

DESCRIPTION

Apparatus For And Method Of Laser Marking

TECHNICAL FIELD

The present invention relates to an apparatus for and a method of laser marking and, in particular, to an apparatus for and a method of performing marking continuously on a plurality of objects to be marked that are moving.

BACKGROUND ART

When marking patterns consisting of any characters, symbols, figures, designs, etc. on workpieces formed of metal, plastic, ceramic, paper, cloth, etc., manufactured by production lines in plants, it has been general practice to use an ink-jet system (See, for example, Japanese Patent Laid-Open No. 57-14981). In this system, recording is effected while varying the positional relationship between the workpiece and the nozzle of an ink jet by means of a conveying device, so that an interlock between the conveying device and the ink jet is indispensable.

However, as the miniaturization of semiconductor products, etc. proceeds, marks to be recorded are now required to be smaller and more precise. Under the circumstances, attention is being given to a laser

marking apparatus as an alternative to the ink-jet system. In a suitable example of the laser marking apparatus, raster scanning is performed on the surface of a mask with laser beams from a laser generator by means of a deflector to thereby effect marking on the surface of a workpiece with the laser beams transmitted through the mask, which has a predetermined pattern.

However, in the above-described laser marking apparatus, in which the laser beams transmitted through the mask are deflected toward the workpiece conveying line, the beam application area is stationary, and a workpiece is temporarily brought to a stop upon reaching this application area so that laser beams can be applied to the surface of the workpiece to thereby effect marking thereon, which is thus caused to stay. Thus, it is necessary for the conveying line to be stopped each time marking operation is performed on a workpiece, resulting in a rather poor productivity.

DISCLOSURE OF INVENTION

The present invention has been made with a view toward eliminating the above problem in the prior art. It is accordingly an object of the present invention to provide an apparatus for and a method of laser marking in which marking can be effected on workpieces being continuously conveyed, without having to bring them to a stop at intervals, whereby it is possible to achieve an

improvement in terms of production efficiency.

A laser marking apparatus according to the present invention includes a second deflector having a mirror for reflecting laser beams transmitted through a mask and movable lenses for receiving the laser beams from this reflective mirror and applying them to the surface of a workpiece for marking, with the movable lenses being mounted on a moving mechanism which moves in synchronism with the speed at which the workpiece is conveyed. The reflective mirror is composed of a first mirror for receiving and reflecting the laser beams transmitted through the mask and a second mirror for reflecting the reflected beams from the first mirror to the movable lenses, with the direction of the reflected beams from the first mirror being switchable with respect to the second mirror or the movable lenses. Further, the reflective mirror may also be composed of a movable mirror for receiving and reflecting the laser beams transmitted through a mask, a rotating mirror which reflects the reflected beams from the movable mirror to the movable lens and which is capable of planar rotation, and a stationary mirror capable of receiving the reflected beams due to the displacement of the movable mirror and reflecting them to the rotating mirror, with the direction of the reflected beams from the movable mirror being switchable with respect to the rotating mirror or the stationary mirror through displacement of

the movable mirror. Further, the above-mentioned reflective mirror may also be composed of a first mirror for receiving and reflecting laser beams transmitted through a mask, a second mirror for reflecting the reflected beams from the first mirror to movable lenses, a third mirror for receiving and reflecting laser beams transmitted through the mask, a fourth mirror for receiving and reflecting the reflected beams from the third mirror to the movable lenses, and a fifth mirror for reflecting the reflected beams from the fourth mirror to the movable lenses, with the first through fifth mirrors being secured to a movable base, and the laser beams transmitted through the mask being switchably applied to the first or the third mirror through displacement of this movable base. Further, the above-mentioned moving mechanism may be formed by an orthogonal biaxial planar moving mechanism, with one of the orthogonal two axes coinciding with the workpiece conveying direction, and the drive in this axis being effected in synchronism with the workpiece conveying speed.

A laser masking method according to the present invention is characterized in that, when applying laser beams to the surface of a workpiece for marking, movable lenses for applying beams to the surface of the workpiece, which are provided in a second deflector, are moved in synchronism with the workpiece being conveyed,

in the workpiece conveying direction. Further, the second deflector may swing laser beams transmitted through a mask by at least 90° between the mask and the movable lenses. Further, the second deflector may be equipped with a movable mirror for deflecting beams transmitted through the mask toward the movable lenses and a stationary mirror for receiving the reflected beams from this movable mirror, with the reflected beams from the movable mirror being switchably emitted to the stationary mirror or the movable lenses to thereby make the mask pattern rotatable.

