

Repairing a

By Mark Guthrie and Peter Werkhoven

Sometimes projects come in that you know will be difficult. Recently, we were given a trumeau mirror that had been previously repaired several times—unsatisfactorily. Fortunately, we had an historical understanding of the trumeau design as well as the professionalism to take on the task of repairing the frame.

Although the trumeau design never appealed to us personally, we did wind up accepting this repair project because it represented a challenge. Note the word “restoration” is not used. To be accurate, many of the steps that were needed on this frame are identical to those that would be done on a restoration. But the term “restoration” indicates that a piece originally had a special quality that had been lost and to which it is to be returned. In this case, “repair/touch-up” is more appropriate because it indicates stabilizing the structure and ornament, then giving it some aesthetics that it never had before.

History of Trumeau

First, let's define a couple of terms. The architectural-based term *trumeau* (pronounced, troo-mo) originally referred to an ornamented vertical section between two doors, commonly found on Gothic entrances. And *boiserie* (pronounced, bwah-ze-re) refers to ornate and intricately carved paneling popular in 17th and 18th century French interiors. When a boiserie section appeared between two doors or openings within the room, they often contained an upper and lower section. The upper section usually carried an artful depiction and the lower section was left unadorned or contained a mirror. Over time, the two terms became intermingled and “trumeau” eventually became the accepted description for any design



This was the trumeau mirror in its original state, with damage as well as bad previous touch-ups using bronze paint.



The plaster ornamentation on the mirror was chipped or missing and needed to be re-created.

Trumeau Mirror

with such a distinct upper/lower arrangement, especially when the lower section was mirrored.

The trumeau mirror was an intriguing development in interior design. During the height of boiserie popularity, the European bourgeoisie were emulating the style of the courts in their own town homes on a lesser scale. The trumeau design was one outgrowth of this.

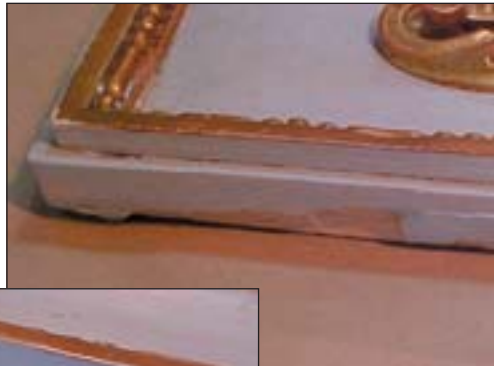
The earlier boiserie ornamentation was entirely carved from wood, created just as meticulously as any frame of the same period. The original substrate panels are literally planks of wood approximately 1" to 1½" thick, cut sharply. The edges have no decorative moulding (unless applied at a later date). Because there was often an adjacent repeat of the decoration, the panels were usually cut closely to the ornamental area. As these detached boiseries became increasingly scarce, replicas were fabricated to fill the need. The method of ornamentation quickly turned from carved wood to cast (molded) ornamentation. This continued to be the most common method of construction.

The original construction of this mirror was done sometime in the late-18th century—and not very well. The ornamentation and much of the panel surface was plaster (a very frail and unstable substance). Throughout



Another section of the frame had broken ornamentation that had to be repaired.

the process, it continued to loosen and break apart. Instead of patching areas using the same plaster that was used previously, we decided to make a putty that was often used by master framemakers in the 18th century. This material was known in Europe as *pâte* (pronounced *paht*). *Pâte* is a mixture of bleached Japanese rice paper, rabbit skin glue, and chalk. When hand-carved frames became too expensive and time consuming for people to make, framemakers found different ways to make the process go faster and cheaper. Prior to the advent of *pâte*, details were molded from *papier-mâché*, an innovation by a Parisian named Gardeur. He developed the process of “*carton pierre*”. *Carton pierre* (meaning, stone carton) was a *papier-mâché* offshoot largely employed as a substitute



Even the sides of the frame had lost the plaster.



for plaster in the moulded ornaments of ceilings and walls.

Gardeur's gilt and painted creations were destined to hang in ballrooms and grand public areas. Over time, the

process was officially approved by l'Academie d'Architecture. When craftsmen tried to use the same application on trumeau mirror

frames in the mid-late 18th century, they found that the material wasn't durable enough. Renaud, a member of the Academy de Saint Luc is known as the originator of *pâte*, which replaced the *papier-mâché* process in 1765.

