

The Miracle of

A 500-year-old frame returns home

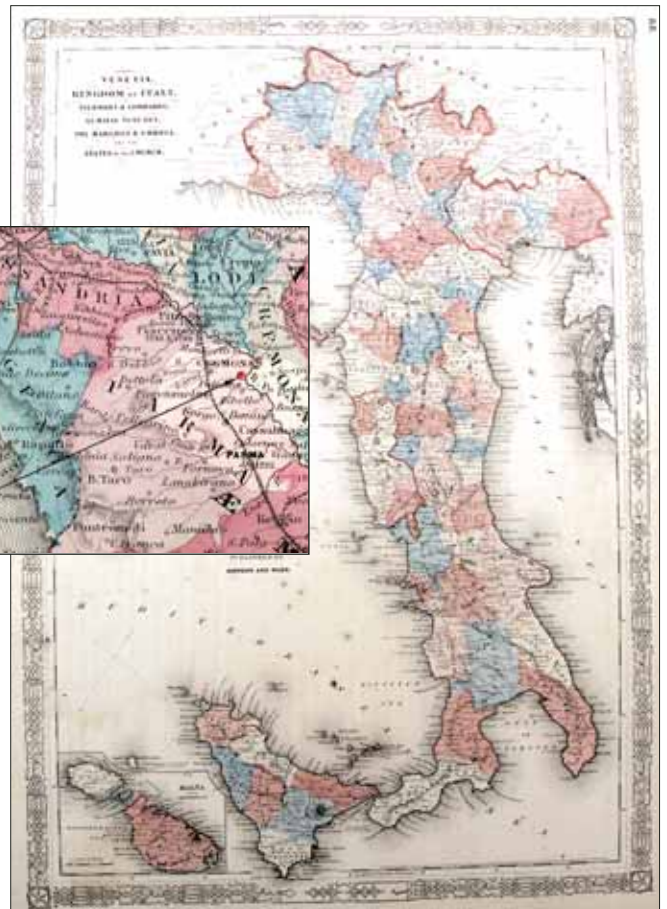
by William B. Adair

We're conditioned to think that our lives revolve around great moments. But great moments often catch us unaware—beautifully wrapped in what others may consider small or insignificant. As a result, there aren't many times in one's life where we can say, "that was truly a miraculous event."

In 1957, a monastery in Thailand was being relocated and a group of monks was put in charge of moving a giant clay Buddha. In the midst of the move one of the monks noticed a crack in the Buddha. Concerned about damaging the idol, the monks decided to wait for a day before continuing with their task. When night came, one of the monks came to check on the giant statue. He shined his flashlight over the entire Buddha. When he reached the crack he saw something reflected back at him. His curiosity aroused, the monk got a hammer and chisel and began chipping away at the clay Buddha. As he knocked off piece after piece of clay, the Buddha got brighter and brighter. After hours of work, the monk looked up in amazement to see before him a huge solid gold Buddha.

Many historians believe that the Buddha had been covered with clay several hundred years earlier by Thai monks before an attack by the Burmese army. They covered the Buddha to keep it from being stolen. In the attack all the monks were killed, so it wasn't until 1957, when the monks were moving the giant statue, that the great treasure was discovered. This was a miracle.

Like this Buddha's clay, the outer shell protects us from the world; our real treasure is hidden within. We human beings unconsciously hide our inner gold under a layer of clay. All we need to do to uncover our gold is to have the courage and time to chip away at the outer shell, piece by piece and eventually, with a little luck and tenacity, success can be achieved.

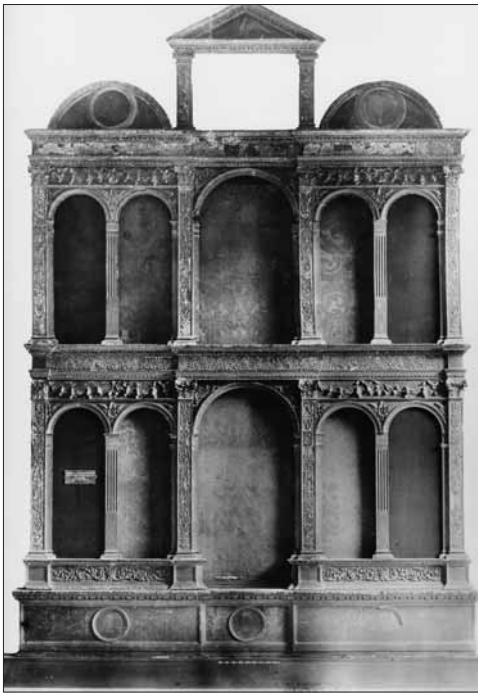


The town of Cortemaggiore, the place of origin of this Italian polyptych, shown on a map from 1863. (Published by Johnson and Ward, London.)