In the apparatus for and method of laser marking described above, a more flexible planar positioning of mask information obtained by the first deflector is possible by means of the second deflector. That is, the laser beams containing mask information can be displaced in a two-dimensional plane in synchronism with the conveying device, without requiring any change on the workpiece-conveying-device side. Due to this arrangement, it is possible for the laser marking apparatus to have a higher degree of freedom, whereby the load on the conveying device can be diminished. Thus, an improvement is achieved in terms of general versatility, and a reduction in workpiece-production tact time due to the marking operation can be prevented.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 is a diagram illustrating the construction of a laser marking apparatus according to a first embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 2 is a flowchart illustrating the operation of the apparatus of Fig. 1;

Fig. 3A is a diagram illustrating how laser beams from a first deflecting mirror according to the first embodiment are directly deflected to movable lenses; Fig. 3B is a diagram showing Fig. 3A from the direction of an arrow A;

Fig. 4A is a diagram illustrating how laser beams from the first deflecting mirror of the first embodiment are deflected to the movable lenses through a second deflecting mirror; Fig. 4B is a diagram showing Fig. 4A from the direction of an arrow B;

Fig. 5 is a diagram illustrating how marking is started according to the first embodiment;

Fig. 6 is a diagram illustrating how the movable lenses of the first embodiment are synchronized to a conveying device;

Fig. 7 is a diagram illustrating how marking is completed according to the first embodiment;

Fig. 8 is a diagram illustrating an arrangement of a reflective mirror of a second deflector according to a second embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 9 is a plan view of a reflective mirror, showing a first optical path according to the second

embodiment;

Fig. 10 is a side view of Fig. 9;

Fig. 11 is a plan view of a reflective mirror, showing a second optical path according to the second embodiment;

Fig. 12 is a side view of Fig. 11;

Fig. 13 is a plan view of a reflective mirror of a second deflector according to a third embodiment of the present invention, which corresponds to the first optical path;

Fig. 14 is a side view of Fig. 13;

Fig. 15 is a plan view of a reflective mirror of the second deflector according to the third embodiment, which corresponds to the second optical path; and

Fig. 16 is a side view of Fig. 15.

BEST MODE FOR CARRYING OUT THE INVENTION

Preferred embodiments of the apparatus for and the method of laser marking of the present invention will now be described in detail with reference to the accompanying drawings.

Fig. 1 is a diagram showing the construction of a laser marking apparatus according to the first embodiment, which includes a YAG laser generator 1 serving as a laser beam source. This apparatus is equipped with a first deflector 3 (3X, 3Y) for deflecting laser beams from the YAG laser generator 1 in X and Y-

directions for raster scanning after they have been condensed by an optical lens 2. In an intermediate section of this first deflector 3, there is arranged an optical system 4 for condensing the laser beams deflected by the Y-direction deflector 3Y at a point on a reflecting surface of the X-direction deflector 3X.

The first deflector 3 (3X, 3Y), whose axes of rotation are orthogonal to each other, consists of a polygon mirror 3X, which serves as the X-direction deflector, and a rotating operation mirror 3Y, which serves as the Y-direction deflector. These mirrors are spaced apart from each other. The polygon mirror 3X, which is formed as a polyhedron having 36 surfaces, is rotatable in constant-speed rotation modes of several steps, an optimum mode being selected for each workpiece .

8. That is, one surface of the polygon mirror 3X corresponds to one line in the X-direction on a liquid crystal mask described below, one rotation of the polygon mirror 3X corresponding to 36 lines in the X-direction.

The rotating operation mirror 3Y is designed such that, as the polygon mirror 3X rotates to cause the laser beam receiving point to shift from one surface to another, it rotates by a minute angle and then stops. In this embodiment, the rotating operation mirror operates by minute equal angles of 43 steps. After the last, i.e., the 43rd step, the mirror makes a reverse rotation to return at a stroke to the first step. Although it

might be possible to adopt a system in which the 22nd step constitutes a neutral position, this embodiment adopts a system in which the first step constitutes the neutral position so as to be in conformity with the raster scanning start position. Thus, in this embodiment, one minute rotational angle of the rotating operation mirror 3Y corresponds to a line feed in the Y-direction on the liquid crystal mask, the rotating operation mirror 3Y making a rotation by one minute rotational angle each time the application of beams to one surface of the polygon mirror 3X is completed. Until the application of beams to one surface has been completed, the rotating operation mirror 3Y rests at the same position.

