

In Praise of the

The Restoration and Conservation of a Gilded Rococo Room

by William B. Adair

Preservation Theories

Over the years, the surface of gilded wood can take on different appearances. A patina, or encrustation of age, develops; this is desirable for a fine antique and is often considered an important factor in the value of the object by top collectors, dealers, and museum curators. Knowing what you see is an important prerequisite to correctly repairing areas of damage to match the existing patina. Depending upon many factors, primarily the age of the object, the gilded surface can be obscured by darkened varnishes, bronze paints, and other coatings. On the other hand, it can be simply covered by a coating of dust, still brilliant and reflective without being ostentatious.

Most importantly, what appears attractive and richly layered to some is considered dirty and murky to others. In other words, "One person's dirt is another's patina." Knowing the delicate balance between the two is often a thin tightrope to walk, and there are many pitfalls. One important consideration is the lighting conditions of the room in which the gilding is to be viewed. Other salient issues, such as methods of fabrication, the conditions of the environment, and the way the object was treated by its previous owners, all contribute to the overall appearance, both good and bad.

Traditional water gilding methods have proven to be the techniques which are the most

"The Baron of Bancroft Place," the room's original owner, with the Salon Room shown decorated as it was in the 1930's.



Rococo Style II

by William B. Adair

beautiful and enduring. If moisture is kept away from the fragile surfaces and they are cared for properly, they will remain lustrous indefinitely. Unfortunately, over several hundred years, an object goes through many transformations due to natural abrasion, an “inherent vice,” changes of environment, and various “repairs.”

Routine maintenance, such as dusting and cleaning by well-meaning but unskilled hands, has led to the ruin of many fine gilded antiques. Over-cleaning leads to the removal of the delicate leaf, often exposing the layers of bole and gesso, which is then typically “repaired” with bronze paint, which will turn dark or discolor in time, creating a whole new set of problems for the conservator.

Much of my work is the undoing of this “overpainting” of original surfaces, with the goal being the preservation of what is left of the original gilding and the repair of damaged areas to blend in with the existing patina. In the strictest sense of the word, this is what is meant by conservation. Restoration, on the other hand, is defined as the repair of an object to its original unimpaired condition. This method is undesirable for a fine antique; in fact, it takes away much of the value if the piece has been completely regilded.



The completed “Salon Room” as it appears today, after a conservation project which took more than two decades to complete.

Cleaning the Gilded Surface

Techniques for the cleaning of frames are many, but the basic premise is to use a cleaning agent that does not remove the gold leaf or patina. If the original gilding technique is determined to be water gilding, than a solvent-based cleaner will usually not remove the leaf. If the surface was oil gilded, then a water-based cleaner is indicated. Sometimes a frame can have both techniques, so one must be careful to recognize the difference. The most important concept to

remember is to use care and remove only the over layers that obscure the original intent of the artisan. Cleaning the gilded surfaces of the “Salon Room” of Marie Drissel and Curtis Bristol’s home was the first step of that project (see “In Praise of the Rococo Style: Part I, *PFM* August, 2001).

Bronze Paint Removal

The next phase of conservation for the Salon Room was to remove the bronze paint from the original water gilding without destroying

it. During the paint removal process, it became clearly evident I was re-discovering the intrinsic beauty of the eighteenth century fragments. The room was clearly a modern reconstruction, but it had the guts and heart of the eighteenth century. As Bruno Pons so eloquently states regarding another such room (one put together in the 1930's), "The inspiration of the 18c. is evident, but it is also obvious that this room is a 20thc interior with its own logic." If this notion of an ensemble, a unified whole, has to be insisted upon, it is precisely because various factors concurred in making people aware of the intrinsic beauty of the elements detached from their setting and which were beginning to be collectors' objects in their own right.

These factors included the return to favor of all the decorative arts and a growing awareness of the quality of execution, of the superiority of the craftsman of past centuries, and, at the same time, the industrial ornamental processes and reproduction methods that were being developed.

