artwork is ingeniously Velcroed on to cupboard doors to reduce the 'kitchen-ness'.

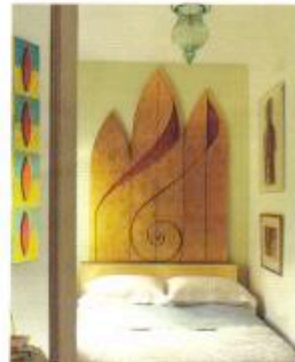
Throughout the house, there is strong evidence of Emma's gilding enthusiasm; on a screen in the spare bedroom; as stars round the main bedroom walls; and on gilded panels in the bathroom.

For Emma, the love is all in the design and creation. It was her sons, Archie and Jamie, who persuaded her to do it professionally. Now, she concentrates on the design, while the boys organise the management and production of the beds, pictures and other decorative objects.

In our drab northern climes, a splash of gold or silver around the house provides a welcome lift. 'That's not to say,' says Emma quickly, 'that our things don't look great in sunnier places too.' Well, perhaps she does do some of the marketing after all.

Foale & Sons: 020-3181 0072;

e-mail: archiefoale@foaleandsons.com



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A verre-églomisé bed dominates the main bedroom, Emma painted the picture of the horse and rider. Porcelain birds and turquoise by Emma's late mother, Anne Gordon, are clustered on corner shelves. In the spare room, a gilded screen acts as a bedhead; the light is by Prue Lane