Further, there is provided a liquid crystal mask 6, which receives laser beams for use in raster scanning by the first deflector 3 and which is capable of arbitrarily displaying patterns causing them to be transmitted or scattered electrically. Due to this liquid crystal mask 6, it is possible to form a desired mark pattern. The liquid crystal mask 6 is of a type which is generally called a transmission/scattering-type liquid crystal mask, an example of which is a "liquid-crystal/resin complex composed of liquid crystal and resin (See Japanese Patent Laid-Open No. 2-96714)".

In this liquid crystal mask, a multitude of parallel electrode lines are provided on either side of the liquid

crystal and in such a way as to cross each other between the obverse and reverse sides. In those portions of the liquid crystal to which no voltage is being applied, laser beams are in a scattered state, whereas those portions of the liquid crystal to which voltage is being applied are in a laser beam transmitting state. By utilizing this electrical characteristic, voltage is selectively applied to the electrodes to thereby form a desired pattern into an image instantaneously. Unlike conventional liquid crystal masks, this liquid crystal mask 6 requires no polarizer. Thus, the intensity of the laser beams transmitted through the liquid crystal mask 6 is at least two times as high as that of the conventional liquid crystal masks. In this embodiment, the liquid crystal mask 6 has 24 x 24 dots, displaying different divisional patterns in dot matrix. Apart from this, it is possible for this liquid crystal mask 6 to have various other types of dot matrix, for example, 72 dots x 36 dots.

On the output side of the liquid crystal mask 6, there is provided a second deflector 9 for deflecting laser beams transmitted in conformity with the pattern to be formed toward the surface of the workpiece 8, which is the object of marking. This second deflector 9 comprises a first deflecting mirror 10 for receiving and reflecting the laser beams transmitted through the liquid crystal mask 6 and a second deflecting mirror 11 for reflecting

the reflected beams from the first deflecting mirror 10 toward a group of lenses described below. In this case, the first reflecting mirror 10 is designed such that its reflecting direction is switchable, i.e., it can be directly reflected to the above-mentioned group of lenses or indirectly thereto through the intermediation of the second deflecting mirror 11. For this purpose, the first deflecting mirror 10 is designed so as to be capable of being rotated by a mirror driving motor 12, whereas the second deflecting mirror 11 is formed as a stationary mirror which is positioned such that it deflects toward the group of lenses.

As described above, there are provided a group of lenses for receiving deflected laser beams directly from the first deflecting mirror 10 or indirectly through the second deflecting mirror 11. The group of lenses are arranged above a conveying device 14 for conveying the workpiece 8, which device consists of a belt conveyor or the like. The group of lenses form an optical system, which is mounted on an XY table 15 that is formed so as to be capable of making planar movements along the conveying plane of the conveying device 14, and thus can make planar movements. This table 15 has an orthogonal biaxial planar moving mechanism. The movable group of lenses, mentioned above, are composed of an objective lens 16 and a marking lens 17. The objective lens 16 is arranged above the surface of the table 15 and moves

integrally with the table 15. The objective lens 16 serves to receive laser beams from the first deflecting mirror 10 or the second deflecting mirror 11 and effect correction on formed images.

The marking lens 17 has an optical axis which coincides with that of the objective lens 16, and is secured in position within a through-hole section of the table 15 to perform pattern marking on the workpiece 8 passing under the table 15. Further, to enable the table 15 to move, the table 15 is equipped with a Y-direction motor 18 for driving it in conformity with the conveying direction of the workpiece 8 and an X-direction motor 19 for driving it in a direction perpendicular thereto. Thus, the table 15 is capable of making planar movements in composite driving directions due to these motors 18 and 19.

Further, on the upstream side of the workpiece conveying device 14, there is provided a workpiece position detector 20 for detecting the presence of any workpiece 8 on the conveying device 14. Further, there is provided a controller 21 for overall control of all the above-described driving units. This controller 21 generates a marking pattern signal and causes a laser beam transmission image corresponding to a pattern to be formed in the liquid crystal mask 6, driving the first deflector 3 so as to effect raster scanning on the surface of the liquid crystal mask 6 with laser beams.

