

# GUILDED AGE

THE ALPHA WORKSHOPS CELEBRATES THE ARTIST'S HAND AS IT LOOKS TO THE PAST AND FUTURE OF DECORATIVE ARTS. WRITTEN AND PRODUCED BY **JESSE BRATTER**

When Ken Wampler started The Alpha Workshops in 1995, his team was so green that they made their first designs using potatoes as printing stamps. Green, but surely imaginative, and that ingenuity has led The Alpha Workshops to become a force in the industry. Today, the not-for-profit has grown into a school and series of decorative arts studios that allow creative persons living with HIV to use the healing power of art to improve their lives. Known for its handmade wallpapers and artisanal wall treatments, The Alpha Workshops also applies its fine finishes to custom furniture and lighting. “They are artists who work in a studio setting much like guilds of previous times,” says Wampler, who shares below how Alpha’s vast offerings stay bespoke, as the one constant is a focus on the artisans themselves.

**What’s so alluring about handmade?** You can feel handmade and you can see it. These finishes require many steps, with careful techniques that can take hours, days, even weeks to create. Upscale consumers and designers want bespoke—they want to understand the workmanship that goes into making beautiful finishes and wallpapers. **Your artists use time-honored techniques but might add a modern-day twist.** Verre eglomise, for example, is a very old glass technique of reverse painting and leafing on the back side of the glass. We’ve developed a process that allows us to combine a pigment, a leaf and a backing color to create a loose grid, custom-colored to the designer’s specifications. **Tell us about your mantra, “Creating Beauty. Changing Lives.”** Our students and staff learn to work by making beautiful things, and it feels really good to make something beautiful. We took one of the guys from the wallpaper studio to see an installation in an extraordinary apartment and he was so proud of his work. He made that wallpaper, every inch of it. Beauty is powerful. We need it.

**What are some of Alpha’s most memorable collaborations?** We recently teamed with designer Ernest de la Torre on a bespoke wallcovering using canvas, gesso and aluminum leaf. We crafted a grapewood branch installation growing out of a ceiling for David Mann of MR Architecture + Decor. And we recreated a documented faux-marble floor in the style of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century itinerant painter for Jamie Drake’s restoration of Gracie Mansion. **But on top of these custom projects, you have product licenses, as well.** We generally make everything ourselves, but we also have licenses with Pollack, Edward Fields, Koroseal, Larson-Juhl, and Thibaut. Our most recent is the Horizon collection of wallpapers with Warner Studios, a division of Brewster Home Fashions. They’ve done an incredible job of translating our designs. **And your newest in-house wallpapers?** Highline has a subtle, almost three-dimensional quality. It takes an otherwise unexciting white or cream and makes it rich and dazzling because the tones are layered and deep. Our backgrounds are rubbed on, not roller-coated, so the handmade quality (as with all of Alpha’s creations) is immediately evident.



*The Alpha Workshops creates decorative arts products, like textured wallpaper (top) and plaster wall treatments (center right). The wallpapers above include the brand’s latest collection, Highline, shown in pink, and a new lamp appears left. Alpha’s studios and classrooms are housed in New York, where future plans include a storefront and possibly opening up classes to the public.*