The recipe of his “Mastique de Pâte Economiques” was launched without much success at first, but it soon became irreplaceable within the wooden sculpture industries, including frame-making.

The Repair

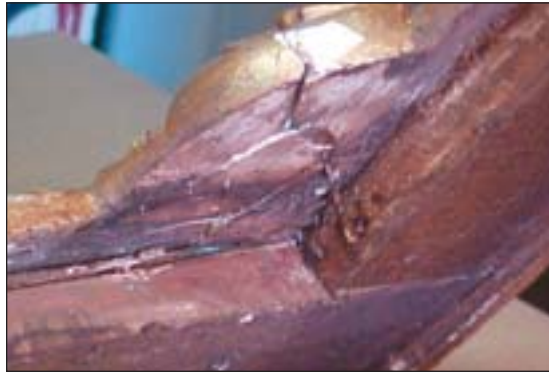
The stages of work required on this piece were fairly straightforward. We needed to stabilize the structure; re-attach any broken ornamentation; replace elements where needed; then gild, paint, and patinate the surface.

The applied plaster ornamentation was in such a horrific condition that, in order to detect weaknesses, we decided to run a hammer over the surface first with a soft tapping motion. This

way, any unstable parts beneath the painted surfaces could become evident. On the portions that seemed stable, a solvent of shellac was carefully injected underneath and then dried under a little bit of pressure. After applying the pâte, the panel areas were sanded down to a smooth surface again.

Since the original panels showed brush marks, we recreated these by re-carving into the pâte. Afterward, a thin layer of gesso was applied to smooth and level out the panel surface. Again, pâte was used to recreate the missing ornaments. Fortunately, there were only small details missing. The pâte was molded and carved out by hand. (Note: If there were entire strips of ornamented detail missing, we would have created a rubber mold of some similar detail. Luckily, this process was unnecessary.)

After re-cutting and sanding the newly applied pâte, all of the work that had been done by previous restora-



The back section of the frame was also in need of repair.



To begin the repair process, glue was applied and clamps were attached to hold the frame together while it dried.



Pâte was applied to recreate the ornamentation. It was then hand-carved to look like the original.



tion/touch-up efforts was stripped down. These incompetent touch-ups included attempts to conceal gold losses by using bronze paint, bronze wax, and other inferior materials. Instead of re-gilding all of the ornamentation (which would have actually been much easier) we carefully gilded (23K) the spots where any original bole and gold was visible. Often, the work areas were ¼" square or smaller. Our own mixture of bole was applied that matched the original red color, then the newly replaced or patched ornamented sections were gilded.

The original time-worn patina on the piece then had to be matched. For the freshly gilded areas, it was decided that the best match toward the soft tones of the original gold had to be achieved using a recipe created by another 18th century craftsman. Coffee grounds, tea, and dark tobacco were dissolved in water for a few days, then mixed with a little animal hide glue. This mixture tends to darken the new gold slightly. At

the same time, its acid content “bites” through, eliminating the need for a rub-through. We then applied a thin layer of “lijm” (our word at Ædicule for a mixture of hide glue and a specific pigment color). This creates a smooth film over all of the gold and gently

tones the gilded surfaces overall. The final step was to determine where there would be “pings” (moments of brilliant highlight), and where the gold would be left a little duller. To accomplish this, the lijm was spot removed from those particular areas.

Once completed, the frame received a faux-antique mirror, replacing the anachronistic clean mirror that had been originally installed. This type of mirror is made by



After the ornamentation had been cleaned, repaired, spot regilded, and patinated, the Trumeau frame was ready for the mirror.

a relatively simple process of sprinkling shavings from the backs of authentic antique mercury mirrors over a newly silvered mirror just prior to receiving its back paint. The older mercury shavings begin to oxidize the new silver, creating silver-loss “blooms,” which accurately resemble natural aging.

Although the project began as one of those uninspiring “headaches” that continued to be troublesome throughout the process, the outcome was surprisingly effective and a pleasing improvement. ■



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