

In Praise of th

Historical Background

The Rococo style originated in France in the 1730's. By the 1740's the influence of this dynamic style spread throughout Europe, particularly to Germany, where it was taken to extreme levels of exaggeration.¹ Its delicate ornamental expression of sinuous curves and outrageous effects reflected the more relaxed atmosphere of the court of Louis XV. Although inspired by the Italian Baroque style of a century earlier, it was more light-hearted and informal. The Rococo style typically consisted of foliage, shells, and other elements copied from nature. A common ornamental motif was an innovative free-form abstract combination of a shell and leaf combined into a single shape, called the *rocaille* in France.² (see Figures 1 and 2.)

The asymmetrical (possibly Chinese influenced) arrangement of volutes and other elements developed and was referred to at the time as "modern." This new variation still existed within the confines of the prevalent aesthetic of curved shapes without a straight line in sight. As early as 1680, the fashion for oval frames was popular, which eventually evolved towards the whimsical and inventive French Rococo style of the 18th century.³ (see Figure 3.)

A leading figure of this new exuberant style was



Figure 1: Rocaille Design, Bristol Ballroom (Courtesy of Gold Leaf Studios, Washington, D.C.)

Gilles-Marie Oppenord (1662-1742), the son of Jean Oppenord, a Dutch born cabinet maker to the court of Louis XIV (1639-1715). Gilles went to Rome in 1692 to study architectural interiors. He accumulated a large repertory of Italian Baroque ornamental motifs and forms in his notebooks.⁴ (See Figure 4.) Upon his return to Paris in 1699, he studied historic French traditions in decoration and also the current trends exemplified by such designers as Berain, Delafosse, Lepautre, Audran, Pineau, and Meissonnier. (See Figures 5, 6, and 7.)

It has been suggested that styles change every generation due to the very act of creation: a craftsman's tools wear down and must be replaced every 20 years or so. Availability of raw materials, coupled with the influx of new ideas from other cultures, will often influence craftsmen working within their regional traditions. For example, in 1685 Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes,⁵ which protected the rights of the Protestants. Many of the best Huguenot craftsman fled to England, thereby stimulating ideas and raising the standard of excellence within London's finest tradesmen.

Another example of previous cross-cultural influences is Dutch born woodcarver Grinling Gibbons (1648-1720), who is considered to be unsurpassed in his exquisitely detailed carving of fauna and flora. He produced carved decorations for interiors as well as for picture frames and mirrors. Gibbons inspired many imitators and his work was an important prelude to the 18th century's Rococo style.⁶ English woodcarver Matthis Locke published a booklet in 1746, *The Principles of Ornament, or the Youth's Guide to Drawing Foliage*,

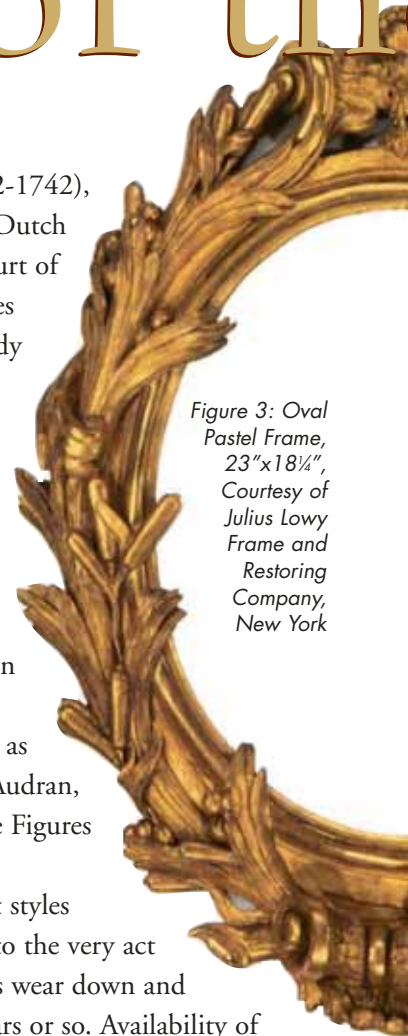


Figure 3: Oval Pastel Frame, 23"x18 1/4", Courtesy of Julius Lowy Frame and Restoring Company, New York

e Rococo



which gave specific instruction on how to draw a ragged edge acanthus leaf in what was referred to as a “raffle”. Another craftsman, engraver Henry Copeland, later joined forces with Locke and published a booklet in 1753, *A New Book of Ornaments with Twelve Leaves*.

