

Gilded Magic

By William Bruce Adair

Even though frames have the potential to change the human perception of a work of art, very little has been acknowledged about why that is or how that works. People just say, “Either I like it or I don’t; I’ll let you know when I see something I like.” Fair enough; it’s often a matter of personal taste.

However, there are certain designs that do tend to work with specific types of subject matter. For example, a scoop profile can often work with a dark landscape, and a reverse profile is often good for a bright landscape. But there are no hard and fast rules, just trends or patterns that seem to evolve almost amorphaously over time. The best answer comes when a frame visually blends with a painting and the décor of a room simultaneously. The frame becomes like a camouflaged animal; you know it’s there but you don’t specifically focus on it unless you’re looking for it, and the painting remains the main event.

Along this line, a successful painter friend, Clyde Aspevig, an American landscape painter, once told me that certain landscape compositions are always successful when they have foreground, a middle ground, and long distance, but that they must have a water feature in the middle ground. Why? He said it satisfies the reptilian part of the brain. Maybe that’s what also accounts for differences in personal taste. I didn’t disagree. For all I know, he may be perfectly right.

What I do know, however, is that the profile or shape of moulding and the amount of ornamentation, tonality, texture, and color can make or break a painting. And, oftentimes, it just boils down to a matter of personal taste.

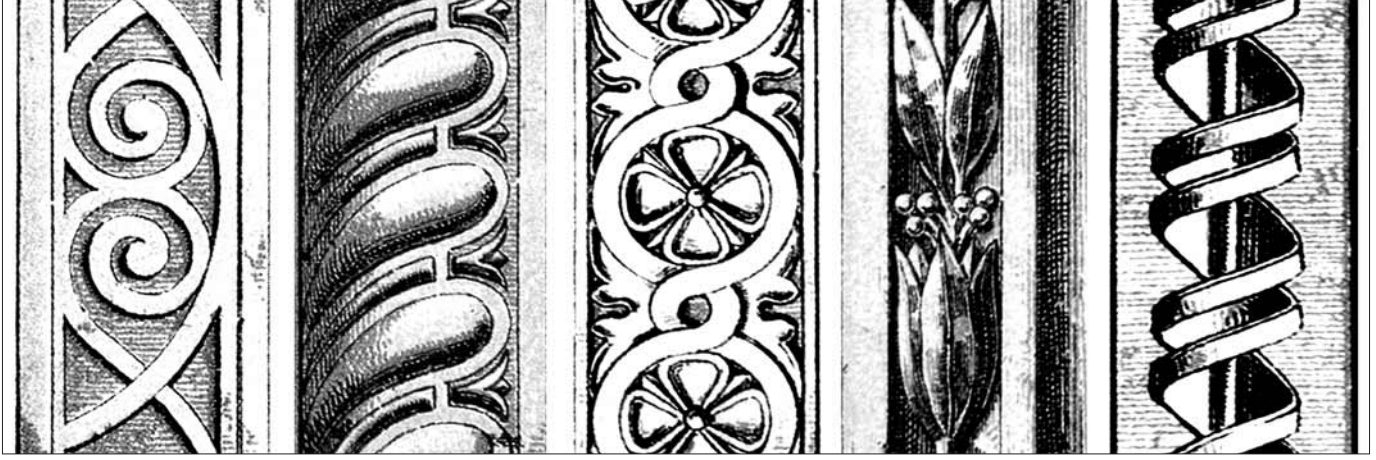
Design

I recently suggested to a class of artists, “Do the frame first; then do the painting to fit it.” A few perplexed looks followed, but the challenge did force them into dealing with a completely different conceptual perspective. Such a bold concept is often worth exploring, even if it fails; you gain by learning from your mistakes in exploring new territory.

Here’s how to unleash your creativity by blending the Renaissance gilding techniques of sgraffito, granito, and pastiglia with your own personal design

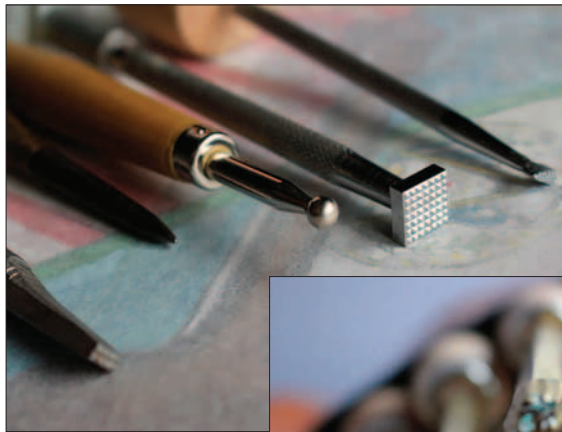


Cardinal with Pearls, by Lina Liberace. Oil on panel, 3½" x 3½". Water gilded frame. Courtesy of Alexandria Virginia Art League.