The removal of the bronze paint from the applied wood designs was a difficult and dangerous process. There were the usual problems of environmental hazards; exposure to paint strippers is always a health issue, not to mention the possibilities of lead paint exposure. The precautions are many but the most stringent requirement was the hooded, full body suit that was supplied with fresh air by a rubber hose attached to a special air compressor. This ensured the workers were not



Two dominant styles of Louis XIII and the Regence period co-exist in silent symbiosis within the room as a unified whole. Shown after intense conservation efforts, one contains an intensely deliberate cross-hatched gesso as a background pattern for small "C" scrolls that terminate in a roccaille shell/leaf pattern. The other has a relatively simple ogee molding that still has the flourishing terminal Rococo leafage as counterpoint to the plain moulding.

exposed to toxic chemical fumes. With two pairs of gloves on, cotton swabs, and paint stripper, we removed several layers of radiator paint, revealing a most exquisitely carved and gilded surface that looked like "liquid gold" in dim light. Since this brand of paint stripper contained no water-based elements, the water gilding was not affected by the chemical. When

the cotton swabs became dirty, they were discarded, as the gritty, bronze powder-laden solvent could act as an abrasive and remove the delicate gold leaf.

What I discovered was remarkable in that I had rarely seen the original toner on old gilding. It consisted of a thin, reddish brown translucent glaze used to give life and fire to the gold. It created contrast between the background matte areas and the highly bur-nished gilding of the prominent curves and roccaille patterns.

Gesso Repairs

The room's original eighteenth century gilding had many losses, hence the reason so much bronze paint covered the entire surface in an effort to mask this condition from the casual observer. We spent a great deal of time filling these losses and recutting the gesso to match the character of the original. With such a project, the gesso must be built up in layers so that the desired thickness could be achieved. Once the recutting was complete, color-matched bole was applied.

Re-Gilding and Toning

Matching the color of the gold and the bole is perhaps one of the most critical aspects of the job. The Salon Room contained various colors of leaf ranging from cool greenish (18 karat) to very warm (23½ karat). The bole color also changed depending on the section of the panels. This was a clear indicator that the room was a conglomerate of various rooms of different manufacture. Our task was to attempt

to unify the whole.

In eighteenth century France, the use of various color leaf was practiced to give contrast to the various ornamental elements. In addition, the contrast of burnished and matte areas was also critical. The “dead” and “bright” scheme was typically employed to give the smooth, higher relief areas a more brilliant reflection, whilst the recessed areas were kept dull and toned slightly to emphasize the details of the recutting or engraving into the gesso. The areas of new gilding were then toned down with casein pigments, watercolor, and various waxes and dry pigments to blend in with the patina of the original surface.

Replacement of Ornamentation

In areas where there was carved wood from the eighteenth century, bass wood was attached with hide glue. When dry it was carved to match the original. The method chosen for the replacement of other areas, such as over the doors where the 1930's compo ornamentation was missing, is one of the simplest and most effective techniques: using Plastilina clay and a casting material similar to Plaster of Paris called Hydrocal. Both are readily available in art supply stores.

It is important to find an area that corresponds to the missing sections and make sure it is stable enough to withstand a moderate amount of finger pressure without breaking. In some cases, there is no alternative but to sculpt a new piece to replace the one that is missing, and then make a mold from that.

The area to be copied is first dusted with talc and a soft brush, coating the entire surface. The purpose of the talc is to act as a release agent for the clay. Next, the Roma Plastilina clay (Grey Green #3) is

built up to a thickness of about an inch and pressed into the ornament. When the clay cools a little (it gets warm from handling) the mold is rocked, side to side, gently so as not to disturb the detail, and



Step 1: Dusting the area to be copied with talc.



Step 2: Plastilina clay is pressed into the ornament.



Step 3: Removing the clay from the ornament once it is cool.



Step 4: Pouring Hydrocal into the newly made mold.



Step 5: Removing the casting when dry.



Step 6: Marking the correct size of the ornament.



Step 7: Scoring the ornament with an X-acto knife so that it will snap easily.