These publications no doubt produced a lasting influence on young craftsmen which subsequently fueled the fire of change in England and her colonies.

In addition, other similar pattern books were published: one by wood carver Thomas Johnson: *One Hundred and Fifty New Designs*, (1758; 1761); and the more widely disseminated Thomas Chippendale’s (1719-79), *Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker’s Director, Being a Collection*

of the most Elegant and Useful Designs of Household Furniture in the Most Fashionable Taste (1754; 1755; 1762). (See Figures 8 and 9.) Chippendale’s publishing effort secured him a lasting position in the pantheon of notable

craftsman, so much so that the Rococo style is often referred to today as the “Chippendale Style.” The practice of publishing designs was known in Europe from as early as c.1550, but Chippendale’s seems to have been the first work on such a grand scale and entirely devoted to furniture design. The first and second editions had 160 plates and the third 200, mainly in the Rococo taste, but also with designs for the two subsidiary styles of Chinese and Gothic.

A Gilded Rococo Room

As life imitates art, there is a certain synchronicity that develops between people and objects. The lines of distinctions are blurred and the eventual outcome is one of wonderment and sublime contemplation of one’s place in the world, and a promise of a future which is also part of the past.



The room in the Bristol’s home which Adair spent years restoring.



Figure 2: Shell Motif, Rocaille (Courtesy of Gold Leaf Studios, Washington, D.C.)

In order to learn an ancient craft such as gilding there are many prerequisites. The obvious ones are manual dexterity, ability to follow directions, and tenacity. The other skills, if not mastered equally, can impede your progress: honest negotiations with clients, time management, and clean work habits are perhaps the most salient. There are, however, other factors that come into play when you are first starting out that cannot be anticipated. One of these factors is underestimating your time.

When I was first starting out in business, I was called by a general contractor to a private residence in Washington, D.C.'s exclusive Kalorama district, north of Dupont Circle. What I stumbled into was a gilder's paradise. It was an entire room of what appeared to be 18th century French gilded frames and mirrors. The old mirror plate was in small sections and rippled like a fun-house mirror that distorts everything reflected in it. I realized right away that this was no ordinary living room, no ordinary project, and when I met the clients, Marie Drissel and Curtis Bristol, they were not ordinary either. In fact, everything about the project was extraordinary. (See Figure 10.)

As I began to explore the various options for treatment, the most prevalent condition I encountered was that all of the surfaces of gilding were covered with bronze powder and other layers of accretions that obscured the brilliance of the 18th century gilding. I began to remove it with solvents and discovered a treasure of original gilding still intact, but the surface was as fragile as an egg shell.

In addition to the obvious, there was other conditions that were more subtle and revealed themselves as I studied the salon room. Some of the areas were not original 18th century hand-carved

applied moldings, but a recent concoction of poorly-cast plaster first covered with Dutch metal leaf and then several layers of bronze powder or radiator paint. These would all have to be replaced as time and budget would allow. I made another discovery working in the "Salon Room," as we began to call it. The entire room was like a big picture frame to me, and the artwork this time was not a painting, but rather, the people who occupied the room. I had discovered a modern innovation: interactive conceptual artwork from the 18th century.

It was going to be time consuming and expensive. Armed with this information, I had my first contact with the client and went into a meeting clutching photos and a condition report with an estimate of cost and time to complete the project. I was in for another surprise. After some negotiations we came to an agreement to begin work slowly so that we could discover more about the room and the nature of the work, and the client suggested perhaps, we might need to amend the contract at some time in the future, depending on the new discoveries and conditions that may arise.

