

Time Frame

compiled by Mark Guthrie

Editor's Note: The history of the picture frame and the craft of framing is as diverse as it is long. Each issue, PFM will explore that history as we feature a prominent person in our industry and their discussions with Mark Guthrie about the period styles, artistic movements, innovations, and frames they find most significant. Topics will run the gamut in terms of era or impact, and it is our hope that "Time Frame" will broaden the understanding of the role of fine frames in history.

Far right: The full polyptych, also featured in an article this issue.

Near right: A detail showing a polychromed and gilded area of the frame both before and after cleaning. Dirt was removed, but the patina remains. (Photos courtesy of Gold Leaf Studios and Banca di Piacenza.)



William (Bill) Adair, conservator and owner of Gold Leaf Studios, head of the International Institute for Frame Study in Washington, D.C., discusses "Dirt vs. Patina."

BA: I've got a "pet peeve" that was brought to mind during my recent work on an Italian Renaissance polyptych [multiple-paneled] altarpiece. For years, people have restored frames—in other words, they attempted to put them back in their original, unimpaired condition. This has been standard practice from the 19th century.

But what we've discovered is that by re-gilding the frame, you denying the viewer an idea of what an antique looks like. When you re-gild, you're taking away value. You might as well show a reproduction.

MG: Because what you're seeing, after restoration, is a reproduced surface?

BA: Right. A lot of people will make a reproduction and restore the original to look like the reproduction. Then what you really have

is two reproductions. It's a highly refined intellectual idea of "dirt vs. patina." You can go through any collection and see frames that were ruined.

The discovery of this polyptych frame (dated 1499) led to a number of campaigns of care and preservation. But there was never a campaign of re-gilding or painting the frame's polychromed areas.

MG: You're seeing a surface from 1499.

BA: From 1499. The mere fact that it survived is a miracle. And what's a greater miracle is that it had been spared the over zealous re-gilding of four centuries of gilders. It was spared because of poverty. If they had the money, it would have been done.

MG: Give me a little background on the altarpiece.

BA: It was located originally in a poor city (Cortemaggiore) in a poor region of Italy (the Emilia-Romagna region). At the height of the Renaissance, an artist, Filippo Mazzola, was commissioned to paint the panels. The panels and frame were installed in the town's cultural center, a monastery. So for years you had a poverty-stricken city and this great work languishing in a church.

In the 1860's, during the reunification of Italy, there was a lot of reorganization. The frame and its polyptych were moved from the Franciscan monastery to The Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie. Now we feel that the frame may have never been in the church; we're not certain. But the painted panels were definitely removed at that time.

MG: Had the panels ever been "engaged" (an interlocked part of the frame)?

BA: No, the engaged stuff

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happened much earlier. But [in the 1860's], there was a Gothic revival going on. So a few of the panels were put into Gothic frames; however, they didn't need all of them. So the frame and the rest of the panels became surplus. They were sold to dealers and then re-sold several times over.

The point that I want to stress is that a frame survived this way because of benign neglect. Our goal in the preservation of the frame was—at all costs—to keep it from being re-gilded or over cleaned.

Paul Levi put it this way, “You wouldn't want your grandfather to look young now, would you?”

MG: How did you do this?

BA: Well, here was an opportunity to preserve the patina. Paul showed me how to “dry clean” the surface with a soft brush. [It's a method of using micro-abrasion, rather than putting any solvent on the surface. When you use solvents you end up with hot spots because they're totally clean areas. A brush allows you to maintain the patina, keep the integrity of the object, but get the surface dirt off.]

When we donated our services for this project, we entered into a covenant: the surface shall not be “improved.”

MG: Does this philosophy apply to other frames as well?

BA: Absolutely. When we find an antique (even a 19th century piece) we are reluctant to re-gild. We try to impress on our clients that the wear and tear is a beautiful part of its existence. When we see collections of frames or framed art or

furniture, we see that many of them have been re-surfaced. But when you find something that hasn't been re-touched at all, it's very rare. More rare than you can imagine.

I hope that if I can accomplish anything in this life, I can help to set a philosophy for frame people [framers, restorers, curators] not to systematically re-gild.

MG: Are the “frame people” paying attention?

BA: Not really. That's the problem. There is still a lot of re-surfacing going on out there.

MG: Any progress?

BA: A little.

MG: When did you begin to see people re-think the concept of restoration?

BA: When we compiled the exhibition “The Frame In America,” in 1981, I did it in the hopes that people might understand that there might be some scholarly theory regarding the symbiotic relationship between frame and art. Through that, some people began to see and appreciate the frame in its natural state.

Then the second exhibition we compiled “The Frame In America, 1860-1960,” toured to a number of museums. This was much more successful: not only was it informative for the public, but curators also got to see these first-hand and they began to make comparisons against their collections.

MG: How do you know when to stop cleaning? Is there good dirt and bad dirt?

BA: I guess one man's dirt is another man's patina. In the case of

the polyptych, we began by vacuuming off the dust. We then used a camel's-hair brush and dry-cleaned it using a circular motion technique. You could see soft gold coming through. Not like someone had spilled casein paint on and wiped off the highlights.

It's really a delicate balance. It's basically [using] a lot of experience. I jokingly tell people that, “We get paid for what we don't do,” because we're sparing it. “You're paying us to not ruin your piece.” It's a little tongue-in-cheek, but still very serious.

MG: Are there any guidelines that you could suggest?

BA: White gesso should be inpainted raw umber, rather than left alone. It's distracting. A rule of thumb might be that areas larger than a marble are to be considered damage. Anything smaller is patina—part of the normal wear and tear of an object. Things along the sight edge are also distracting, because you're looking at them as you view the art. As you go out away from the site [edge], things get increasingly less important.

MG: So items at the back edge may not warrant attention?

BA: Possibly. We concern ourselves first with structural issues. Then we address the larger damaged areas, like large missing chunks of ornament. Finally, we examine the smaller areas for possible attention. And when this is being done, the crux of conservation is to repair the areas of damage to match existing patina. Not like restoration, which repairs it to its original condition. ■



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