

The Miracle of Cortemaggiore

A 500-year-old frame returns home

Part 2

For centuries, art has been looted from Italy, but that trend is changing, one piece at a time. An important altar frame has been donated back to the church for which it was originally commissioned over 500 years ago. The meandering route that the ancient frame's discovery and relocation has taken is so remarkable that it is now referred to as the "Miracle of Cortemaggiore."

by William B. Adair

None of the details of this story could be imagined when, 10 years ago, a 15th century polyptych frame of uncertain origin arrived in Washington, D.C. from London. Only then was the history of this masterwork uncovered. The massive frame (11½'x 16') was constructed for 11 paintings to form the altar of the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in the town of Cortemaggiore, in the Emilia-Romagna Region of Italy. It once enshrined a holy relic (a thorn, now missing), given by the King of France. Its panels were painted by Filippo Mazzola, father of the more famous Parmigianino. Over time, the paintings were dispersed to two museums and the frame sold to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

In August of 1967, the frame was disposed of at auction by the museum and then acquired by Mr. Paul Levi, who subsequently shipped the frame to me at Gold Leaf Studios in 1992 for study purposes and possible resale (as explained last month in Part I). It was here that the discovery of its origins were uncovered and the initial conservation efforts began, later to be completed in Italy by Valeria Fretta and Christina Gaibazzi of Laboratorio Ma. Ni, Parma.



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

The Conservation Work Begins

With the discovery and the repatriation efforts underway, we were faced with an overwhelming amount of work to do in time for the rededication on March 22, 2003. The multi-talented staff of Gold Leaf Studios, and a host of other conservator friends, assumed the many tasks that needed to be done in order to return the massive frame to Italy: reconstruct missing ornamentation, clean the surface dirt, and a massive job to consolidate loose and flaking gesso. Paul Levi arrived from London to direct the conservation efforts, and from his input we were able to develop a detailed plan for all phases of the work. This was an important step for us, as his many years of experience proved to be essential for the work to follow. In addition to his advice on how not to ruin the frame with overzealous cleaning, he provided essential moral support for the hundreds of hours of painstaking work that was to follow in the ensuing months.

The frame had never been regilded, which was the cursed fate of many similar objects from this period, and the blue background had suffered a little oxidization that would be normal for an object of age.

Mr. Levi's earlier decision to donate the frame back to the Church College of Cortemaggiore in Italy inspired us to also donate our time for the conservation, which, in



Paul Levi works on the polyptych at Gold Leaf Studios. Mr. Levi's input was invaluable to help keep us from "over restoring" the frame. The patina of age is a difficult thing to preserve and his dry brushing technique was the only technique that could lift the dust and dirt while leaving the patina behind. (courtesy of Gold Leaf Studios)



The brown areas in this photo (at top and bottom) of the polyptych represent the still missing components that may still be at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. (courtesy of the V&A Museum)



The varied elements of the polyptych seen here illustrate the textures and finish of the centuries-old frame. (courtesy of Gold Leaf Studios.)

turn, miraculously inspired other conservators to volunteer their time to help with the project. Marina Ginanni was instrumental in the consolidation efforts.¹ Her training in the treatment of polychrome sculpture and panel paintings was critical in establishing an effective methodology to hold the loose and flaking gesso together without compromising the integrity of the ancient surface. Other attempts failed to work using a new synthetic adhesive, Aquazol, to adhere loose and flaking gesso.² This proved to be difficult to regulate, so with Marina's advice we reverted to a more familiar and traditional adhesive, Sturgeon's Bladder Glue. This glue is obtained from the swimming bladder of the Russian Sturgeon and is as difficult to get as caviar. It has consolidation properties that are well-known in the conservation field.

In addition to this pervasive, yet inherent, problem of surface flaking, there were numerous areas of ornamentation completely missing. Some carved wood (bass wood) was used for the cornice returns, outermost volutes on the capitols, and the egg and dart on the lower left side of the lower lunette. In addition to the laborious carving, we also made molds of existing designs, then cast hydrocal for the urns and tendrils on the pilasters, as well as the anthemion pattern on both the frieze areas.³

The Cleaning

In Mr. Levi's opinion, the frame was in need of only a light cleaning with no solvents. I proudly pointed to an area that I had cleaned prior to his arrival with a cotton tipped applicator and organic enzymes.⁴ He admonished me, and said this cleaning test had removed the patina and created too much contrast. Paul remarked that a frame of this age, with 500 years of original, natural dirt, should be simply dry cleaned with a bristle brush in circular motions to remove the dust. Taking a white hogs hair brush with soft yet firm bristles, he proceeded to gently remove layers of dust and accumulated grime from years of wax candles burning nearby, leaving a residue on the surface. This was a new approach for me to learn as it was removing the dirt and leaving the patina behind as evidence of age. Soon the surface began to take on a life of its own, producing a subtle glimmering effect, without radically altering the overall appearance of the massive frame. This dry cleaning method was the most conservative approach I had ever attempted. It worked!

The accumulating dust had taken its toll on the once pristine blue and gold surfaces. They were now darkened with years of use. The giant frame had a quality of depth

and luster unmatched by artificial patinas I had seen. The key to success in our conservation work was finding a balance between the disparate surfaces. This balance was achieved through the dry brushing methodology, with most of the effort concentrated on the darker areas of the frame's surface. In some areas at the base where all the dust lay ¼" thick, there was no gold left at all. After all the accumulated dust was removed, Paul felt it was in a perfectly natural state, and should be left alone and not be regilded or improved in any way in the future.