To set the direction in which the marking of the pattern on the surface of the workpiece 8 is to be effected, the controller 21 determines the deflecting direction of the first deflecting mirror 10 and, on the basis of this direction, drives the mirror driving motor 12. Further, the controller 21 inputs a signal from the workpiece detector 20 and, when the workpiece 8 reaches the marking position, starts the Y-direction motor 18 so as to effect a synchronized movement in the conveying direction, causing laser marking to be performed while the workpiece 8 is being conveyed.

A marking method using the above-described construction will be described. Referring to Fig. 2, which shows a control flow, the pattern to be marked and the range and direction thereof are set (step 101). Regarding the marking direction, the first deflecting mirror 10 is inclined by the mirror driving motor 12 as shown in Figs. 3A and 3B so as to adjust its deflecting direction to the movable lenses 16 and 17 below, whereby laser beams P are deflected in a direction perpendicular to the workpiece 8. As a result, a pattern as shown is marked on the surface of the workpiece 8. Next, as shown in Figs. 4A and 4B, the first deflecting mirror 10 is set to a vertical position by the mirror driving motor 12, whereby the laser beams P are deflected so as to be parallel to the surface of the workpiece 8 and impinge upon the second deflecting mirror 11. The second

deflecting mirror 11 is fixed in a position in which it is directed downwards, so that the laser beams P are deflected in a direction perpendicular to the workpiece 8. As a result, a pattern obtained by turning the pattern shown in Fig. 3A by 90° with respect thereto is marked on the surface of the workpiece 8. That is, by driving the conveying device 14 to move the workpiece 8 to a position directly below the first or second deflecting mirror 10 or 11, it is possible to arbitrarily select the direction of the marking pattern solely by controlling the mirror driving motor 12.

Next, the conveying speed of the workpiece 8 is set (step 102). Since the range in which marking by the laser marking apparatus is possible is restricted, it is necessary to perform marking of one pattern within the range. In view of this, the speed at which the workpiece 8 is conveyed is determined in accordance with the size and direction of the marking range.

After these preparatory operations, the motor 13 for driving the conveying device 14 is started (step 103). After the start of the motor, the operation for detecting the presence of the workpiece 8 is continuously performed (step 104) by the workpiece position detector 20, which is associated with the conveying device 14, for the purpose of checking the timing of the conveyance of the workpiece 8 into the marking range, the procedure advancing to the next step upon detection of the

workpiece 8.

After the workpiece 8, which is being conveyed by the conveying device 14, is detected by the workpiece position detector 20, an inner timer of the controller 21 is started, and the detection of the conveying direction and the vertical position of the workpiece 8 is effected by the workpiece position detector 20 (step 105). Then, by operating the XY table 15, the movable lenses 16 and 17 are moved to a marking start point (step 106). The marking start point is the stroke end on the upstream side within the marking-possible range with respect to the conveying direction of the workpiece 8, whereas, with respect to the direction orthogonal to the conveying direction, it is the position detected by the detector 20 in step 105.

After the movable lenses 16 and 17 have been brought to the marking start position, the apparatus enters into a stand-by state, which continues for a period until the workpiece 8 is conveyed to the position concerned. This period is uniformly determined by the distance between the workpiece position detector 20 and the marking-possible range and the conveying speed, and is compared with the lapse of time as indicated by the inner timer of the controller 21 (step 107).

After the elapse of the predetermined stand-by period, that is, when the workpiece 8 has reached the marking start point, marking is started (step 108). This

condition is shown in Fig. 5. While keeping the conveying speed of the workpiece 8 constant, the marking position is moved relative to the workpiece in synchronism therewith, whereby the surface of the workpiece 8 is marked with a fixed pattern. The synchronization of the marking position is effected by the Y-direction motor 18 of the XY-table 15. That is, as shown in Fig. 6, driving is performed such that the speed of the movement of the lenses 16 and 17 and the conveying speed of the workpiece 8 can be kept equal to each other. By this synchronized movement, marking of a fixed pattern is effected, with which the marking operation on one workpiece 8 is completed (See Fig. 7).

After the completion of the marking of one workpiece 8, the lenses 16 and 17 are moved to the upstream side so as to be prepared for marking on subsequent workpieces 8, which are to be fed one after another (step 109), and the procedure returns to step 104 to repeat the same operations. In this way, laser marking can be performed on workpieces 8 even when they are being continuously conveyed, without having to stop their conveyance.