Step 8: Breaking the casting along the score line.



Step 9: Shaving the back of the ornament so that it will be level.



Step 10: The new ornament is glued to the frame.

then removed from the frame. The two open sides of the mold are then dammed up with more Plastilina.

Next, the Hydrocal is mixed with water until it is the consistency of heavy cream, then poured into the mold. The mold is tapped lightly to remove the air bubbles that might form on the surface of the

design. When dry (in about an hour) the casting is removed and fit into place by first marking it with a pencil, then scoring the pencil line with a knife, then snapping it so it breaks along the scored line. The piece is then glued onto the frame and any gaps filled with a mixture of Hydrocal or gesso putty, then

smoothed or carved to match the original pattern. The replaced piece is then ready to be finished to match the original gilding and patina.

Summary

After 20 years of working on this project, I realized that there are many things that could have been done differently. The prevailing thought throughout the entire process was, "I thought it was a good idea at the time." However, the end result, through all the trials and tribulations, is one of great satisfaction.

After the appraisal, it was determined that the current value of the room has increased as a result of the conservation efforts. The money spent has been well worth the investment, and not just for monetary reasons. The room has become, for its owners, a kind of Mecca for intellectual discussions, a place for

masked balls, wedding receptions, Society of Gilders meetings, and most importantly, a room of exquisite refinement where their dogs can chase each other around the French furniture.

Protecting and preserving this room has been one of the greatest achievements a gilder could ever hope to accomplish. For me, this is a room that is more than a room; it is a living monument to the future. I was able to train my daughter and her husband on the project, and they will hopefully continue this kind of work for future generations.



Clockwise from above: This corner of the room shows the many mouldings, mirror frames, and the wainscoting that needed repair. Annie and Francesco Gronchi, who were trained on this extensive project. Some areas has more missing than existing ornamentation.



One of the many mirror frames, with white (ungilded) areas showing necessary repairs.

Overall Condition

Most projects begin with a photographic survey and a description of the existing conditions with recommended treatments. The description of the Salon Room follows.

- The panel borders have cracks along corners, major intermittent gesso loss, nail holes, and other chips, especially on corner points.
- The borders have been given an underlying coat of deep red paint and have been metal leafed in most areas. Bronze paint has replaced the metal leaf, however, in several large areas throughout the room. Many still have the original water gilding. With regard to the ornamentation within the panels, most appear to be stable, although there are various pieces missing from almost every unit. They are covered with a variety of different karat gold leaf, metal leaf, and bronze paint.
- The wainscot has been metal leafed over deep red bole (matte finish with an orange hue), and in some areas it has been bronze painted (strong matte finish with green and brown hues). In one area it has been painted white. The wainscot has intermittent nail holes and has either gesso loss or ornament loss on the protruding corners. In some areas white paint has been splattered on the surface. The lower moulding of the wainscot also has been partially painted over with the same white paint.
- The mirror frames are in varying conditions and have been coated with the same variation of materials used throughout the room. Almost all are experiencing chipping and loss of the ornamentation as well as major gesso loss. Several mirror

frames and areas of the moulding have been attached to the wall with large screws or nails that clearly protrude from the natural surface.

- The cornice moulding along the ceiling is in fine condition, with the one exception of the left corner of the fireplace, which is experiencing bloating of the underlying plaster as a result of apparent water damage. The running moulding beneath the cornice ornamentation has been metal leafed and bronze painted, and is of various shapes and dimensions. The various cracks in the plastered ceiling and walls, in particular close to the panels and mirrors, should also be noted.
- The moulding and ornamentation not mentioned above are all painted white. These include: the mantel, the radiator covers, the baseboard, the windowsills, and the doors (including cornice). The outer rim of the door panels do, however, show evidence of a previous application of bronze paint and gilding beneath the paint.
- Wall I (facing dining room): The cornice, mirror, and over-door panels on this wall are in good condition. The ornaments within the upper vertical panels as well as the central horizontal panels are all gilded without evidence of major gesso loss or inappropriate abrasion to the gilding. The quality of the ornamentation, however, is affected by previous restorations. In contrast to the upper central horizontal panel with defined edges and detailed lines, the other ornaments are disfigured and lack definition of detail. Throughout this wall the gilding alternates between the water and oil techniques. Starting with the lower and upper central ornaments, the central