He said, "Take as much time as you wish, we are in no hurry, and by the way, you and I have more in common than you might imagine." After some hesitation and pensive thought, he cleared his throat and said, "Bill, the nature of your work is similar to mine, I work on patients whose conditions are not always obvious at first, but require the same kind of careful removal of layers that have built up over the years. The digging down to the original surfaces, without disturbing the patina, is often a difficult and time-consuming process that takes years. Almost always incredibly fragile, and, in addition, there are often areas containing falsehoods, pastiches, and poorly-constructed passages that need to be removed in order that the nature of the origi-



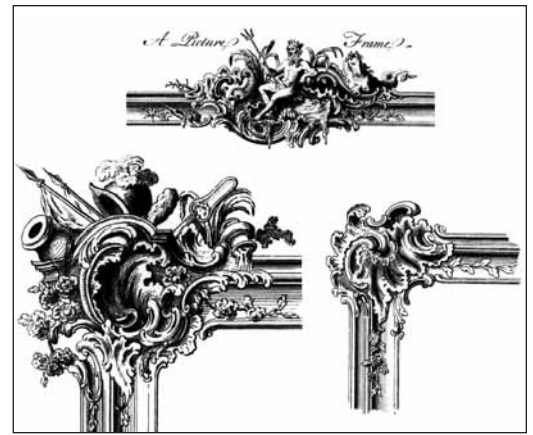
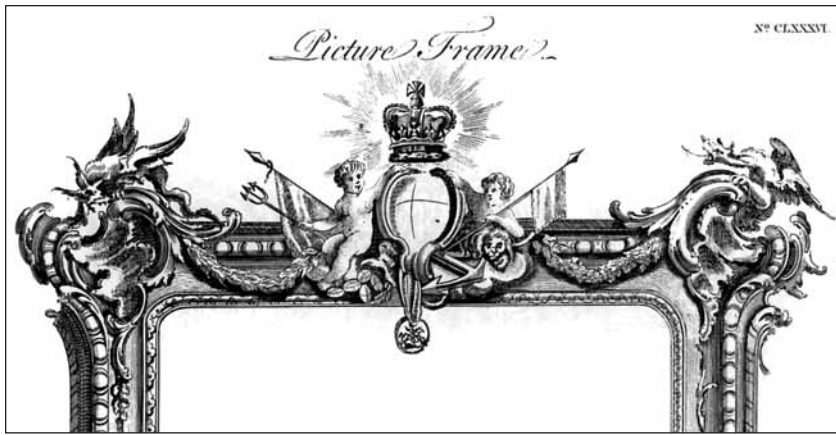
Figure 4: Design for a Cartouche, 18th century, pen and ink, 10"x7" (Author's Collection)



Figure 5: Cadres Français et étrangers du XV siècle au XVII siècle. Paris: Étienne Bignou, 1931 (Author's Collection)



Figure 6: Cadres Français et étrangers du XV siècle au XVII siècle. Paris: Étienne Bignou, 1931 (Author's Collection)



Figures 8 and 9: Details from Chippendale's Director

nal person be revealed and their true identity's worth re-established." He is a psychoanalyst, and no ordinary one, either.

When I presented him with the estimate, he suggested that he put me on a yearly stipend and do the work in stages because the scope of the project was so extensive. I agreed, and then asked for a deposit to begin the first phase of the work. He pulled out a bottle of 1937 true Portuguese port and poured it into crystal glasses and suggested we toast the beginning of the long and complicated restoration and conservation of the room.

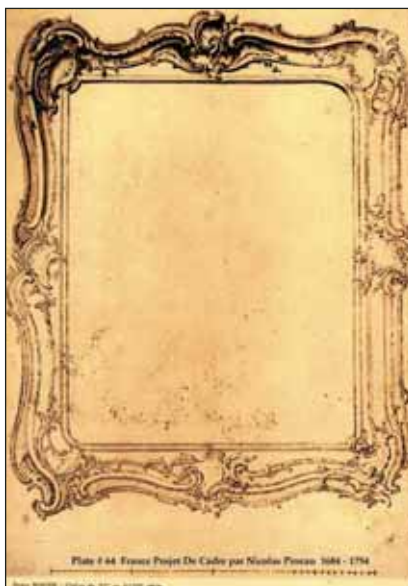


Figure 7: Cadres Francais et etrangers du XV siecle au XVII siecle. Paris: Etienne Bignou, 1931 (Author's Collection)

I knew he and his wife, Marie, were going to be fun clients to work for over the years. As he wrote me the first of many deposit checks and said jokingly, "One more thing, Bill... you're like a shrink who believes in shock therapy. You present the bill before treatment."