From left to right these classical designs often used for frame decoration are called Scroll, Gadroon, Guilloche, Laurel Leaf with Berry, and Stick and Ribbon. These designs are transferred onto tracing paper and used to transfer the patterns to the frame.

Whether art or frame comes first, frames may be organized into a myriad of surface finishing categories; invariably this can be based on using one technique or another applied to a gilded surface. Take, for example, the technique called *pastiglia*, a thickened gesso painted or dripped onto the moulding to create raised surfaces beneath the gold. It is used to develop a sculptural effect to augment the flatness of the painted and embossed surface decorations. Or there are two related techniques, *sgraffito* and *granito*. The former involves scratching an artistic design into the surface; the latter incorporating punchwork and embossing into the surface design. All three techniques can work together to provide a breathtaking effect that allows the viewer to experience a rich emotional mix of wonder and amazement. It becomes everything an art experience should be. There is even a name for it, *Stendhal Syndrome*, which involves things like a rapid heartbeat, increased respiration, and lightheadedness in the presence of great art. Luckily, the effects are short lived and do not seem to require medical attention.



Various metal stamping tools are used to create designs in the surface of the gold leaf, called "*granito*." Some tools were adapted for gilding from the leather-working and bookbinding trades.



The typical methods for achieving these effects are arcane, slow, and laborious. And sometimes, the old gilding geezers offer only part of the formulas, but they always provide general guidelines on how to proceed. Although there is no real substitute for time in producing a finely developed work of art, there are certain tools and tech-

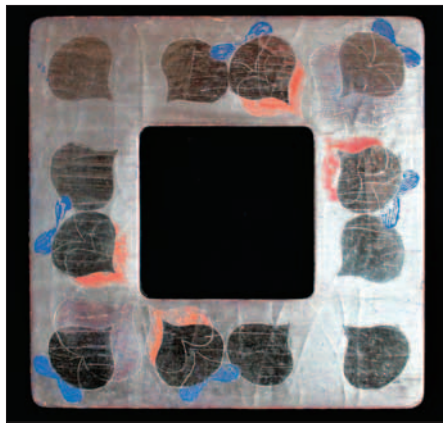
niques that help speed up the work while still maintaining some semblance of quality and possessing a certain spontaneity of youth and vitality.

In the past, some clients have asked me to work faster. I used to tell them that when I rush, the quality goes down. Or so I used to think. My older and sometimes overworked designs, I have discovered, were in need of fresh insight. There has evolved a happy balance in my work between the quality inherent in traditional methods and the freshness of creative spontaneity that can really be successful.

For example, from the allied craft of bookbinding, I discovered brass embossing wheels that I have readapted for use on gilded surfaces. To prepare the surface for the embossing wheels, I first place the gilded frame into a plastic bag with a paper towel slightly dampened with water. This distributes moisture to the frame in about an hour, thus giving it a "leather-hard" and somewhat "giving" surface. When the embossing wheel, or Italian metal punch tools, or hand-shaped nail heads are used this way, the gesso does not crack and it doesn't take a lot of hand pressure to emboss the surface. This enables the artisan to control the

depth and be able to judge the pressure needed to emboss the design without destroying the gesso surface with uncontrolled hammering and pounding.

The Italian punch tools used were actually designed in the fourteenth century and are now made by a friend in Italy for stamping and embossing individual designs in



(L) Art Nouveau Design, by Andy Stemple; (M) Leaf Design, by Joanna LT Sage; (R) Swirling Figures, by Eugeni Tanov. Students designed and decorated frames using the time-honored Italian embellishment techniques taught in the WCAF session in January, 2016.

water gilding. But the stamping must be done one at a time with even pressure and then placed carefully to create the granito effect. This is a very effective method of decorating the gold, albeit an extremely time consuming one.