medallions have been water gilded and burnished, while the surrounding tendrils have been oil gilded. The mirror and the frame around the fox and rooster painting have been water gilded and burnished in areas and left matte in others. The ornaments in the vertical and over-door panels have all been oil gilded. The wainscot and panel borders have been metal leafed. The frame around the painting is missing ornamentation in the following places: on the top left side, two large tendrils; on the lower left corner, the tip of a protruding leaf; and on the bottom side, to the left of the center ornament, the tip of a leaf. To the right of this ornament there is a gaping fracture where a nail has been inserted, and the leaf ornament above the lower left corner has been bronze painted.

- Wall II (facing corridor and study): The cornice on this wall is also in very good condition. The wall is entirely without ornamentation and the wainscot and panel borders are metal leafed and bronze painted. The wainscot on the far-left side has been painted white.
- Wall III (with fireplace): While the oil gilding on the cornice is in fine condition, there are areas in which the plaster has blistered and crumbled, coming through the gilded areas. These are: on the right side, above the leaf tips; on the right edge of the central side, on the bottom parts of the leaves; on the left edge of the central side, above and below the leaves and on the lambs tongue moulding; on the left side, above the leaf tips. All of the ornamentation on the right side of this wall has been water gilded. The frames have been coated with bronze paint, but the original water gilding can be

seen in various points. This wall has the most extensive ornament loss. Starting with the upper mirror on the right side, the following ornaments are missing: the tips on the central medallion of the top side; a small piece of the sight edge of the upper right corner; three leaf tips on the lower left corner; and a wedge of the lower central medallion. The frame has been bronze painted, possibly over original water gilding (as evidenced by the top central medallion). There are various cracks in the frame (along the bottom side and in the two lower corners) and the gilding and gesso are largely unstable. On the lower mirror frame the following ornaments are missing: the tips of the leaves of the central medallion on the top side; the tendril to the right of the central medallion; in the upper left corner, the tip of the round ornament; in the lower left corner, the curving leaf; in the lower right corner, a two inch piece of the running moulding and half of the external tendril. The entire frame is experiencing major gesso instability and loss. The ornaments missing in the vertical panels on the right side are the leaf tip and half-circle of the upper left ornament and leaf tip of the lower left ornament. The frame on the dog and pheasant painting on the central side is missing the following ornaments: the tips of the tendrils on either side of the top central ornament; the protruding leaf on the upper left corner; the protruding leaf on the lower left corner; leaf tip on the center of the left side; connecting filament on the center of the right side; leaf tip on the lower third of the right side; a half inch piece of leaf to the right and then entire leaf tip to the left of the bottom central ornament. The following areas have been bronze painted: leaf ornament on the lower third of the left and

right sides; and protruding leaf on the upper third of the right. The central horizontal panel ornament is missing pieces in two points on the right side and has been entirely covered with bronze paint. The lower mirror is in good condition and has been water gilded in a recent restoration. The vertical panels are missing the following ornaments: a three inch central section and a connecting leaf of the lower right ornament; two connecting tendrils of the central right ornament; a one inch connecting piece of the central left ornament; the upper third and a one inch connecting piece of the lower left ornament. The two upper ornaments are not missing any pieces, but have been covered with bronze paint. The upper mirror on the left side is missing these ornaments: two leaf tips on the center of the right side; a leaf tip to the right of the center ornament on the bottom side; and the tips of the central medallion on the top side. The mirror is water gilded and partially covered with bronze paint. The lower mirror is missing the following ornamentation: the top of the central medallion on the right side; the leaf tip to the right of this medallion; a small connecting piece and a leaf tip of the upper right corner; the bottom half of the external tendril on the lower left corner; and the outer edge of the same corner. The frame has been water gilded and is, again, covered with bronze paint in some areas. There is major cracking and corner gaps on this frame. The vertical panels on the left side are missing only a small piece of ornament in the lower left panel. The two central ornaments are water gilded while the other four are covered in bronze paint.