Cortemaggiore

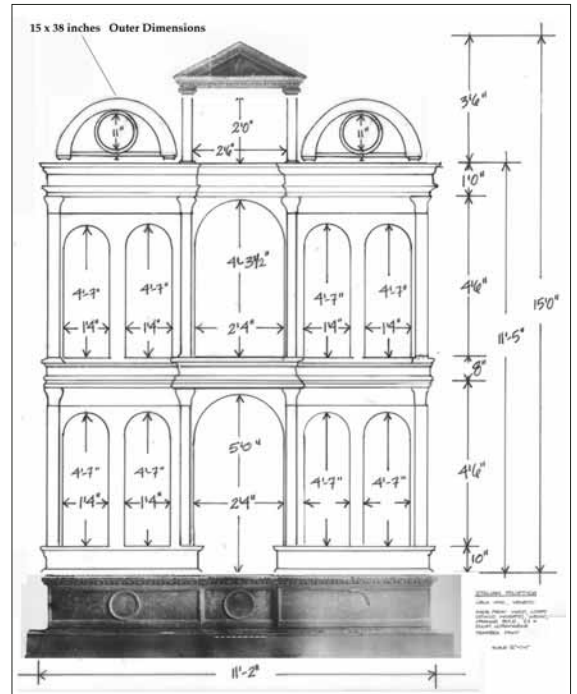


Italian polypych frame c. 1490; poplar wood, composition material on pilaster, "Pasta di Riso", red bole, gold leaf, azurite (blue background). Shown here the polypych has been gently restored and is ready to be returned to Italy where the original panel paintings were re-installed. Photo courtesy of William Adair, Gold Leaf Studios.



Left: In the 1880s, the frame was displayed at London's Victoria and Albert museum. Fabric inserts were placed where the panel paintings would have been. (Photo courtesy of The Victoria and Albert Museum Picture Library.)

Right: Even today the frame is not complete. In this combination sketch and photo, the photographed pieces indicate areas of the original that are still missing. (Courtesy of Gold Leaf Studios.)



With this in mind, I began a search for something that was seemingly impossible. Over the years of searching, as I would begin to give up, I remembered this golden Buddha story in addition to the advice of my teacher, Oliver Anderson, “Bill, you might sometimes give out, get tired and dismayed or discouraged, but please, don’t ever give up.”

The Mystery Begins

More than 10 years ago, after returning from a fellowship to study Italian frames at the American Academy in Rome, a small group of scholars formed the International Institute for Frame Study (IIFS). It was established primarily as a public archive dedicated to the history of the picture frame.¹ At that time, advisory board member and noted frame historian Paul Levi retired and sadly gave up his prestigious London workshop that had been in operation for over 50 years.

In July of 1992, two large crates arrived at the Gold Leaf Studios in Washington D.C. It was not until the crates were opened did I realize what hidden treasure abided within. Before me in the sweltering heat of my dusty chinatown warehouse were the components of one of the largest 15th-century frames I had ever laid my eyes on. I felt like Indiana Jones. As an added bonus, the frame was in a completely natural state of condition for a 500-year-old object, having been spared the usual mistreatment at the hands of previous restorers.

Paul sent me the frame in hopes that I might be able to find out where the paintings were and reunite them. If

I couldn’t find the paintings, he authorized me to sell the frame to an individual or institution that would appreciate this fine example of the framer’s art. I knew at the time it was a long shot to find the original paintings, but that perhaps I may find a decent home for the frame. It was an orphan, yet it was just too beautiful an example of Renaissance workmanship to be discarded casually. Its proper placement would be a challenge, to say the least.



