

# NATIONAL TREASURES

By Patrick Sarver

*Amid an impressive collection of historic frames, Gold Leaf Studios in Washington, DC, preserves and advances the highest level of the picture framing arts*

For all of the important framing work that goes on inside its yellow brick walls, from the outside, Gold Leaf Studios in Washington, DC, looks more like it could be the location of a well-hidden government sting operation than one of the East Coast's most impressive custom framing businesses. Filling three stories of a nineteenth-century carriage house a few blocks from Dupont Circle, it is accessible via a short alleyway from the nearest

street. It has no display windows; only a small, unlit sign announces its existence; and the showroom is open only by appointment. One flight up an outside staircase, the entrance is a set of fortress-like doors, which are equally non-commercial.

Once inside, however, all that changes. Gold Leaf Studios offers a literal treasure trove of picture framing unlike few other places in America. The walls are hung shoulder-to-shoulder with fascinating frames from virtually every period and country. Not to mention that the work done here includes conservation and historic frame replications for some of the most important museums and collections in the country.

"Gold Leaf Studios was founded in 1982, and we are dedicated to collecting antique frames, reproducing and conserving historic frames, and conducting research on frame makers and the history of gilded frames," says owner and master frame maker William Adair.

This blend of Old World craft studio and frame museum has long provided period framing services for major museums, government agencies, and serious collectors. "We've been lucky in getting government contracts from local agencies such as the State Department Diplomatic Reception Rooms and the National Trust for Historic Preservation as well as from other museums around the country," says



Above: Gold Leaf Studios' Washington, DC, showroom has scores of historic frame recreations that are used as a library of design. Many are original designs by artists, designers, and architects.

Right: Studio owner Adair peers through a replica tabernacle frame designed by architect Stanford White. It was originally used for a painting of an angel by Abbott Handerson Thayer.





In the great room, there is an enormous 17' high tabernacle frame surmounted by two angels. It was most likely first used for a religious subject over an altar in the 1500s, but for the last 75 years it was used as a doorway at the Italian embassy.

Adair. “They always need the kinds of expert services we provide. Of course, we do other things besides period frames. We make elaborate mounting for French mats, perform conservation on gilded furniture, and architectural gilding for historic buildings. We also teach gilding, including seminars at the West Coast Art & Frame Expo. We work locally with the Alexandria Art League



In the reception area is a display of historic gilding and goldbeating tools used to instruct clients about the history of the craft. These artifacts often serve as an effective sales tool for finished corner frames.

in Virginia and museum education departments that have created training programs on frame history. We even provide curatorial services for collections.”

While Adair’s business has little in common with the typical frame shop, he says he sometimes orders pre-finished mouldings for clients who can’t afford custom handmade frames. “We do everything that other frame shops do,” he says. “But we really specialize in handmade, gilded frames.”

Adair points out that frame shops everywhere can learn a lot from the research and work that Gold Leaf Studios publishes through PFM. “We recently reissued



This Renaissance revival frame from the mid-nineteenth century retains its original carved wood frieze with a background color of a muted greenish-blue egg tempera. Areas of abraded gilding and missing ornamentation are being treated to maintain the patina.

*The Frame in America*, which is now in its seventh printing, distributed by PFM and PFFA. We also promote learning about the history of frames, which often helps in the selection of the right commercial moulding. Knowing the historical precedent for framing artwork is important when it comes to selecting an appropriate contemporary frame.”

There are three floors at Gold Leaf Studios, each devoted to a different function. The second floor, where customers enter, includes the design showroom, a display hallway, a great room with a 40’ high atrium, a reception area, Adair’s office, and his art studio. All are filled with historic frames. The showroom has all kinds of hand-gilded corner samples surrounding the design table. The hallway next to it also features displays using smaller frames and matting that the studio has produced.

Downstairs is where the framing and conservation work is performed, and where five craftspeople carve, gild, and preserve frames. Wood is milled and stored on the lower level, and there’s a separate room with an explosion-proof fan for when chemicals are used to strip bronze paint from original gilding. There’s even a separate room for matting. Typically, a dozen projects are



A Byzantine frame with portraits of deceased clergy disguised as cherubim is the oldest frame in the collection. Most likely, it originally held a Madonna and child.



worked on at any one time in the workshop; most all are done for museums and private clients.

On the third floor is the attic storage area that houses the bulk of Gold Leaf Studios' collection of period frames. "Whenever I want to go shopping for frames," says Adair, "I just go to the attic. There are more than 3,000 frames up there."