After hundreds of hours of work, we completed the job and shipped the frame back to Italy so the paintings and the frame could be once again reunited in their original hometown church (certainly guaranteeing Paul a one-way ticket to heaven). It was a good feeling knowing we had participated in the miracle of Cortemaggiore. Who knows what other miracles lay ahead?

Bound for Italy

I arrived in Cortemaggiore about 9:00 p.m. after a long day of traveling from America. I met with Paul Levi and Monsignor Ghidoni for a delicious Italian feast at the local restaurant, where we discussed the program for the next day, how the ceremony would unfold, who would be there, etc... The monsignor made Paul and I feel very much to be his guests of honor. After all, it was he who had masterminded the whole project by resurrecting Paul's original request to put the frame back in the church where it came from, and not just in the Museum in Parma, where they had been restoring the remaining fragile panel paintings since 1987.

He told us the project was of great interest to many Italian art historians. The local bank, Banca di Piacenza, had produced a magnificent color catalog, the television stations and other press were going to be there, as well as the bank directors who funded the micro-climate system for the paintings as well as the shipping and crating. In addition, the under-secretary for the "Biene Culturale," Vittorio Scarbi, was to come with an



Shown here is part of the frame in its condition before any cleaning was done to it. (courtesy of Gold Leaf Studios)



Seen here is Jennifer Janicki and I painting some losses with water-color and dry pigments. The surface required many hours of in-painting to obscure the obvious losses.



Marina Ginanni consolidates flaking gesso with sturgeon's bladder glue. This helped to hold down the loose bits that would certainly fall off during shipping back to Italy.



Kan Phung works on replacing the left side of the lower lunette with carved bass wood. The wood is easy to carve and takes gesso well, as there is no sap or resin in the wood. The area was then gessoed, coated with a color matched bole (brick red), water gilded with 23³/₄ karat gold leaf, and burnished and toned to match the original 503-year-old gilding .

entourage of security and special friends. In other words, this was a much larger event than Paul and I could have ever imagined. Even the English government sent a representative from their Milan office to congratulate Paul on this special occasion. All was set for the unveiling the next day, March 22nd. We arrived at the church early to examine the frame and the polyptych was covered with a blue cloth, set to be pulled off with a tug of a rope. It was ready for the unveiling to the crowd of several hundred to follow later that day. We had to wait, but what was a few more hours?

The outside of the church was ringed with bright yellow tents serving cold prosecco and full size wheels of local cheese. The atmosphere was charged with anticipation. Cell phones were going off in church. People were happy. The event seemed to bring out old friends and soon the church was filled with huge throngs of people, some seemingly just off the street, while others who were given seats of honor towards the front appeared to be devoted parishioners. After many speeches, at the appointed moment, Paul was asked to pull the cord, the veil was dropped, and the crowd gasped, cheered, then applauded. The town mayor, Gianluigi Repetti, then gave Paul a beautiful hand-drawn parchment scroll commemorating this event.



The frame was unveiled at the church in Cortemaggiore in March 2003. (From l to r) Bill Adair, Paul Levi, Gianluigi Repetti, and Monsignor Ghidoni at the ceremony at the church. (courtesy of Gold Leaf Studios)

When the blue shroud dropped from the giant frame (seen for the first time in over a hundred years with its paintings), it was the climax of a long and complicated journey back home for a small but important bit of art history. Only a few more missing elements of the complete ensemble are missing now, and with a little more luck, they may be found. My part of the incredible journey was over, and as I packed

up my bags to go back home, I realized that this was a moment in time that was worth savoring, but like a great meal, it was over too soon. Perhaps someday I will return to Cortemaggiore as a tourist and sit in front of the frame and ponder the events that led us down the twisted path towards bringing Mazzola's paintings and frame back together again. ■

Endnotes

1) Marina Ginanni, a conservator from Italy came to help us as well as several other conservators: Steve Wilcox, and Tom Gentle generously donated their expertise to help us move the project along towards completion. I would also like to thank the conservation staff of Gold Leaf Studios: Jennifer Janicki, Kan and Che Phung, and Noy Eam for their expert help on the project.

2) Aquazol is a reversible acrylic mixed with alcohol, It was effective in some areas with larger pieces ($\frac{1}{4}$ "- $\frac{1}{2}$ "") but for the smaller flaking bits, it was the fish glue that seemed to penetrate further into the nooks and crannies of the substrate and really hold the flaking surface together. Before the glue was injected with a syringe, alcohol was first injected to penetrate and prepare the surface for the subsequent hot glue. When the fish glue was applied, the surfaces drank it up like a sponge, pulling the glue underneath the fractured and dry gesso. The treated surface was then covered with wax paper, then a weight was applied to assert gentle pressure and compact the glue and gesso together without changing the appearance of the 500-year-old frame.

3) Hydrocal is a plaster of paris type material that is stronger and more durable than other casting stone. In addition, if properly coated, it will accept and retain all forms of gilding and finishing techniques that will be applied to it.

4) Organic enzymes are sometimes used by the conservator to loosen surface dirt in test cleaning to see how reactive the patina will be to a weak solvent.

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.