Santa Maria delle Grazie, Cortemaggiore. This church was the original home of the gilded polyptych and its panel paintings. (Photo courtesy of Egidio Bandini.)

The polyptych appeared somewhat dirty and old—as you would expect from an object of that vintage. There were missing parts of the ornamentation here and there, some fractured wood pieces, and in some areas under the overhangs where the dust couldn't settle, the gold had remained and still reflected a soft light from the recesses, much like the Buddha.

Armed with the enthusiastic zeal of unfettered youth, I began the hunt to find the 11 paintings that once were enshrined in this Renaissance Polyptych.² As I began looking for comparable objects from the same general region and date of fabrication, I found very little information on the subject. This piece was so rare that not even the Getty Museum's Bartolomeo Vivarini (1432-1499) polyptych had a frame of this quality and condition

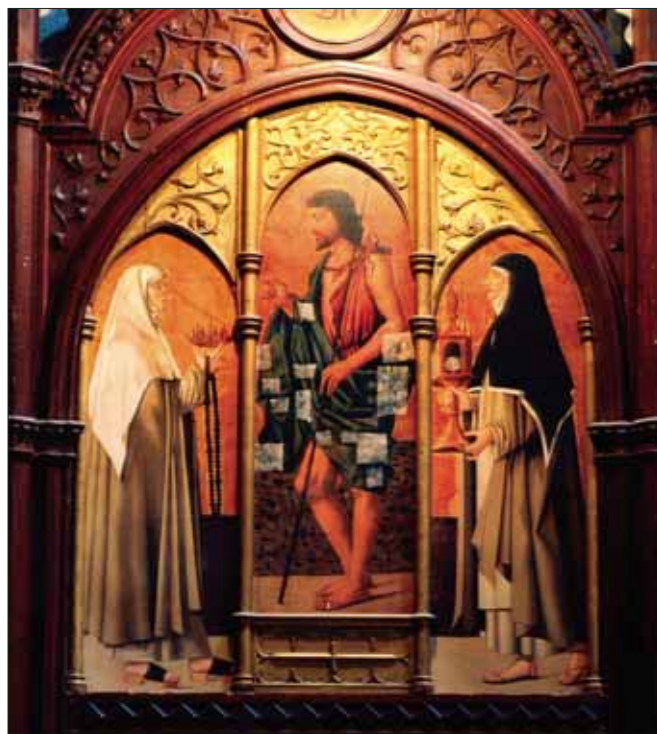
In fact, upon further investigation, I found that many of the polyptych frames in Venice, Florence, and other museums throughout Italy had, like the Getty's, been systematically regilded as a matter of course throughout their history, depriving us of the way they would have looked after 500 years. Paul pleaded the case a bit further for the minimal intervention approach for conservation: "You wouldn't want your grandparents to look young *now* would you?"

The Only Clue

The Polyptych was acquired in 1967 by Mr. Levi from a now defunct auction house in London.³ The frame was sold in 14 pieces; that is, all the individual components were apart and ready to go on the auction block. It would take some imagination to think about what to do with such an object, but Paul instantly recognized its quality and rarity. On the verso of the uppermost cornice entablature there was a 19th century railway sticker marked "Veneto." This, coupled with a small bit of evidence from the same sale, indicated that the frame may have been deaccessioned from the Victoria and Albert Museum. These were the only shreds of evidence we had to go on.

At that time, I could have said just two things about the great Italian altarpiece frame. First: it was timelessly beautiful in its original natural state; and second, that it had once a setting for an elaborate altarpiece. Timeless though it might be, it had no visible path through time, no long history of origin and ownership. Slowly the investigation unraveled. I began to inquire with various Renaissance scholars about the feasibility of finding some of the paintings.

The resounding response was a kind of chuckle and



Before the polyptych and its panels were returned, reproductions of Mazzola's paintings hung in the church in gothic revival frames. (Photo courtesy of Egidio Bandini.)

snicker with a shrug. Others were more encouraging. Individual paintings from these masterpieces are scattered all over the world. It was like searching for a needle in a dozen haystacks. In the 60 years that Paul Levi had been in the frame business, he had rarely been able to reconnect a frame and original painting together. Why did I ever think I could find 11 paintings for a polyptych? He must have known that maybe someday something good would come of it.