The frames also serve as examples for creating replica period frames. "It's like a graveyard for frames," Adair says. "Many of them are redeemable, however, and we try to save as many as we can. Primarily, we use them to make molds for reproductions or as examples for new carvings. It's like a library of real frames."

What's most impressive about the studio is its collection of historic frames. "People who come in are usually overwhelmed by the number of frames, especially in the great room," says Adair. "This is very much like a museum of frames. We have frames from all periods you can imagine, and they are just waiting for the right client. They range from the ridiculous to the sublime."

"For example," Adair says, "we copied an original frame used for the 1820 'Stone' copy of the Declaration of Independence that we've reproduced for 186 embassies worldwide. Some of my favorite quirky frames include the world's first picture light frame, with the light actually inside the moulding. There is a tortoiseshell frame with silver leaf under the tortoise that I really admire; it seems to glow in the dark. I have another seventeenth-century tor-



*Adair pauses in the back stairway in front of a Tuscan tabernacle frame that once belonged to American architect Stanford White. At the time of White's death, there were over 90 such frames in his collection.*



*Conservation intern Kaitlyn Wright fills a gesso loss on a simple American federal-style frame.*



*Matting specialist Celina Walsh measures a watercolor for a deep bevel mat with gold leaf details.*

toise frame with inlaid brass, referred to a 'Boule' work. There's also a Dutch ripple frame made with ebony and elaborate crosseted corners. I have a large Spanish frame with *puti* carved on it as well as a Chinese Chippendale frame in the Louis XIV style. Also in the collection are numerous American arts and craft frames with hammer-carved finishes that would be perfect for a William Merritt Chase or Childe Hassam painting. There is a Dutch ebony frame with inlaid semi-precious stones."

Among the more unusual frames are a bead frame made by Native Americans from the Niagara Falls area in 1906, a cast frame made from diatomaceous earth infused with shellac that was used for an early daguerreotype, and handmade Persian frames with inlaid marquetry.

A walk through the main and lower levels with Adair leads to interesting stories about frames or references to works by major artists that some frames once housed.

- "The oldest frame I have is a Byzantine frame, made in the twelfth century. It has roundels with images in encaustic portraiture; there would have been a Madonna and child artwork in it. Next to it is a Whistler frame, which we have replicated from the artist's work, 'Self-Portrait.' And right next to that is an original Degas style frame from Paris."

- "A huge frame came to us from the Italian embassy. It was owned by Victor Emmanuel III, the last king of Italy, who abdicated in 1946. When his property was confiscated, the frame happened to be at the embassy. When the





Group shot of various designs used as models for reproductions



Military Trophy Frame, c 1876, Society of the Cincinnati, with replica of Certificate



Louis XIII Frame, ca. 1730, Pine,  $6\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{2} \times 2\frac{3}{4}$  inches. The Midi Region in the South of France had strong ties with the Italian designs. This frame is an amalgam of both aesthetic sensibilities. It can be best described as less fastidious and more playful in its design and execution, than its French counterparts. Remarkably, the frame retains its original patina with a red clay ground and heavily abraded traces of the original water gilding.



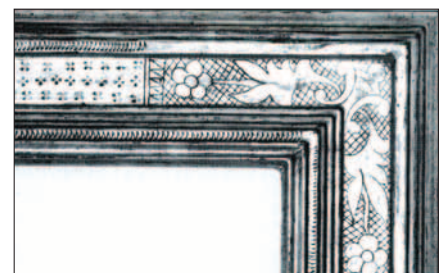
Top: Louis XIV Frame, c. 1650, oak, gold leaf with recut gesso,  $8\frac{3}{4} \times 6\frac{1}{2} \times 3$  inches  
Louis XIV (1638-1715) worked successfully to create a centralized government in order to sweep away the fragmented feudalism which had been in France, thus giving rise to the modern state. This style of frame became popularized and extensively used throughout the country including the many provinces, where less attention to the details was practiced. This model is hand carved from oak and its distinctive features are the center and corner ornamentation. Bottom: Corner, Courbet Frame, Louis XIV frame from painting by Eugene Boudin



Louis XV Frame, décapé finish, c 1730, oak,  $7 \times 5 \times 2\frac{1}{4}$  inches. Moving away from the structured influences of earlier French frame styles, the Louis XV (1723-1774) artisans focused on fluid movement and dramatic shapes. Whereas earlier frame-makers favored more structured lines and forms, craftsman of this new era embraced curvilinear and asymmetrical patterns, developing the international style of the Rococo. The Louis XV frame captured movement, oftentimes that extended beyond the frame's border, with pierced openings and continuous fluidity of undulating movement.



