

PRESERVING A NATIONAL TREASURE

THE RESTORATION AND REPLICATION OF A CARLO MARATTA FRAME

BY WILLIAM B. ADAIR

In January of 1980, while working for the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, I was assigned to conserve the frame on an important historic painting—the portrait of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart. No other American icon has been so often repeated as the image of Washington. However, this particular painting and frame has more significance than the others.

The commission was awarded to Gilbert Stuart¹ in the spring of 1796 by one of the wealthiest patrons of the new republic, Mr. and Mrs. William Bingham (whose Philadelphia residence occupied an entire city block). Senator Bingham was a staunch supporter of American independence. The painting was done at the end of Washington's two-term presidency and sent to England as a gift for American supporter, the second Earl of Shelburne and first Marquis of Lansdowne, William Petty. The



painting is referred to as the “Lansdowne” portrait because of this early association with the Marquis, who died in 1806. The painting was subsequently sold at auction and passed through several ownerships until ending up in the collection of Lord Dalmeny, son of the 7th Earl of Rosebury.

In 1968, the portrait was loaned to the Smithsonian and became the museum's focal point for more than 30 years. It symbolized the essence of the Gallery's mission to recognize great individuals of American history. Marvin Sadik, then the director of the NPG met with Lord Dalmeny (a child at the

*The Carlo Maratta style frame on this portrait is almost as important as the painting. The standing portrait depicts Washington as he appeared before Congress in Philadelphia. It includes furniture symbolic of the new America republic, as well as books titled *American Revolution*, and *Constitution & Laws of the United States*, and a silver inkstand engraved with the Washington family coat of arms, which echoes the coat of arms above the original portrait. Seen above is the replicated frame. At left is a detail of the original frame. (Also see the cover of this magazine.) (photo credits: William Adair)*

time) and persuaded him to keep the painting on loan so the American public could admire the quality. The youngster agreed, but quipped, “I bet you wish I was dead, so you could keep the painting!”

Two years ago, the very much alive and cash-strapped Lord Dalmeny announced that he was going to put the painting up for sale. The Gallery then faced the task of raising money to save this monumental icon for the nation. Appeals in the press and on television by the new gallery director, Marc Pachter, captured the attention of Fred W. Smith, chairman of the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, who immediately understood the patriotic significance of Stuart’s masterpiece.² A few weeks later, the trustees of the foundation announced their generous gift to the Gallery to purchase the painting, which included support for a historic tour of the painting to the American public and ultimately a permanent place to display the masterpiece in the National Portrait Gallery. (See sidebar on page 56 for tour schedule.)

THE CARLO MARATTA STYLE FRAME

Acanthus leaves and calves tongue patterns, independently carved and gilded, set into a deep scooped profile, become the chief character-



Photo 2: The compo cross straps are sliced and applied while warm and pliable. The antique book press is still the best way to make the cross straps, as Gold Leaf Studios artisan, Koy Eam, slices the compo with a thin gilder’s knife. (photo credit: William Adair)



Photo 3: Gold Leaf Studios staff members, Noy Eam and Kan Phung sand gesso and apply corner straps to frame with hide glue, prior to the three applications of bole and our favorite gold leaf for historic projects, Sepp special 23.75 k gold leaf. (photo credit: William Adair)

istic of the Carlo Maratta Style frame.³ The popularity of this Neo-classical frame style spanned roughly from the 1790’s to 1820’s and was a typical choice for those British patrons who made the grand tour to Italy in the late 18th and early 19th century. This monumental and classic design was chosen to create a certain awe-inspiring effect on the viewers not readily realized by the average viewer today. It’s not a coincidence that the bundled reeds with cross straps mimic the gilded table and chair in Stuart’s composition. The furniture elements “surround”

Washington and the frame subsequently becomes a visually interactive part of the entire ensemble, thus elevating the viewers of the late 18th century to the “goosebump” stage of art exhilaration.

THE COMMISSION

When a painting this large travels to as many venues as this one is during its current tour, the risk of damage is great. As a result, the frame usually takes the brunt of wear and tear. Although I conserved the original frame 20 years ago, it always will remain extremely fragile due to the nature of the materials and its age. Therefore, the decision was made to replicate the frame.

Measurements of the profile and silicone rubber molds of the ornaments were taken from the original frame so that an exact replica could be fabricated.

The wood (basswood) was milled from specially ground knives, joined with interior splines and PVA Titebond glue, then given 10 coats of traditional rabbitskin glue type gesso. With the exception of the cross straps all of the other foliate ornamentation was cast in hydrocal and applied to the frame’s surface using PVA Titebond glue, reinforced with small brads for support.

Since the original frame had been so extensively conserved in 1980, it was possible to make a rubber mold of it without risk of



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damaging the original surface. Hydrocal was used instead of carved wood for economic reasons. This casting technique has proven to be a reliable substitute for the laborious and expensive hand carving of the 18th century.

The bole color chosen matched the original, which consisted of a yellow ochre background with a red/brown chestnut

movie of the fabrication and installation process go to www.goldleafstudios.com.)