Starting with that vote of confidence, I searched the best sources I know of for information on this arcane subject. The Getty Research Institute in California; The Villa I Tatti, in Florence; The National Gallery of Art in Washington DC; and others as time and money would permit. Every turn of the key opened up another door, which always led to a brick wall. Years rolled by without any hope of the discovery in sight. The next phase was a couple of near misses, but luckily, none of them snagged.

Reincarnation

When we think of the many empty frames that have been sitting in basements or attics in just about every museum in the world, it staggers the mind. Where are all the paintings to these unwanted treasures? Some frames can be recycled for another painting, with a little adjustment to the site edge; enlarging and reducing the size

can be cleverly concealed by the adroit artisan. Surfaces have been regilded or simply covered with radiator paint to freshen up the look, or they have been given a white-wash to obtain the ever-popular 50s look of bleached driftwood. All of the above can be justified under the general rule of “Let’s recycle.” The precedent exists to take all kinds of liberties to re-purpose these discarded relics. With our frame, there was no difference—until we discovered its history.

Near Miss #1: The National Gallery had an important painting that needed a frame. Bellini’s “Feast of the Gods” had originally been a mural painting and was roughly the same period as our polyptych. The polyptych would have to be cut down and reconfigured to fit the painting: not an easy job, but feasible. The reincarnation of another life for the frame was a better prospect than it languishing in our warehouse, forever unappreciated by the public. At least it could have another life besides its original purpose. The proposal was not accepted as the frame had too many secular connotations as well as the obvious expense considerations and aesthetic incongruities of the frame selection committee.

Near Miss #2: The National Cathedral in Washington had designs for a meditation chapel and the polyptych was considered as a contemplative object devoid of paintings with just fabric inserts to fill the negative space. The committee rejected the proposal in favor of a Plexiglas sculpture of folded hands with a spotlight in a dark room.

Near Miss #3: A private client was constructing a chapel in Santa Fe with space enough for the polyptych to fit at the end of the church, but it was decided to keep the design simple and austere. The polyptych was just too much ornament for a simple adobe structure.

Sometimes in life we are discouraged by rejections, especially after a lot of work has gone into the preparation of proposals. However, the Dalai Lama says “Remember not getting what you want is sometimes a brilliant stroke of luck.”⁴

Research Redux

Two years ago, our research team began preparations for an exhibition on Italian tabernacle frames called “Vero e Falso,” or “True or False.” Essentially, it is a showing of about a dozen frames that range from modern foam copies to original 15th-century frames. The catalog in preparation will guide the viewer to understand the differences. The idea originated from



A detail of a double arch section of the frame before it was restored. Few pieces as old as this have remained in their original, unrestored condition. (Photo courtesy of Gold Leaf Studios.)

IIFS advisor Dott. Marilena Mosco, a knowledgeable expert on frames as well as director of the Palazzo Pitti’s Museo degli Argenti e Porcellane in Florence. As we began our search for information on the subject, we started with the polyptych.

We first assembled it, photographed it, measured it, and then worshiped it in its 16-foot-high-by-12-foot-wide glory. The first time that the polyptych was completely assembled gave us renewed faith in the project. Its conception, design, and original condition were breathtaking.

While I was focused on it once again, I remembered a hunch I never had time to pursue. London’s Victoria and Albert Museum is one of the world’s great repositories of the decorative arts. The fact that Paul Levi mentioned that museum as the possible source intrigued me. The hunt was on again: this time we were looking for a file in the bowels of the museum’s archive. In reviewing some of the literature on decorative arts, I discovered a book, “The Treasury of Ornamental Art” by Sir John Charles Robinson.⁵

It gave me the idea to start looking for something with his name on it, or to at least examine the acquisition books starting with the last quarter of the 19th century. With this task in mind, Jennifer Janicki, the co-curator, and her assistant, my daughter Annie, traveled to London to search the archive for clues. It was a dreary day for a London digging expedition, but



Many small pieces of ornament had to be repaired, replaced, or restored. The repaired areas here have yet to be finished. (Photo courtesy Gold Leaf Studios.)

somehow they figured they could crack the mystery there, even if I couldn't spare the time to go. Besides, both were trained researchers from their college days. So with unbridled youthful enthusiasm, they set off in search of the origins of the polyptych.