He also asked me one more salient question: Is the room worth doing? Answering with some trepidation, I said that if he and his wife liked the room and were going to use it, then it was worth doing. I also suggested that they hire a qualified expert to appraise the entire room, and then insure it; should the house ever burn or be sold, they would be properly covered and know the current market value. Whatever value it retained would certainly be greatly enhanced by being maintained and cared for over the years. It was decided to appraise the room after the treatment was complete. Little did I know that would take almost two decades.

In the 1930's, the former owner, who is referred to by the Bristols as "The Baron," purchased a series of carved wood panels with mirrors and paintings in Europe

that were originally from an 18th century Bavarian hunting lodge. They were installed to create a living space worthy of such a grand house and to accommodate his collection of 18th century style furnishings. There were some issues that needed to be overcome, such as adaptation of the fragile mirrored panels into an existing space, and the replication of many of the motifs to make it appear the room had always been there.

Some areas of the room were composed of plaster replications of scrolls, cartouches and shells. Metal-leafed⁷ wood trim was attached to the plaster walls, mimicking the effect of the adjacent original 18th century panels. In addition to hundreds of feet of new wood trim and other ornaments, there is also a nine-inch curved cornice with a continuous acanthus leaf pattern running the length and breadth of the room (30x20 feet), separating the walls from the ceiling. Three large windows dominate the south side of the room which are surmounted with valances embellished with composition scrolls and a central rocaille pattern, all of which was smeared with oxidized bronze paint. The carved

wood fireplace was painted faux-green marble, and the paintings installed over the mirrors were dirty and ripped. In short, the room was a mess.

The Work

The project began in the fall of 1982 with the task of gluing back pieces of ornamental plaster and composition material that had fallen from the walls during the many years of benign neglect. Since the plaster ceiling had just been repaired, I began my initial phase of consolidation work that I had outlined in my proposal, realizing soon into the project it would be impossible to accomplish my objectives, due to my lack of expertise in project management, and failure to understand the complexities of the room. However, what I lacked in time management skill, I made up for with enthusiasm and hard work.

The hunt was on to re-attach the pieces of the missing ornamentation. It was like a jigsaw puzzle with a purpose. After many hours of trial and error we had the majority re-attached using hide glue, wiping off the excess carefully as it dripped down the wall. This gave me another opportunity to study the room in greater detail. Soon after, my contract ran out and I would have to come back next year to continue the work.

In the next installment, I will delve further into this restoration project. ■



Figure 10: Dr Bristol, Marie Drissel, in Salon Room

Arts, Edited by Harold Osborn, Oxford University Press, 1975. 4. Baroque refers to a period of art in the late 16th century, and well into the 18th, falling between Mannerism and Rococo. The form is recognized by a overall attention to harmony with a solid balance of forms with additional embellishments of floral, grandiloquence, and exuberance. 5. 1598, decree promulgated at Nantes by King Henry IV to restore internal peace in France, which had been torn by the Wars of Religion; the edict defined the rights of the French Protestants or Huguenots. These included full liberty of conscience and private worship; liberty of public worship wherever it had previously been granted and its extension to numerous other localities and to estates of