- Wall IV (with windows): The cornice and the valances are in good condi-

tion. The upper mirror on the right side is missing only a small connecting piece on the lower right corner. The lower mirror is missing the top of the central shell ornament and a four inch length of molding beneath this ornament. Both frames are covered in bronze paint, but the water gilding is evident in patches, in particular in the lower left corner of the lower mirror. The vertical panels are missing only the tips of the leaves on the two bottom ornaments, all covered with bronze paint. The horizontal panel over the mirrors has several large cracks and is missing and 1½ inch piece of connecting ornament. The mirrors on the left side are missing no ornamentation, again covered in bronze paint with evidence of water gilding beneath. The vertical panel ornaments are completely intact with only traces of bronze paint over the water gilding. The horizontal panel over the mirrors is intact, but covered with bronze paint.

Total pieces of ornamentation missing: 55

Measurements:

Wall I:

Total length of wainscot: 7'5"

Over-door panel borders (two): 13'4" x 2 = 320"

Vertical panel borders (two): 17'2" x 2 = 412"

Lower vertical panel border (two): 4'4" x 2 = 104"

Upper central panel border: 11'3"

Lower central panel border: 14'2"

Total length of panel border: 95'1"

Wall II:

Total length of wainscot: 12'1"

Over-door panel border (two): 13'4" x 2 = 320"

Lower panel border (two): 11'1" x 2 = 266"

Upper panel border (two): 284" x 2 = 568"

Total length of panel border: 96'2"

Wall III:

Total length of wainscot: 13'

Lower vertical panel border (six): 4'4" x 6 = 312"

Upper vertical panel border (six): 17'2" x 6 = 1,236"

Central panel border: 11'

Total length of panel border: 140'

Wall IV:

Total length of wainscot: 14'

Over-mirror panel border (two): 9'10" x 2 = 236"

Under-mirror panel border (two): 12'3" x 2 = 294"

Upper vertical (along mirror) panel border (four):
14'9" x 4 = 708"

Upper vertical (along corner) panel border (two):
17'11" x 2 = 430"

Lower vertical (along corner) panel border (two):
5' x 2 = 120"

Total length of panel border: 49'

Doors (Walls I and II):

Outer circumference of door molding: 24'2"

Inner circumference of door molding: 19'5"

Circumference of upper and lower door panels: 4'9"

Circumference of central door panels: 6'8"

Total circumference of panels per door: 16'2"

Four sets of doors (eight doors in all) total panel circumference: 129'

Other Measurements:

Total length, Wall II/Wall IV: 28'2"

Total length, Wall I/Wall III: 17'3"

Width of upper wainscot: 2.5"

Width of lower wainscot: 1"

Total wainscot: 3.5"

Width of lower cornice molding: 3"

Width of panel border: 2"

Circumference of room (total length lower cornice molding): 90'10"

Total area of lower cornice molding: 317'11"

Total length of panel border for all four walls: 480'3"

Total area of panel border for all four walls: 960'6"

Total length of wainscot for all four walls: 46'6"

Total area of wainscot for all four walls: 162'9"

Total gilded area (doors, wainscot, lower cornice molding and panel border: 1,570'6"

Plan for Conservation:

- N.B. No areas of original eighteenth century gilding will be re-gilded or otherwise altered.
- Remove bronze paint from all areas of eighteenth century gilding using various paint strippers.
- Consolidate loose and crumbling areas with Aquazol.
- Replace all missing areas of carved wood with carved bass wood. (The original wood appears to be oak, but this will differentiate our work from the original.)
- Gesso and sand smooth recarved areas.
- Replace areas of missing composition and plaster ornaments.
- To these recarved and recasted areas we will: apply color-matched bole; apply 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ k gold with water gilding technique; burnish gilded surface to match original matte/burnish

scheme; tone to match existing eighteenth century patina with watercolors, dye, abrasion, casein, and other methods; gesso and gild panel borders as described in the above steps.