The Payoff

Starting off with the 1875 acquisition book, they methodically went through the files one by one searching for any shred of evidence of the great frame. After the third day in the basement in what was a virtual solitary confinement, they discovered the payoff. There, in the 1884 folder, was the file outlining the entire process of the acquisition, the price, the people involved, the beat down, the rejection of the two paintings, the shipping, the whole story complete with the name of the artist—Filippo Mazzola—and the possible location of nine of the other paintings, which might be in a small town in northern Italy between Parma and Piacenza, called Cortemaggiore. Next destination: Italy!

The road to this sleepy little town is low and flat, being quite near the river and, during the 15th century, an important town for the region. Annie arrived at the church with her heart pounding in her chest and out of breath from excitement and anticipation. She called me on her cell phone and said, "Dad, I'm in the church and found no paintings that corresponded to the size. However, there are some smaller paintings in gothic frames over the doorways to the sacristy. What should I do now?" I told her, "Don't give up now. Keep asking questions." The priest's mother was in the sacristy and

she was a little confused at first; she thought here were some strangers once again, asking about some obscure paintings they were looking to steal from the church. Besides, what she described was simply not there in the church, so had "probably already been stolen."

With that comment, it was clear that the road to success was still eluding us. Here was another door opened with yet another brick wall in view. Well, she had done all she could possibly do up to this point and the time was over on this wild goose chase. Before getting on the road again, Annie went to the tobacco shop next door to the church to get a few things for the car ride back. The clerk asked what she was doing in the town, so she revealed the saga, whereupon he exclaimed, "The paintings you seek are in the National Museum in Parma, and my good friend, Edigio Bandini, a local historian, documented them before the museum took them for safekeeping!" Bingo! Next destination: Parma.

The Gift that Keeps Giving

The curator, Davide Gasparotto, listened patiently to the story and confirmed that the long lost polyptych frame belonged to the paintings, which were indeed under the care of the museum's conservation department. In fact, some of the panels were already restored and on display in the museum, ready to be reinstated in the church if funding could be obtained for the micro-climate system needed to protect the panels from humidity and temperature fluctuation.⁶

The main question he wanted to have answered

was, “How much is it going to cost to get it back?” So many things have been taken from Italy over the years—even Napoleon had sticky fingers. The concept of getting Italian patrimony back is a longstanding goal of the Italian people. The question of cost was presented to Paul Levi, who replied that he would like to donate the frame, so long as it would be displayed in the church where it was originally installed in 1499, and, most emphatically, that the surface not be improved for cosmetic purposes after its final conservation treatment at Gold Leaf Studios. He felt that trying to sell something back to the church was bad karma, besides, how could you put a price on something that was priceless?

After 10 years of wondering what would come of the project, clue after clue fell into place under energetic and resourceful research of Gold Leaf Studios. Now we were able to trace its creation, its mission over four centuries, and the last century of vicissitudes. This generous offer could scarcely be believed by the church. The priest was so excited that he wanted to build a statue to Mr. Levi in the town square. Instead, the Italian government is government is awarding Mr. Levi a Knighthood of the Republic, the highest award any non-Italian can receive for outstanding contributions to the Italian people. I suppose now we have to call him “Sir Paul!”

With the discovery and repatriation efforts underway, we were faced with an overwhelming amount of work to do in time for the rededication in the spring of 2003. Many tasks had to be done in order to return



Most, but not all, of the panel paintings have been returned to the church in Cortemaggiore along with their original frame. This roundel is still missing. (Photo courtesy of Gold Leaf Studios.)

the massive frame to Italy: reconstruct missing ornamentation, clean the surface dirt, and consolidate loose and flaking gesso. ■

In the September issue of PFM, the final segment of this story will describe the process in cleaning and conserving this frame, as well as the astonishing events that transpired after the frame arrived in Italy.