Exhibition Label from Durand Ruel gallery in New York



Corner, Badura Frame, showing detail of sgraffito and granitto work





"Whistler" style, Replica frame, 29½ x 21 ½ x 5 inches, copied from original in the Detroit Institute of Art, "Arrangement in Grey: Portrait of the Painter", 1872, Quarter Sawn White Oak, oil gilded,

impasto oil paint. James McNeill Whistler designed his own frames but had others fabricate them such as the prestigious London gilding firm, Foord and Dickinson. He declared in a letter to a collector, .... That he was first to paint intelligently on his frames... and he didn't want the French taking credit for it..... Here, the Japanese inspired Osier pattern and his signature butterfly cartouche on the frame are painted with care and precision using the same of the same tones of the oil paint that is in the canvas.



Barbizon Style (Claude Monet) Frame 1886 ,27 x 33¼ x 7 inches, Plaster, Gold Leaf, Monet used elaborate frames such as this Barbizon style plaster frame. Durand Ruel Galleries started exhibiting Monet's work in New York in 1886. After the exhibition at the National Academy of Design in New York City that year, Monet sold a number of his paintings using frames such as these to suit the elaborate interiors of American billionaires. The plush and intimate spaces consisted of red tapestry covered walls and richly polished exotic woods, outfitted with elaborate curtains with gold trim, gas light fixtures with crystal ornamentation.



Dutch Ripple Frame c. 1650, Walnut and gold leaf, 29 x 15 x 8½ inches. A Rembrandt self-portrait originally was housed in this frame when it came into the collection. The wobble or ripple molding is made in thin strips with exotic woods and applied to the surface of a larger piece of wood such as linden or poplar. The wobble pattern reflects light without being ostentatious, and with small amounts of gilding added to create some interest. The frame also retains the original hand forged hanging ring.



Bernard Badura Cassetta, c. 1952, Poplar, Silver Leaf, Sgraffito, Granito 28 x 30 x 4½ inches Signed and dated on Verso. Bernard Badura (1888 – 1986) was an artist and frame maker who lived and worked in New Hope, Pennsylvania for more than 50 years. He began making frames to supplement his meager income as a painter during the Depression, but he soon became one of the most sought after frame makers in the country. With master frame maker Frederick Harer as his mentor, frame making soon eclipsed painting as the primary focus of Badura's creative energy.



Regence Style Frame, c 1849, 31 x 46 x 5½ inches, plaster, gold leaf, bitumen varnish. Originally on a "A Burial at Ornans" by Gustave Courbet, Phillips Collection. I bought this frame at auction to use as a model and subsequently reproduced it for many projects including landscapes and portraits with some success. The plaster ornamentation is easily reproduced from a rubber mold and the wood backing is milled on a shaper.





Rusticated Military Trophy Frame, with spandrel, walnut 1880, 8½ x 6½ x 3 inches. This frame originally housed a mezzotint engraving of Robert E. Lee in full military uniform, the rusticated form of twigs was popular after the war in the South as was the shield with thirteen stars that celebrated the notion of states' rights and the centennial of the Revolution in 1876.



Bernard Badura, Cassetta Replica Frame, 8 x 10 x 3 inches, basswood, gesso, bole Moon gold. Inspired by Pennsylvania frame maker Ben Badura, this classic Italian cassetta profile has been used successfully for contemporary plain air painters. There are sgraffito floral designs on the corners of the moulding and punch work on the panel to create interest and texture. This echoes vigorous brushwork on a small canvas, when a good frame can sometimes make the difference in closing a sale.



Barbizon Frame, c 1880, Plaster, gold leaf, 5 x 3½ x 3½ inches. The Barbizon school of painters were part of an art movement towards Realism in art active from 1830 through 1870. It takes its name from the village of Barbizon, France; some of the most prominent features of this Barbizon frame style use of heavily ornamented frames with laurel leaf and berry, acanthus leaves and corner straps.



Top: Rococo Revival Frame, English, inscribed, "Charles, Prince of Wales"; composition, pine, gold leaf, 52 x 57 x 7½ inches. Bottom: Detail showing inscription, hand painted directly on the face of the frame.



Antonio Gaudi, Continuous Wave Replica Frame, 28 x 12 x 6 inches, papier-mache, copper leaf. Inspired by the noted Art Nouveau Spanish Architect, this wave pattern frame is molded after the original 1903 technique using papier-mache, mounted on a wooden back board. Producing a light durable frame yet massive in appearance. With a 6-inch width for such a small opening, it quickly becomes a commanding presence in a room especially with a mirror in it.



embassy sold its property about 10 years ago, the new owner consigned the frame to me. It is 17' high by 11' wide. Originally, it would have housed a Madonna and child or other religious subject. It is from Siena, Italy, made in about 1550, and has retained its original gilding.”