The Class

In the Sgraffito and Granito Workshop at The National Conference, held at the West Coast Art & Frame Expo in Las Vegas, every student designs and decorates a frame that has been water gilded. Learning traditional frame embellishing techniques in the style of the Italian masters has become one of the most engaging and fun classes at the January event. The class allows each student to design a pattern or develop an idea that suits his or her personal aesthetic.

The time-honored Italian decorative methods of sgraffito and granito are used to transform a simple gilded frame into a richly figured work of art unto itself. The best frame that I have used for this class is a mass-produced seamless corner frame that is flat and wide and square. The outer dimensions are 7½” with an opening of 3½”.

Each person starts with a pencil drawing on tracing paper, then the design is transferred to the frame using a ballpoint pen and a slight amount of pressure so the frame is slightly marked but not gouged. It helps if the frame is slightly rehumidified in the technique as described above. Using traditional toning and finishing techniques, the students create a truly unique, personalized frame; some would not

so humbly call it their true masterpiece of integrated art and design.

The first thing the students do is draw the basic shape of the frame on a piece of tracing paper. For example, the 2016 class used “The Octopus Frame,” created by artist Susie Carolina Chorro, who designed a cephalopod and sketched it first on translucent tracing paper. It was then positioned at the top of the opening like a crown or a family crest so the eight arms wrapped delicately around the top of the opening and slightly encroached onto the

edge. Sketching the design out on paper first allowed her to reposition the image until she was certain of what worked best. Some students simply traced a pattern from a pre-existing ornament, but this artist, like others in the class, had a personal vision to implement. Chorro used to work as a docent with invertebrates at the National Zoo and became fascinated with the species.

She first made a loose, sketchy pencil outline on tracing paper that appealed to her own style and sensibilities. Although she had not yet decided the purpose of the frame, I suggested a small mirror, or perhaps placed behind an aquarium

housing a cephalopod, or simply hung somewhere empty as a work of art unto itself.

The sketch was then transferred to the gilded frame with a ballpoint pen, impressing a faint outline through the tracing paper onto the delicate gold leaf surface. Using the faint line as a guide, she then painted, in loose



The student frames will be exhibited in November at the Alexandria Art League and at the 2017 WCAF.


freehand, the octopus in blue casein paint. This paint had been augmented with a few drops of egg yolk and olive oil. The addition of the egg and oil to the casein paint allows the opaque paint to be scratched away, revealing the delicate lines of the gold leaf beneath with no shattering of the paint edge, as seen with the older techniques. In the end, it looked as if the creature was shimmering under the water, hiding from unwanted gazes of lurking predators.

Another creative artist in my class at the Alexandria Art League in Virginia made a painting specifically for the

frame she had designed in our beginner's class this year. Lina Liberace came up with an oil painting of a cardinal adorned with pearls. After she burnished the Italian punch pattern with an agate stone to an extremely brilliant luster, it seemed to reflect light similar to a shimmering pearl because of the little striation designs within the center of the punch pattern. This "virtual" string of pearls around the opening of the frame ultimately inspired her to give the bird some extraordinary bling with its own string of beautifully rendered pearls. After all, cardinals are known for their sassy stylishness among birds—and religious figures.

It was once said with impunity that "Ornithological species of homologous plumage tend to congregate in the same regions," or, more simply put, "birds of feather flock together."

These are time-honored gilding techniques akin to Grandma's cooking secrets that are passed down to those who are willing to listen and have an interest in the craft. You must first have an interest, said Ceninno Cennini in the fourteenth century, "then apprentice yourself to a master." Come take the Sgraffito and Granito Workshop at The National Conference in Las Vegas next January and make your own masterpiece. **PFM**


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William Bruce 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 Gold Leaf Studios to make frames and conserve gilded antiques. 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. In 1991, he was awarded the Rome Prize in Design from The American Academy in Rome. Over the years William B. Adair has written articles in PFM that describe in detail some of the traditional embellishment techniques, as taught to him by Italian master carver and gilder Alex Gagna from the House of Heydenryk in New York City. The first article, published in September 1991, was "Sgraffito: Like a Moth to a Flame," followed in August 1993 by "Granito and Sgraffito: Two Methods of Surface Adornment," and, recently, in August 2015 by "Sgraffito and Granito: Revitalizing an Ancient Technique."