In accordance with this embodiment, described above, it is possible to effect marking of an arbitrary pattern on the surface of a workpiece being conveyed due to the action of the second deflector 9. In particular, in performing marking, selection is possible with regard to planar translational position and two rotating

directions. Further, it is only necessary for the speed in the conveying direction of the conveying device 14 to have at least one degree of freedom, so that marking is possible while continuously operating the conveying device 14. Thus, the load on the conveying device 14 is diminished, whereby an enhancement in general versatility is attained and, at the same time, a reduction in the tact time for workpiece production is achieved, thereby making it possible to achieve an improvement in terms of production efficiency.

Next, the second embodiment of the present invention will be described in detail with reference to the drawings.

This embodiment differs from the first embodiment in the construction of the reflective mirror of the second deflector (See Fig. 1). In the first embodiment, the first deflecting mirror 10 and the second deflecting mirror 11 are used for the purpose of effecting planar rotation by 90° of the marking pattern, whereas, in this embodiment, a rotating mirror 25, a movable mirror 26 and a stationary mirror 27 are used, as shown in Fig. 8.

First, the optical path for laser beams will be described as divided into two paths. In a first optical path, laser beams P transmitted through the liquid crystal mask 6 are reflected by the movable mirror 26, and the reflected beams therefrom are reflected by the rotating mirror 25 and, further, the beams thus reflected

are applied to the movable lenses 16 and 17. In a second optical path, the rotating mirror 25 in the first optical mirror rotates, and the movable mirror 26 moves, whereby laser beams P transmitted through the liquid crystal mask 6 are reflected by the movable mirror 26, and the beams thus reflected are reflected by the rotating mirror 25, the reflected beams therefrom being applied to the movable lenses 16 and 17. The second optical path is constructed such that the stationary mirror 27 exists in the first optical path, so that the beams applied to the movable lenses 16 and 17 through the first and second optical paths are deviated from each other by 90° .

The above-mentioned rotating mirror 25 is designed so as to be capable of planar rotation of at least 90° in order that the direction of incidence of the rotating mirror 25 may be adjusted to the movable mirror 26 or the stationary mirror 27 in Fig. 8. Regardless of this planar rotation, both fluxes of incident beams are applied to the movable lenses 16 and 17 (in a direction perpendicular to the plane of the drawing). The stationary mirror 27 is secured in position such that beams reflected therefrom are directed to the rotating mirror 25. The movable mirror 26 is designed so as to be movable along a parallel line connecting the rotating mirror 25 and the stationary mirror 27 such that beams reflected therefrom are directed to the rotating mirror 25 or the stationary mirror 27.

The second embodiment will be described specifically with reference to Figs. 9 and 10, which show the first optical path, and Figs. 11 and 12, which show the second optical path. The rotation of the rotating mirror 25, the movement of the movable mirror 26, and the fixation of the stationary mirror 27 are achieved by the following construction: these mirrors 25, 26 and 27 are mounted on a base 24. The outer periphery of the rotating mirror 25 is slidably fitted into a hole of the base 24, and is equipped with a gear 32 which is in mesh with a gear 32 of a motor 28. Thus, when the motor 28 makes normal or reverse rotation, the rotating mirror 25 also rotates. This rotating mirror 25 is designed such that it is rotatable at least 90° . Further, the movable mirror 26 is provided such that it is slidable on a rail 29 that is secured to the base 24. This rail 29 is parallel to a line connecting the center of rotation of the rotating mirror 25 and the center of the reflecting surface of the stationary mirror 27.

In the outer periphery of the case of the movable mirror 26, there is provided a pin 31, which is fitted into an elongated hole 30 provided in the outer periphery of the case of the rotating mirror 25, in such a way that it involves no rattling. Thus, when the rotating mirror 25 is rotated by the motor 28, the pin 31 receives a thrust from the wall of the elongated hole 30, whereby the movable mirror 26 moves to the right and left, as

seen in the drawing, on the rail 29 with the rotation of the rotating mirror 25. Further, the case of the movable mirror 26 is provided with two holes 34, which are spaced apart from each other. The distance between these holes 34 corresponds to an optimum amount of displacement when the movable mirror 26 moves on the rail 29.