Protestant nobles; full civil rights including the right to hold public office; royal subsidies for Protestant schools; special courts, composed of Roman Catholic and Protestant judges, to judge cases involving Protestants; retention of the organization of the Protestant church in France; and Protestant control of some 200 cities then held by the Huguenots, including such strongholds as La Rochelle (see Rochelle, La), with the king contributing to the maintenance of their garrisons and fortifications. The last condition, originally devised for an eight-year period but subsequently renewed, was to serve as guarantee to the Huguenots that their other rights would be respected; however, it gave French Protestantism a virtual state within a state and was incompatible with the centralizing policies of Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin and of Louis XIV. The fall (1628) of La Rochelle to Richelieu's army and the Peace of Alais (1629) marked the end of Huguenot political privileges. After 1665, Louis XIV was persuaded by his Roman Catholic advisers to embark on a policy of persecuting the Protestants. By a series of edicts that narrowly interpreted the Edict of Nantes, he reduced it to a scrap of paper. Finally, in 1685, he declared that the majority of Protestants had been converted to Catholicism and that the edict of 1598, having thus become superfluous, was revoked. No French Protestants were allowed to leave the country; those who openly remained Protestants were promised the right of private worship and freedom from molestation, but the promise was not kept. Thousands fled abroad to escape the system of dragonnades, and several provinces were virtually depopulated. The revocation of the Edict of Nantes weakened the French economy by driving out a highly skilled and industrious segment of the nation, and its ruthless application increased the detestation in which England and the Protestant German states held the French king. Its object—to make France a Catholic state—was fulfilled on paper only, for many secretly remained faithful to Protestantism, while the prestige of the Roman Catholic Church suffered as a result of Louis' intolerance. See history by H. M. Baird (6 vol., 1879—95); C. A. Rothrock, *The Huguenots* (1979); N. M. Sutherland, *The Huguenot Struggle for Recognition* (1980); R. D. Gwynn, *Huguenot Heritage* (1985). 6. Gibbons was discovered by John Evelyn in 1671. Evelyn was a wealthy friend of the King Charles II, and encouraged the monarch to support this talented carver for his royal projects. After Charles came into his monarchy in 1660 he transformed the decaying Gothic castle at Windsor into a sumptuous palace in the manner of those that he had seen while in exile in the Netherlands and France. Gibbons had a major role of the transformation of this and many other important royal projects throughout his life. He was an important link between the Baroque and the Rococo. Grinling Gibbons and the Woodwork of his Age (1648-1720), H. Avray Tipping, London, Published at the Offices of Country Life, 20, Tavistock Street, Covent Garden, W.C. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons MCMXIV. 7. Metal Leaf, in contrast to genuine gold leaf, is a material also known as "Dutch Metal" or "Schlag Metal" in the trade. This material is an alloy of base metals, tin, and zinc, and contains no gold whatsoever. It is thicker (you can pick it up with your hand and it won't dissolve) and is usually produced in a 5" square leaf and also placed between tissue and sold in books. Another more economical format is the 5x7" size sold in boxes of loose leaf known as "schlag." This material, along with gold leaf, is also produced in rolls specifically designed for large flat surfaces. A special wheel is used for application. Washington Gilder Ross Wheat, originally did the installation in the 1930's. He must have had budgetary constraints during this austere time of the Depression. ■

Endnotes

1. In the former days of French designer Charles Lebrun (1619-90), the classical orders with their columns and massive entablatures had dominated interior decoration, creating a setting attuned to the ceremonious atmosphere of the Louis XIV court (1661-1715). During the last years of his reign a revolt against strict etiquette and classical ideals developed. Gone were the heavy architectural features and these were replaced by sensuous, elegant, and informal rooms which reflected the taste of the newly emancipated society. The sinuous linear curves echoed the capricious and imaginative qualities of new Rococo style. (See PFM, August 1999, "Glorious Borders, Three Centuries of French Frames," by Jennifer Janicki.) 2. The term "Rococo" was first coined in the late 18th ghteenth century as a derogatory description of the Louis XV Style. By 1840, it was commonly used to describe all of the highly ornamental freehand fantasy work from the first half of the 18th century. The term refers actually to the torturous rockwork created for artificial caves or grottos. *American Rococo, 1750-1775, Elegance in Ornament*, Morrison H. Heckscher, Leslie Green Bowman, Harry N. Abrams, Inc, New York, 1992. 3. Oppenord's reputation has rested on his designs rather than on his executed works. Some 2,000 of these were bought after the artist's death in 1742 by the engraver, Huquier, and published in collections known as the Petit, Moyon, and Grand Oppenord. Three of his sketch books also survive in Berlin, Stockholm, and Lyon. *An Illustrated Companion to the Decorative*