THE COMMISSION REDUX

When the full impact of the project finally settled down in the minds and hearts the trustees of the foundation, they decided to produce an exact replica of both



Photo 4: Seen as it was before conservation in 1980, the acanthus leaf and calves tongue pattern needed to be "dry stripped" or "pressure flaked" with hard wooden sticks (idiot sticks) to remove three separate layers of gesso and gilding from the clogged up design. (photo credit: William Adair)

color overlay, punctuated with grey highlights. The color of gold which most closely matched the original was Sepp Leaf's 23³/₄ karat Rosa Noble. It has a warm rich quality that produces the effect of "instant ageing" when toned. Since we used the water gilding technique, certain highlights were burnished with agate stones to a glistening luster to match the original. The background areas were left alone to reproduce the "dead and bright" look of most Neo-classical ornamentation of the period. As the grand finale, we toned the frame with a raw umber casein paint, put in a few crack lines to simulate aging, and sent it back to the Gallery for fitting with the original painting, ready for its own "grand tour." (To view a quicktime

painting and frame for their Las Vegas headquarters. This was a good way to celebrate their personal commitment and involvement to save America's artistic heritage long after the original painting completed its grand tour across America.

In reviewing the history of Gilbert Stuart's classic American icon, one might ask, why is this particular one so important? The answer is simple. It happens to be the very first finished painting of Washington that Stuart made over his long and distinguished career.⁴

The opportunity to do this first sketch would not have happened for Stuart if it had not been for the "hard begging" of the patron's wife. Washington agreed to sit for the portrait in the spring

of 1796, writing the artist on April 11: "Sir: I am under promise to Mrs. Bingham, to set for you tomorrow at nine o'clock, and wishing to know if it be convenient to you that I should do so, and whether it shall be at your own house, (as she talked of the State House), I send this note to you, to ask information."

Washington's grandson George Washington Parke Custis later wrote: "It is notorious that it was only by hard begging that Mrs. Bingham obtained the sittings for the marquis of Lansdowne's picture."

It can't get much better than that! The first president—at the peak of his power and prestige—being painted by one of America's most talented artists. We at Gold

Leaf Studios felt honored to have been selected for these two historic commissions. So when approached with these commissions, in the spirit of the times, I turned to my staff (who is always under impossible deadlines against all odds) with characteristic "hard begging,".... and said.... "My fellow gilders.... Let's roll." ■

Endnotes

1. (b.1755 - d.1828) U.S. painter. Born in Saunderstown R.I., he went to London in 1775 and worked six years with Benjamin West. He opened his own London studio in 1782 and enjoyed great success, but fled to Dublin in 1787 to escape his creditors. After six years there, he returned to the U.S. He developed a distinctively American portrait style, and quickly established himself as the nation's leading portraitist. Critics have praised his painterly brushwork, luminous color, and psychological penetration. Of his nearly 1,000 portraits, the most famous is of George Washington. Stuart is considered the master portraitist of his age; Stuart was the third child of a Scottish immigrant who operated the first snuff mill in America. When he returned from England to America, he pursued a successful career as a portraitist in Philadelphia, New York, Washington and Boston. He continued to create memorable portraits, painting over 1,000 notable men and women, including the first six founding fathers of our country and five of their wives. Currently his portraits hang in museums all over the world, and his portrait of George Washington is seen daily by millions of Americans as they handle their one dollar bills.

2. Thanks are in order to those who wish to thank this patriotic American.
Fred W. Smith, Chairman, Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, 701 Village Center Circle, Las Vegas, Nevada 89134-6099
www.dwreynolds.com

3. Carlo Maratta (1625-1713) Baptized on 15 May 1625 at Camerano (Ancona). In 1636 he went to Rome where he studied, as a boy, under Andrea Sacchi, and became influenced by Correggio and Cortona. In 1650 he established his reputation with the Adoration of the Shepherds, painted for the church of S. Giuseppe dei Falegnami. Thereafter he became the principal master of late Baroque painting in Rome.

4. The very first oil sketch (owned jointly by the National Portrait Gallery and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston) was kept unfinished by Stuart throughout his life to use as a guide for subsequent paintings.

Tour Schedule

The Museum of Fine Arts

Houston, Texas
February 15, 2002 - June 16, 2002

Las Vegas Art Museum

Las Vegas, Nevada
June 29, 2002 - October 27, 2002

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Los Angeles, California
November 8, 2002 -
March 9, 2003

Seattle Art Museum

Seattle, Washington
March 21, 2003 -
July 20, 2003

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts

Minneapolis, Minnesota
August 1, 2003 -
November 30, 2003

Oklahoma City Museum of Art

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
December 12, 2003 -
April 11, 2004

Arkansas Arts Center

Little Rock, Arkansas
April 23, 2004 - August 22, 2004

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

New York, New York
Fall 2004
(joins Gilbert Stuart exhibition)

(For further information, visit the
National Portrait Gallery website at
www.npg.si.edu)