- “We replicated a military trophy frame for the Society of the Cincinnati, a copy of the 1783 original, which has an eagle at the top and an oculus containing a small eagle pin emblazoned with diamonds. They were worn as symbols of service, like medals are today. Lafayette gave these as souvenirs to officers of the line he served with in the Revolution.”

- “Here is an original Sansovino frame. In front of that is a Stanford White tabernacle frame replica made of wood-simulated polymer. Above those is a frame from the Phillips Collection that once held a painting called ‘A Burial at Ornans,’ created in 1849 by Gustave Corbet, and has all the original labels on the back. It was deaccessioned because Mr. Phillips had the painting reframed. So it has become a nice historical object, reflecting the taste of the artist.”

- “We have a stenciled frame that originally held an engraving of Robert E. Lee. It has a shield with 13 stars used to symbolize states’ rights. Opposite that is a Lincoln frame, a military trophy frame done during the election of 1864. Frames like this were taken around to military camps, selling the President’s ability as a soldier. It has carved double flags, cannons, and rifles. The artwork by William



*This military trophy frame reproduction was made for the Society of Cincinnati from an original in their museum collection. The original housed a copy of the vellum certificate of service that was signed by President George Washington.*



*Military trophy frames often convey information about the sitter that is not obvious in the engraving. For example, in this print, Lincoln, the military commander-in-chief, is dressed as a civilian, yet the frame lets it be known he was using military strength to preserve the Union.*



*Some walls in the studio are hung with new corner samples alongside fragments of original frames that have been saved as examples of period design.*

Sartain, a Philadelphia engraver, shows the height of Lincoln’s career as a military man.”

- “On this wall are a Louis XIII frame, a Louis XIV, a Louis XV, and a Louis XVI—a nice little line up. And then there’s an Empire frame; I should probably put Napoleon in that. There’s a Second Empire frame, what’s called Louis Philippe, and a Barbizon moulding next to it. That’s pretty much the whole history of French frames in miniature.”

- “Some of these frames once held important paintings. For example, here in the stairway is a frame off a Rembrandt. Next to it is a frame off a Monet. On the left is another Monet frame, one he used before he became famous; that one came off of a haystack painting. It’s interesting to compare the two periods in his life in these frames—the opulent and the sedate. A few stairs down we have some Ben Badura frames with Bucks County river patterns, along with his drawings for the frames.”

- “On the lower level, we currently have ‘The Feast of the Gods’ by Giovanni Bellini, painted about 1514. Its frame is one of the most important we’ve ever treated because of its size and provenance. It’s here for conservation from a major national museum.”

- “Other items downstairs include an eighteenth-century mirror frame with sidelights; there’s a duplicate of this style that belongs to the National Trust but is now housed by the White House Historical Association. On the opposite wall is an eglomise mirror commemorating the Battle of Lake Erie.”



This elaborate hand-carved Sicilian Baroque frame is typical of the island's particular flamboyance especially made popular after the massive earthquake of 1693. It is believed that this mirror frame, topped by carved putti, was once in the collection of Lady Hamilton, paramour of Lord Horatio Nelson.

- “This next frame came off a mid-nineteenth-century painting of the Prince of Wales. It was shipped to our client from England, but then the client couldn't get it in his house. The moulding is 9” wide and 7” deep, a fairly typical size for the 1840s.”

- “Finally, here is a frame going to a museum at a college in Southern Virginia. It is part of a collection of Southern artists that a philanthropist is giving to the school.”

“So, at any given time, we have our own collection plus some impressive works in for conservation and reproduction,” says Adair. “Eventually, my collection of frames will be housed at the Muscarelle Museum at The College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, VA. They're building a new regional art center, and in a few years there will be some programs related to frame studies. I'm also hoping for some support from the art and framing industry for this center and its educational pro-



Most of the frames are hung on walls according to size, frame within frame, but others are hung according to style and period. Adair is constantly moving them around, trying to find the perfect “hang.”

grams on frames. That might include regional workshops involving museum curators and educators.”

When that day arrives, the great frame collection from Gold Leaf Studios, now hidden behind modest doors, will be used to entertain and educate the wider public, promoting an appreciation of frame history that this collection so richly embodies. **PFM**

*Note: to see more images of frames mentioned in this article, go to PFM online ([www.pictureframingmagazine.com](http://www.pictureframingmagazine.com)). Also note that frame historian William Bruce Adair will be returning to the 2017 National Conference to teach National Treasures in addition to other popular sessions and workshops.*



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