- Re-tone mirror frame over fireplace to reflect original gilding patina.
- Re-cut (reparure) compo and plaster ornaments that are lumpy and grossly deformed so that they reflect their original character.
- Reproduce and gild S-scrolls and cartouches (found over Wall I doors).
- Wall II: reproduce and gild same over the doors S-scrolls to create a decorative border for the radiator covers to integrate them with the room; sand, gesso, and gild panel borders and wainscot as described in the steps above; water gild fluting, edges, and central ornament on mantle as explained above; consolidate and re-gild blistering plaster on the cornice above the mantel; oil gild molding beneath cornice; stabilize and smooth areas of cracking and buckling plaster; re-paint doors and walls.
- The doors will be treated in the following steps: dry strip and sand smooth all painted areas to be gilded; in-fill cracks, corners, and nail holes with gesso putty; clean areas with alcohol and treat with rabbit skin glue; apply six coats of gesso to serve as a cushion for gilded area; sand gesso smooth; apply a coat of yellow ochre bole and let dry; apply a coat of brick red bole; water gild prepared surface with gilder's liquor and 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ k gold leaf; burnish gilded area with agate stone; distress and tone gilded area with casein paint and matching pigments to achieve appropriate patina.

Gilding of Door Panels

Measurements:

Circumference of inner door molding: 19'5"

Circumference of upper and lower door panels: 4'9"

Circumference of central door panels: 6'8"

Total circumference of panels per door: 16'2"

Total panel circumference for eight doors: 129'4"

Total circumference of door molding: 77'8"

Existing Condition

All door surfaces have been covered in white paint with underlying layers of bronze paint and gesso and traces of original gilding. The surfaces have the typical drip mark and brush stroke characteristics of paint application.

Recommended Treatment

- Dry strip and sand smooth all painted areas to be gilded.
- In-fill cracks, corners and nail holes with gesso putty.
- Clean areas with alcohol and treat with rabbit skin glue.
- Apply six coats of gesso to serve as a cushion for gilded area.
- Sand gesso smooth.
- Apply a coat of yellow ochre bole and let dry.
- Apply a coat of brick red bole.
- Water gild prepared surface with gilder's liquor and 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ k gold leaf.
- Burnish gilded area with agate stone.
- Distress and tone gilded area with casein paint and matching pigments to achieve appropriate patina.

Progress Report from

9/20/00 through 12/17/00

Total hours: 560.75

Total hours surface preparation:
121.03

Total hours stripping: 46.7

Total hours gesso application and sanding: 142.64

Total hours bole application, gilding and burnishing: 127.37

Total hours administrative: 49.33

Total hours test areas and room preparation: 26.38

Notes on Conditions and Materials:

- Paint surface too lumpy, and along edges of panels too unstable, to gild; will need to strip completely and gesso.

- As of November 20th, new gesso used on door edges that is much thicker and resistant.
- Door 4 (on south wall) has problematic edges; the paint is very elastic along outer rim carrying over to an in-fill area on the wall.
- Upper left corner on doors 3 and 4 (both on south wall) had large gaps; in-filled with wood and putty. Red bole feathered on yellow bole on doors 3 and 4 to leave yellow bole in crevices. Outer edge that lies along the corners of doors 3 and 4 and the adjoining walls was not gilded because it was believed to

draw attention to the flaws in room construction. Double burnish used on all door edges; wainscot metal leafed in parts, in others bronze painted with four underlying layers: white, beige, grey and red (with the red directly under the bronze). Difficult to apply gesso without cracks or bubbles forming on wainscot to left of mantel; radiator behind wainscot dries the gesso too quickly. Takes several applications to remove thick bronze paint. Different karat gold used on ornaments and mirrors on mantel: wall III (lemon gold) and on windowed wall IV (orange gold). ■