ENDNOTES

1 International Institute for Frame Study, 2125 R Street NW, Washington, DC 20008, E-mail: iifs@iifs.org, website: www.iifs.org. The International Institute for Frame Study (IIFS) was established

in 1992 as the first public archive devoted exclusively to the history of picture frames. This archive is presently being developed and organized and will open as funds become available. Curators, collectors, craftsmen, and frame enthusiasts will benefit from the information. The archive consists of hundreds of photographs, drawings, out-of-print books, auction and framemakers' catalogues, articles, videotapes of public and private collections, and other frame-related ephemera. Items comprising the current holdings have been donated by The Kress Foundation, the Kunsthistorisches Institut and Palazzo Davanzati in Florence, the Norton Simon Museum, and other donors in the United States and abroad. The IIFS is a not-for-profit organization; it is not a member-based entity requiring dues or fees for obtaining access to study its holdings. Information is disseminated through the Internet. An international group of specialists comprise the Advisory Board. Board members serve as liaisons between the IIFS and their communities, refer the IIFS to new sources of information, promote the Institute's interests, and assist with fundraising and surveys of rare and previously undocumented data. The IIFS conducts frame surveys of public and private collections and special exhibitions. Surveys include photographic/videotaped images, profile drawings, and reports on condition, methods of construction and provenance of the frame. Each survey is adapted to meet the specific needs of an individual collection; survey results are integrated into the IIFS's archive. There is a fee for this service. Until recently, the frame has been virtually ignored by most art historians. With increased public awareness of the importance of the frame as a work of art in its own right, the IIFS is instrumental in providing an educational program which includes exhibitions, lectures, and workshops. The IIFS's first exhibition, *The Frame in America:*

1860-1960, curated by William Adair, was first exhibited in Washington, DC in January 1995 under the auspices of the Fine Arts Program of the Federal Reserve Board. This exhibition had traveled throughout the United States for three years ending in 2002. The exhibition consisted of frames, tools, drawings, cross-sections, photographs, workbooks and other ephemera. In addition to surveys, another major source for information on frames and framemakers is from individuals seeking assistance with identifying individual objects. Our volunteer staff welcomes inquiries by the public for identification purposes only. To utilize this service, please send a self-addressed stamped envelope, with a photograph and brief description of the frame, to the address listed above. Or send e-mail with attached photos.

2 The term Polyptych refers to a group of paintings consisting of more than three individual units that collectively form a whole composition. A triptych refers to three openings; a diptych is two openings in the frame. Most 15th century and earlier Italian paintings seen in museums today were once part of a specific grouping that have subsequently been taken out of the larger frame and sold individually, often being reframed with 19th century copies of what framers today call "Tabernacle frames."

3 W.E. Coe & Sons, South Kensington Auction Rooms 79/85 Old Brompton Rd. The polyptych was sold in Sale #2345, *Antique and Modern Furniture*. Sold without reserve on 8/16/67 Lot # 676 (the last lot sold of the day). "Large antique gilt wood chancel screen having carved and moulded decoration and painted with circular portrait panel, etc., in fourteen sections."

4 "The Power of Compassion", *A Collection of Lectures by the XIV Dalai Lama*, 1995, Harper Collins

5 "The Treasury of Ornamental Art", London, (1857) by Sir John Charles Robinson (1824-1913). Robinson was a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, collector and connoisseur. He began his study in architecture but then turned to painting working in the 1840's in the studio of Michel-Martain Drolling in Paris, among others. He went on to be an expert on early Italian drawings and sculpture, as well as the decorative arts, including frames. In 1882, he became Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, a post he retained until 1901. In 1883, while traveling in Italy, Robinson made more purchases for the museum and was involved with the purchase of the polyptych.

6 Funding was obtained from the Banca Di Piacenza for this important aspect of the project, as well as the shipping, crating and insurance. Monsignor Ghidoni, Arciprete della Collegiata, was responsible for this and many other critical negotiations. Special thanks to Davide Gasparotto, curator, Parma National Museum.

William B. Adair received his B.F.A. in Studio Art from the University of Maryland in 1972. For the next 10 years he worked for the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery as a museum conservator specializing in the treatment of picture frames. In 1982 he formed his own company, Gold Leaf Studios, for the making of frames and the conservation of gilded antiques. Over the years his clients have included the U.S. Department of State and the National Park Service. He is the founder of the International Institute for Frame Study, a non-profit archive dedicated to collecting and disseminating information on the history of frames. He can be reached via e-mail at bill@goldleafstudios.com.