The base 24 has a pin 36 which is firmly secured thereto. At each of the stroke ends of the movable mirror 26, the pin 36 enters the hole 34 to thereby arrest the movable mirror 26. Though not shown, the pin 36 has a ball at its tip, which ball is outwardly biased by a spring. Due to this construction, the ball enters one of the two holes 34 at the stroke ends of the movable mirror 26 to thereby serve as a positioning lock for the movable mirror 26. Further, the rotating mirror 25 has two holes 33, which are spaced apart from each other. These holes 33 correspond to the rotating angle of 90° of the rotating mirror 25. A pin 35, which is secured to the base 24, is arranged so as to enter these holes 33 at the stroke ends of the movable mirrors 26, thus serving as a positioning lock for the rotating mirror 25. This pin 35 has a construction similar to that of the pin 36.

The rotating mirror 25 has a mirror 251 at its center of rotation (See Fig. 12). Thus, if the rotating mirror swings, both of the incident fluxes of beams from the movable lens 26 and the stationary lens 27 can be applied to the movable lenses 16 and 17. That is, in the

first optical path shown in Figs. 9 and 10, the rotating mirror 25 rotates 90° by the rotation of the motor 28 and, with this rotation, the movable mirror 26 moves to thereby realize the arrangement as shown in Figs. 11 and 12, whereby the second optical path is obtained.

Due to this construction, it is possible, as in the first embodiment, to turn the image to be marked by 90° and, further, marking is possible even when workpieces are continuously conveyed. While this embodiment has been described with reference to a construction in which only one motor 28 is used to reliably and economically realize an interlocked movement of the rotating mirror 25 and the movable mirror 26, it goes without saying that it is also possible to use two motors and that, regarding the mirrors, it is possible to adopt mirrors of various other types and configurations.

Next, the third embodiment, in which the reflective mirror of the second deflector 9 (See Fig. 1) is designed in still another way, will be described with reference to Figs. 13 through 16.

Figs. 13 and 14 are diagrams corresponding to the above-described first optical path, and Figs. 15 and 16 are diagrams corresponding to the above-described second optical path. Five reflective mirrors are secured to a movable base 37. These mirrors include a first mirror 38 for receiving and reflecting laser beams P transmitted through the liquid crystal mask 6 (See Fig. 1), and a

second mirror 39 for applying the reflected beams from the first mirror 38 to the movable lenses 16 and 17. The above five mirrors further include a third mirror 40 which, like the first mirror 38, receives and reflects laser beams transmitted through the liquid crystal mask 6, a fourth mirror 41 for receiving and reflecting the reflected beams from the third mirror 40, and a fifth mirror 42 for applying the reflected beams from the fourth mirror 41 to the movable lenses 16 and 17. The laser beams P transmitted through the liquid crystal mask 6 can be switchably applied to the first mirror 38 or the third mirror 40 according to the position of displacement of the movable base 37.

Each of the second mirror 39 and the fifth mirror 42, which, from their appearance as shown in the drawings, have the same configuration as that of the rotating mirror of the second embodiment, is obtained by removing the gear 32, etc. from the rotating mirror 25 of the second embodiment. Thus, unlike the rotating mirror of the second embodiment, they do not rotate but are fastened to the movable base 37.

Further, the movable base 37 is arranged so as to be slidable on two parallel rails 43 fastened to a base 45. In the middle portion of the base 45, an elongated hole 451 is formed so that laser beams can be applied to the movable lenses 16 and 17 from the second mirror 39 or the fifth mirror 42. Further, the movable base 37 is pin-

connected to the base 45 by means of a direct driven type pneumatic cylinder (not shown), whereby it can move to the right and left as seen in the drawing by a predetermined stroke. This stroke is determined by positioning locks 44. For example, in the state shown in Fig. 13, the movable base 37 is secured in position by the left-hand side positioning lock 44. That is, the first mirror 38 and the second mirror 39 have substantially the same construction as the first optical path, as can be seen from the laser optical path shown in Figs. 13 and 14.

Next, by driving a motor (not shown), the movable base 37 moves to the right as seen in the drawing, and arrested by the right-hand side positioning lock 44. Then, an arrangement as shown in Figs. 15 and 16 is realized. That is, as can be seen from the laser optical path shown in Figs. 15 and 16, the third mirror 40, the fourth mirror 41, and the fifth mirror 42 have substantially the same construction as the second optical path of the second embodiment.

