

Artistic Surroundings

Connecticut River Impressionist
Leif Nilsson handcrafts his own frames.

by Chet White

At the mouth of the Connecticut River lies Old Lyme, a burgeoning center of the visual arts and home of The Lyme Art Association,

The Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts and The Florence Griswold Museum. The newly expanded Museum commemorates the site where Childe Hassam, Guy Wiggins, Charles H. Davis and other founders of the School of American Impressionist Painting gathered at the beginning of the 20th century.

Born and raised in Old Lyme, painter Leif Nilsson completed a full curriculum of Classical Studies at the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts in 1986. In the early nineties Leif and his artist wife, Katherine, settled across the river in the picturesque village of Chester where they purchased an antique building, once The Chester Hotel. Now carefully remodeled under Leif's direction, and often by his own hand, the building serves as a personal residence and gallery for exhibition and sales of the artist/owners work. The small studio adjacent to the gallery is the workspace where Nilsson crafts his own frames.

I found him there one sunny afternoon last spring, his compound miter saw set up outside on a temporary work

bench, preparatory to cutting 10 foot lengths of profiled bass wood into mitered lengths. "I cut a good stock of standard sizes and put a bunch together when I have



Nilsson created a custom profile based on a cassetta shape to house his impressionistic landscapes of Connecticut. The artist makes his own frames to be sure his works are enhanced by their housing—but he's happy to make changes or alterations to please customers.

enough paintings and some spare time," he said. "The bass is lightweight and pretty free of grain and knots. I invested about six hundred dollars for a custom profile cutter with a millwork shop years ago. I like this 'Florentine' design."

The profile was about 2 7/8" wide

and resembled the cut of an Italian "Cassetta" frame.

"I got serious about making frames in 1989 when a friend recommended a weekend workshop where I learned the basics of making finished corner, leafed frames. I did some experimenting and adapted the principles to applying a metal leaf finish."

We then went inside the studio where Leif showed me some assembled frames awaiting finishing. "I use a plunge router to cut a slot for the biscuit in the corners, glue it all together and clamp it in a framing vise. Next I pre-drill and counter-sink three holes for corner screws, two staggered on one side and one from the other. Then I cover the holes with wood



The artist and a painting of his garden—ready to be framed.

plugs, apply wood filler and sand the whole thing, sometimes two or three times. I like to think of them as 'workhorse' frames. They stand up to heavy use over time. Paintings get changed in and out of them in the gallery and they get shipped around, but they still hold tight and look good."

Just a couple of years ago Leif found a source for printmaking with a process he felt would do the originals justice and began offering prints for sale. Now, framing is one way he likes to distinguish the artist's prints from their originals. He decided to use a simple, raw poplar "baguette" frame, $\frac{3}{4}$ " wide by $1\frac{1}{4}$ " deep with a $\frac{3}{16}$ " rabbet. The frame sets $\frac{5}{8}$ " proud off the acrylic face, which is spaced away from the unmatted print. Leif follows the same careful procedures for cutting and joining print frames as he does for frames for the oil originals. They can be hung unfinished, stained, or painted, depending on the print and the buyer's preference. He charges about half the price for them as for the metal leafed frames.

"As far as what buyers want in framing," Nilsson told me as we walked over to the gallery, "I try to accommodate them. My primary interest is in marketing my art, not frames. I just want to be sure the quality of the frame adds to the value of the painting, instead of detracting from it."

I noticed a few paintings in purchased frames. "That was an experiment," Leif commented. "I got a good deal on a volume purchase. Some people like them and that's fine with me. In fact, sometimes collectors will take a painting without a frame because



Nilsson has taken a practical approach, and a simplified aesthetic, to framing his prints—a plain profile in raw wood that can later be finished to the customer's taste houses a float-mounted print.



Nilsson says he makes his frames to be workhorses, ready for changes in the gallery or for shipping to far-flung customers. He pays careful attention to joining and fitting.

they want to supply their own to get the same 'look' as the rest of their collection."

"But I like the patina you get on your metal leafed frames," I said. "The gold has a sort of muted, textured look. How do you do it?"

"Actually, they're not all that way," Leif replied. "In fact I've changed the finishing process so I get a nice bright, reflective gold to start with and that gives me the option of leaving it bright or toning it down. At first, I used what I call a 'Toned Shellac' finishing method, but now I usually use an 'Oil Base Wax' method. The initial steps for applying the metal leaf are the same for both. Good preparation is time consuming, but it's a must. And remember, I'm usually doing these in batches of six to a dozen, depending on the frame sizes. The wood has to be well sanded, clean, and dry. First, I use a cheap bristle brush to apply a base coat of shellac thinned with alcohol. Sometimes I use amber, that is, orange, shellac. Or, I might use white pigmented shellac toned with burnt sienna pigment."

"Anyway," he went on, "The white shellac seems to produce a harder, more reflective substrate. That helps if the wood has some pronounced roughness or defects. After that dries, I sand and steel wool it two or three times. Then I seal it with a coat of thinned amber shellac. Although, sometimes, I'll add some pigment to the sealing coat for a deeper tone. Finally I steel wool it again, vacuum off any dust or particles and give it a wipe with a damp cloth. Now it's ready to have the

metal leaf applied.”

