

The Technique of Gilding and the Art of Finishing: A Philosophy (Part I)

by Marty Horowitz

Understanding Gilded Period Frames

The most important part of creating a gilded frame is knowing what the frame is about. You have to understand the type of frame you are replicating: the part of the world it came from, the period of time when it was created. Once you understand those things, you'll know how to reproduce them in your frame. You'll know what gesso to use, what color bole, what color and weight or karat of gold leaf. If you truly understand the antique frames, then you'll know how to recreate them.

If you have ever oil painted (or studied the technique of oil paintings), you know there is a parallel in preparing your canvas and preparing your frame for gilding. When painting, you have to first apply a gesso ground to the canvas, and then possibly a zinc ground, before you begin painting. You build up the surface, creating a foundation for your paint. Then, through multiple glazes of paint, you build a translucence in the painting. You don't just see the top layer of paint, you see them all.

Gilding a frame is the same: you

work from the bottom up, applying gesso, bole, then the gold leaf, and finally your patina, through layers of translucent washes and glazes. You must understand each of these steps, and know how each of them contributes to building the foundation of your frame. Only then can you begin to alter these steps confidently to achieve the frame you want; you'll know how each change affects the whole.

Each item you frame comes from a period, and should be framed in the tradition of that period. If a client brings you a Rembrandt painting, you need to know type of frame it should be placed in. But there's more than that: you also have to know the difference between a Dutch/Flemish frame that is a reproduction with a black finish and a frame made of ebonized wood, as the original Dutch frames are.

You'll learn this by study and experience—as well as through many trips to museums and by reading the catalogs of fine frame makers. Once you're familiar with different types of frames, you'll find that it really isn't so hard to tell the difference between them. Right now you might not be able to see the difference between a

Louis XIII and Louis XVI carve and profile, but the differences will become obvious to you once you know what to look for.

The French Maid Story

Part of understanding frames is understanding how they've aged. I like to explain this by telling my "French Maid Story."

Let's say King Louis commissions a portrait. When it's finished, he wants it hung in his castle where everyone can see it. Naturally, there's no electric light in the castle. So he commissions a gilded frame to be made to house the painting.

He tells the frame maker that he wants a frame as fabulous as the por-

trait: finely carved, gilded with gold, brightly burnished. When the frame is finished and the painting installed, the bright gilding (as bright as possible) reflects all available light onto the portrait. At that time, the gold was burnished but the surface wasn't patinated. The nuances of the frame were created by the contrast of matte and burnished areas of gold.

The painting is hung with torches and candles nearby so that their light will reflect off the frame and illuminate the portrait. One day, the king's maid notices that the king's portrait and frame are covered with dirt and soot from the candles and torches. The soot and grime of the atmosphere have become caught

in nooks and crannies of the carves and beads. Agast, she goes to work. The painting is varnished, so when she wipes the dirt and soot off with a rag, it cleans easily. The frame, however, isn't sealed with shellac, so when she rubs it, some of the gold comes off too. The color of the bole begins to emerge.

That's the beginning of the frame's patina. Remember, your frame isn't supposed to look as if you made it old, it's supposed to appear as if it became that way over time. You're not just replicating the period of the frame, but its patina as well.

Look for Part II of Marty's philosophy in our September issue.