Due to this construction, it is possible, as in the above-described embodiment, to turn the marked image by 90° and to achieve an improvement in terms of production efficiency. While in this embodiment the drive source for the movable base 37 consists of a direct driven type pneumatic cylinder, it is also possible to use a hydraulic cylinder, a solenoid, a motor and so on.

Further, in the above construction, switching from the first optical path to the second optical path and switching reverse thereto involve an increase/decrease in the number of mirrors by one, so that the image formation on the workpiece surface involves reversing from left to right. Thus, it should be added that, when effecting the above change in optical path, the display of the image on the liquid crystal mask 6 is reversed from left to right beforehand.

INDUSTRIAL APPLICABILITY

In accordance with the present invention, beams transmitted through a mask are switched by a reflective mirror so that the image to be marked can be turned by 90° and, further, laser marking is possible even when workpieces are being continuously conveyed, without having to stop them at intervals, whereby an apparatus for and a method of laser marking are provided which help to attain an improvement in production efficiency.



WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A laser marking apparatus comprising a laser generator, a first deflector for deflecting laser beams from said laser generator to perform raster scanning, a mask capable of selectively allowing transmission of the laser beams from said first deflector for raster scanning to thereby display a predetermined pattern, and a second deflector for further deflecting the laser beams transmitted through said mask to apply them to the surface of a workpiece for marking, wherein said second deflector includes a mirror for reflecting the laser beams transmitted through said mask and movable lenses for receiving the laser beams from this reflective mirror to apply them to the surface of a workpiece for marking, with the movable lenses being mounted on a moving mechanism which moves in synchronism with the speed at which the workpiece is conveyed.

2. A laser marking apparatus according to Claim 1, wherein said reflective mirror comprises a first mirror for receiving and reflecting the laser beams transmitted through said mask and a second mirror for reflecting the reflected beams from said first mirror to said movable lenses, and wherein the direction of the reflected beams from said first mirror can be switched with respect to said second mirror or said movable lenses.



3. A laser marking apparatus according to Claim 1, wherein said reflective mirror comprises a movable mirror adapted to receive and reflect the laser beams transmitted through said mask and capable of planar movements, a rotating mirror which reflects the reflected beams from said movable mirror to said movable lenses and which is capable of planar rotation, and a stationary mirror which can receive the reflected beams due to displacement of said movable mirror and reflect them to said rotating mirror, with the direction of the reflected beams from said movable mirror being switchable with respect to said rotating mirror or said stationary mirror through displacement of said movable mirror.

4. A laser marking apparatus according to Claim 1, wherein said reflective mirror comprises a first mirror for receiving and reflecting laser beams transmitted through said mask, a second mirror for reflecting the reflected beams from the first mirror to said movable lenses, a third mirror for receiving and reflecting laser beams transmitted through said mask, a fourth mirror for receiving and reflecting the reflected beams from the third mirror, and a fifth mirror for reflecting the reflected beams from the fourth mirror to said movable lenses, with the first through fifth mirror being secured to a movable base, and the application of the laser beams



transmitted through said mask being switchable to the first or the third mirror through displacement of said movable base.

5. A laser marking apparatus according to Claim 1, wherein said moving mechanism is formed by an orthogonal biaxial planar moving mechanism, with the direction one of the orthogonal two axes coinciding with the workpiece conveying direction, and wherein the drive in the direction of this axis can be effected in synchronism with the workpiece conveying speed.

6. A laser masking method in which raster scanning is performed with laser beams from a laser generator by using a first deflector and in which the laser beams used in said raster scanning are applied to a mask capable of displaying a predetermined pattern and are selectively transmitted therethrough, the laser beams transmitted through said mask being further deflected by a second deflector so as to effect marking application of said pattern to the surface of a workpiece, wherein, when said marking application is effected, movable lenses for applying laser beams to the surface of the workpiece, which are provided in the second deflector, are moved in synchronism with the workpiece, while the workpiece is being conveyed, in the workpiece conveying direction.



7. A laser masking method according to Claim 6, wherein the second deflector swings laser beams transmitted through said mask by at least 90° between said mask and said movable lenses.

8. A laser masking method according to Claim 6, wherein the second deflector is equipped with a movable mirror for deflecting beams transmitted through said mask toward said movable lenses and a stationary mirror for receiving the reflected beams from said movable mirror, and wherein said movable mirror is operated so as to allow switchable emission of said reflected beams to said stationary mirror or said movable lenses to thereby make said pattern rotatable.