“Where do you get all this stuff?” I asked.

“From almost any art supply house. The leaf is a metal composition that comes in small, thin sheets between pages in a little book; very thin sheets, thousands of an inch. You have to stick it on the face of the frame with a coat of ‘size,’” he continued. “I skip the leaf on the sides, but they get all the other steps.”

“I used to use oil based size, but I changed to water base. The water base is okay for interior applications. I just brush it on with a no.12 artist’s brush and it sets up to a tack in about 15 minutes. Then I lay on the metal leaf. There’s a technique to it.”

I looked at the book. Each metal leaf was affixed to a thin paper backing.

“You kind of have to roll it off the paper onto the frame,” he said. “Overlap each leaf slightly over the next. It’s not easy, but you get better with practice. Then you gently burnish it into the corners with the tissue backing and let the sizing



Top, Center, and Above: Nilsson’s metal leafed frames can have a range of finishes from very bright (top) to much more subdued (above). While some frames are given a finish determined by the painting they will house, others get very little toning so that they can be altered to the taste of the buyer.

dry overnight. The next day I brush off excess fragments of leaf with a cottonball or a soft brush and give everything a good vacuum. You don’t want to breathe in those metal particles.”

“That’s it? I asked.

“That’s all for the metal leafing, except for sealing it. I brush on a coat of amber shellac, cut 50% with alcohol. You have to get all the way around the frame quickly to avoid puddling and marks from overlaps. When it dries, you go over it lightly with steel wool, dust it off, and give it a final sealing coat the same way.”

“Then you tone it,” I offered. “But how long does all this take?”

“Many, many hours,” he smiled, “But I get a lot of satisfaction out of walking

into the studio and seeing a dozen nice new gold frames lined up, ready to have my paintings fit into them.”

“You mentioned you used two methods for applying tone over the metal leaf.”

“Right,” he nodded. “For the ‘Shellac tone’ method I mix burnt sienna pigment in a container with alcohol-thinned amber shellac. Then I put on rubber gloves and use a cloth to rub it all around the frame. Next I go around with the cloth again and kind of daub with it to lift off some of the tone. You get a sort of ‘mottled’ effect. After that sets for about an hour, I do the same thing with a ‘cool’ tone made from thinned

shellac mixed with black and yellow pigment. I let that get good and dry, put on my gloves again, and use a soft rag to apply a coat of amber ‘Butcher’s Wax’ all over the face and sides of the frame. After about ten minutes I use a soft, dry cloth to buff off any excess wax.”

“The final step,” he said, “If you want an antique finish, is to put on some rotten stone. It’s a fine, gray pumice you just sprinkle on, rub gently into the wax with a cloth and spray with fixative.”

“This ‘Shellac tone’ method,” he continued, “Seems to give you a muted, more uniform finish and dries faster than the ‘Oil Base Wax’ process. But, it’s hard to reverse and very difficult to remove.”

“You said the ‘Oil Base Wax’ method gave you a brighter gold finish to start,” I reminded him.

“Right. It gives you the opportunity to tone to values and colors complementary to those in the painting. After you seal the metal leaf, you apply the amber Butcher’s Wax as I explained for the other method and rub it down with a soft cloth. Don’t forget your gloves. Then you mix paint thinner with a handful of wax and a dab of some oil paint you’ve chosen to a workable consistency. Apply it as a wash over the front and sides of the frame. It’ll look messy, but don’t let it bother you. If you want a textured look, daub it with an elephant brush.”

“Let it set up for 20 minutes,” he went on, “And if



While both large and small prints can be accommodated in the one simple profile he’s designed, Nilsson plans to design a second, wider profile for his large-scale paintings.

you want to achieve a darker, more antique effect, just rub some of the tone off the high points. I usually allow some of the small, cosmetic imperfections to show.”

“I think it emphasizes the handcrafted quality of the work,” I observed.

“The next thing I need to resolve,” Leif mused, “Is the issue of this 2 7/8” stock width for the frames on these larger paintings. The uniformity of working with one width has

simplified things. On the other hand, some of these big paintings really deserve a presentation that’s more appropriate to their size.”

“You could design a new ‘superwide’ profile and buy a new custom cutter for your mill,” I suggested.

“Possibly,” he agreed. “Or, I could just buy some wider stock in a standard profile from a planing mill like Xylo. I’ve also thought about buying a strip of standard stock and adding to the profile I already have to make a ‘cove’ configuration like the one the Hudson River School painters favored.”

I looked around the gallery again. The paintings ranged in size from 8”x10” to 48”x72”. The gold frames emanated a mellow glow, reflecting the late afternoon sun from the west windows. “How do you put a price on something that labor intensive?” I asked.

“I list a 24”x30” frame at six hundred dollars,” he replied. “Of course, I sell them with the paintings, and when all’s said and done, you’re never sure exactly how to allocate the sale. I am sure, though, that I usually don’t cover the cost of the frame, considering what goes into them.”

We stepped out into the lengthening shadows of early evening. Leif’s workbench was still set up outside the studio. “It’s getting late,” he said. I’d better wrap it up.”

“So, what’s next?” I asked. “An evening landscape?”

“No. I’ve got to get some new paintings up on my website. Take a look. It’s www.nilssonstudio.com.” ■