

Reproducing a Neo-Gothic Mirror

By Mark Guthrie and Peter Werkhoven

Earlier this year, we were asked to create a mirror for the lobby of an historic apartment building here in San Francisco. Because this mirror would hang in a common area, it was essential that the design selected meld seamlessly into its surroundings. Specifics of our original size and finish recommendations were filtered through the building's approval committee and suffered some alteration. However, the final product was successful and can serve as an example of sound decision-making for similar situations.

Concept

Architecture was the overriding influence in our design selection. The 12-story apartment building was erected in 1929 in the neo-Gothic/Deco style, designed by Conrad

Alfred Meussdorffer. Although Gothic architecture is best known for its religious structures of the Middle Ages, neo-Gothic draws inspiration more from secular and mercantile buildings of the age. Initially revived in the mid-nineteenth century and flourishing during the eclectic early twentieth century (a period of major architectural transition), Neo-Gothic architecture stands as the final reflection of the nineteenth-century Beaux Arts academic tradition of design.

The ceiling of the lobby contained ribbed vaulting (Photo 1), which was a commanding feature of this area. Here and elsewhere within the structure's design, elements of the then-oncoming Deco movement were visible, primarily a softening, or minimizing, of conventional Gothic ornamentation. Within the lobby, this series of peaked arches became the obvious cue for the mirror's shape to follow and their cleanliness of line dictated its profile.

Design

Once the intended form and size were determined, the next task became to establish the specific angle and pitch for the frame's arch to assure that the installation would appear to naturally mimic the interior architectural lines.

Immediately, we encountered problems of scale. The distance between the existing columns was approximately 12', and the height to the peak of the vaulted ceiling's arch was nearly 18'. Because of these expanses, the option of modeling the cur-



The reproduction of a neo-Gothic-style mirror looks as if it had always hung in the historic apartment building lobby.

vature with a flexible form, then downsizing the shape to the desired proportion, became unmanageable. The best option was to replicate the curvature through photography. Standing at a fixed point away from the wall and maintaining a “parallel position” to the wall (to diminish any foreshortening effect of the lens, which would skew the curvature) and by locating a height that would keep the camera level with the peak of the arch, we photographed the existing shape. This allowed for the digital resizing of the original into a template for shaping.

Once downloaded onto the computer, the arch shape was reprinted in poster form (multiple pages sectioned together to create a single image) and mounted to a foamboard substrate. The result was a properly adjusted arc, sized for the next phase of the project.

The building's approval committee agreed that one of the existing reproduction frames from our line of mirrors, a Louis Philippe design, would act as the model for this piece (Photo 2).

The customary Louis Philippe design is typified by its silhouette (rectangular shape, right-angled corners at the bottom, radius-turned corners at the top). In this particular setting, the standard Louis Philippe profile (a flattened reverse bolection with smooth, accentuated hollows) without the customary applied ornament at the lip followed nicely with the lines of the interior moulding. With a softly patinated 13.5k white gold finish, the new mirror frame would become a suitable neo-Gothic/Deco design.

Construction

After the selected profile shape had



Photo 1: The lobby had high, rib-vaulted ceilings.



Photo 2: A Louis Philippe style was the model for the reproduction.



Photo 3: The top of the mirror was hand-carved.



Photo 4: The blanks were joined in their respective positions, and the profile was carved so that the contours met neatly.



Photo 5: Gesso layers were applied.



Photo 6: The frame was then sanded to a smooth finish.

been milled in length for the bottom and sides of the frame, we encountered a unique challenge when transposing the photographed arch template into a wooden arched top. Because the contour of the desired shape was a continuous curve (no straight lines), none of the milled length moulding could be used.

To accurately follow our template, we carved the top by hand (Photo 3). The four blanks (raw wood segments for carving) comprised what would become the two turned corners and each side of the two arcing “bows.” The blanks were joined in their respective positions, and the profile was carved so that the profile contours met neatly with the ends of the milled lengths (Photo 4).

As with most any water-gilt frame, a number of gesso layers were then applied and sanded to a smooth surface (Photos 5 and 6). Following the gesso was the application of a black bole. When viewed through the white gold, this would add a cool, dark quality to the overall personality of the frame (Photo 7). When set, the bole was sanded with 800 grit sandpaper and polished with a wet cloth to add hardness and act as an additional aid to areas intended to receive burnishing (Photo 8).

The frame was gilded with 13.5k white gold (as opposed to the standard 12k) for its warm, yellow/green coloration (Photo 9). The intent for this finish was to vaguely suggest a tarnished silver surface (Photo 10). After the hollows of the gilt frame were burnished, selected portions of the profile were rubbed to reveal the black bole beneath (Photo 11).

When all of this work was done, the most critical phase—the patination process—was ready to be carried



Photo 7: Black bole was applied to add a darker quality to the frame.



Photo 8: The bole was sanded and then polished with a wet cloth to add hardness.



Photo 9: To achieve a warm, yellow-green coloration, the frame was gilt with 13.5k white gold.



Photo 10: The finish suggested a tarnished silver surface.



Photo 11: Selected portions of the frame were rubbed to reveal the black bole underneath.



Photo 12: A unique “tobacco spittle” concoction was applied to the open gold surface, creating a worn, tarnished effect.

out. All subsequent stages of the surface treatment—from gesso and bole application to the selection of karat for the gilding as well as the methods and procedures used in each step—were deliberately prepared to execute this particular patination.

The target appearance could be best described as “a 1929 lacquered silver mirror frame that was originally placed in this public setting and had never been removed.” To achieve this effect, we sought to replicate the aging and occasional mistreatment that would logically have befallen a 78-year old item—including the very necessary collection of nicotine that would have assuredly been present much of the time (Photo 12).

Of course, nothing replicates this effect better than the real thing. Of the many Old World techniques and recipes that Peter has found, one the

most more effective is his own “tobacco spittle” concoction. When applied to an open gold surface, the tannins in tobacco collect and provide a soft visual filter that adds warmth to the metal surface while also mildly etching the skin with its acidic content. This technique helped to convey an illusion of age as well as providing an honest “tarnished” effect.

After the frame was complete,

an aged faux antique mirror was inserted with a specified silver-loss pattern replicating a gathering of moisture toward the edges and predominantly the bottom. The resulting coupling of glass and frame, when installed in the building's lobby, attracted neither undue attention nor detracted from the surrounding architecture (Photo 13). It simply looked as though it had always been there.■



Peter Werkhoven is co-owner of Aedicule Fine Framemaking in San Francisco. Mr. Werkhoven is originally from Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and moved to the U.S. a few years ago. His frames can be found in the Rijksmuseum and the Van Gogh Museum, as well as in the homes of many European collectors. He can be reached at pwerkhoven@comcast.net.



Mark Guthrie, CPF is a 25-year veteran of the framing industry and owner of Aedicule in San Francisco, CA. He provides consultation services to industry manufacturers and retailers, and has served as V.P. of Sales for Abe Munn Picture Frames in New York City. His background also includes management of multi-store operations and ownership of Guthrie's Picture Framing in Houston, TX. He can be reached at emguthrie@yahoo.com.