

FEAST OF THE GODS, *Giovanni Bellini, 1514: Frame and Fortune*

By William B. Adair



Photo Credit: Max Hirshfeld

This Renaissance Revival tabernacle frame, conserved by Gold Leaf Studios, brings the painting back to the way it was first viewed by the donor, Joseph Widener, when he gave the painting to the National Gallery of Art in 1942.

It started about 20 years ago with a request to assist my frame guru, Paul Levi, in the reframing of a painting for the National Gallery of Art: "Feast of the Gods," one of the most important and monumental Renaissance paintings in America. The painting was one of four originally commissioned by the Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso I, beginning in 1514. Levi understood that these allegorical scenes were intended to be viewed together in an architectural setting for the Duke's private pleasure. They were housed in a narrow and intimate art viewing room off the bedroom. It was a time when having a mirror in your house was considered vain, and to have paintings like these on public display could have caused an uproar of criticism.

Levi called the painting "abused," because it suffered at the hands of many throughout its life. It was first painted by the Venetian master Giovanni Bellini. Shortly after his death in 1516, Ferrara's court painter, Dosso Dossi, altered the composition. The final artistic cover-ups were performed by Bellini's student, Titian, who painted over it to match his other commissions in the room around 1529. He blotted out most of Dossi's work, except for the bird in the tree. Quite a spectacular pedigree—and the rest of the painting's history just gets more intriguing.

A Reframe and a Restoration

Levi called me from London to discuss the reframing project details and hash out a logical approach to finding the best possible solution for the piece. He was always concerned about the placement of the painting in its proper setting by finding out the historical context in which the painting was first displayed. His research thus far had deduced that the painting was once part of an elaborate architectural setting, and for him, there was only one perfect choice. He suggested we reframe it in

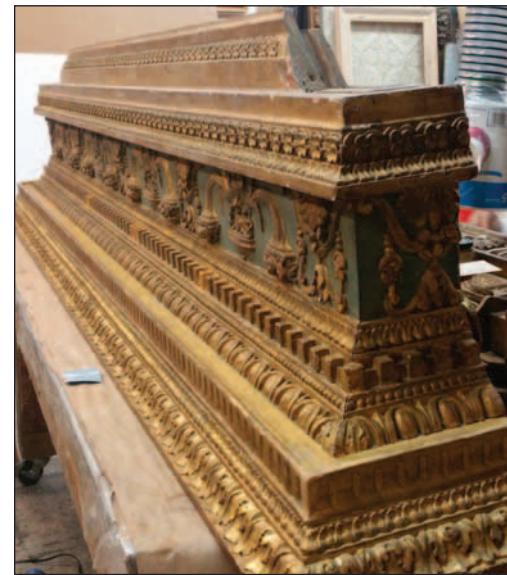


Details of the replaced cornice area on the upper right side were skillfully blended to match the original patina, using the traditional water gilding technique.

an architectural tabernacle frame of the same period and region.

When Levi first came up with this plan, he explained that he owned a frame that would fulfill the requirements. In August 1967, he had acquired a Venetian frame of the same period. He proposed that Gold Leaf Studios adapt it to fit the Bellini painting. If that didn't make sense financially, then it could certainly be used as a model for us to fabricate a replica. He insisted it was the only proper course of action to take. Anything else, he said, would be a compromise, all subject to the restrictions of money and capricious style of current taste over historical accuracy. "Bill," he said, "a museum's role is to educate, not decorate."

But, of course, you must settle for what the client wants to do. Much to Levi's disapproval, the notion of putting another tabernacle frame on the painting was



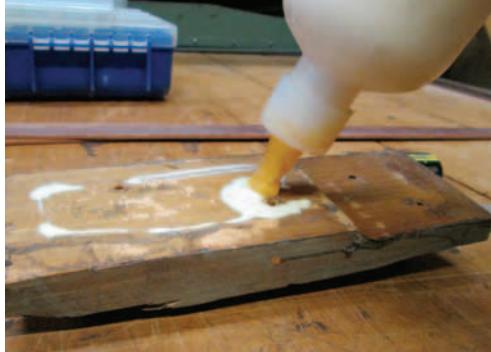
The frame was cleaned with various chemicals to remove dirt and save as much gilding as possible.



Methylene chloride was used to clean bronze paint from the crevices.



Each section required meticulous attention before moving forward.



The structural integrity of the frame is the primary objective of the conservator. The old blocks of wood on the verso had split in half, requiring regluing and/or replacement with oak, a more stable wood than pine, previously used to strengthen the frame.

not accepted at the time. The National Gallery staff decided instead to place the existing Joseph Widener frame in storage and commission us to make a more practical secular design. Levi selected a suitable model from his extensive inventory of some 4,000 frames from an array of time periods and countries. The frame chosen to copy was a mid-sixteenth century Florentine mannerist frame made from walnut and embellished with gilded bands of

running ornament.

Levi's protege in London, Timothy Newbery, carved and gilded the exquisite replica frame for the gallery. It served the painting well all these years, until recently the decision was made to put the Widener frame back on to the painting. According to National Gallery senior curator and chief of design Marc Leithauser, he remembered seeing the Widener frame as a child when his parents brought him to visit the gallery,



and he was all for bringing it back. Also happy to see the frame put back on the painting was David Alan Brown, curator of Italian

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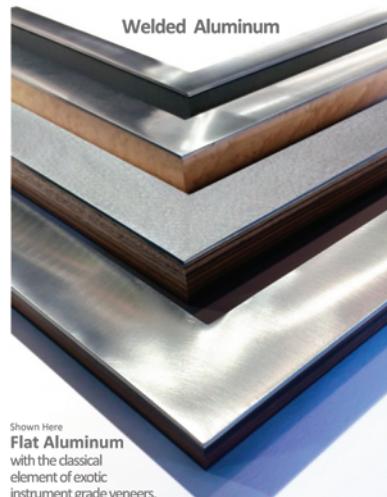
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Adair discovered an old inventory number in red ochre paint that may offer art historians a clue to the painting's previous ownership.

paintings at the National Gallery, who said the walnut frame could still be used as a travel frame when the painting is loaned to other institutions, but the Widener frame would be placed on a wall of its own and would command the space, as the donor had intended it to be seen.

My 'Indiana Jones' Moment

As I crawled on the floor in the dark storage area behind the frame with a flashlight, I was glad to see the frame was designed to be taken apart in sections. This is the type of construction technique used for large frames that were fabricated since the nineteenth century. It was held together with 12-inch bolts with nuts and washers that were specifically designed for easy transport in four sections and subsequent reassembly on site. It was essentially a good example of the Renaissance Revival movement of the late nineteenth century frames.

The biggest surprise we found was an old inventory number painted with red ochre paint, along with a name and number that appeared to be written in a Cyrillic alphabet, possibly indicating Russian ownership. Steve Wilcox,

retired frame conservator of the National Gallery, had it translated by some Russian friends. It reads, "St. Petersburg Community Association No. 136546." It is not currently known if the painting was ever in Russia, but it appears the frame may have been at one time in its life. In the last century, the painting was owned by the Duke of Northumberland, then sold to Widener, who donated it to the National Gallery of Art in 1942.

In short, the frame was a wreck. There was the typical surface degradation of a fragile water gilded frame: deteriorated gesso, missing and damaged ornaments, and even the entire upper right side of the carved entablature was missing. This was going to be a challenge, to say the least.

The Process

The frame arrived at Gold Leaf Studios in early December 2016, and we began the fastidious procedure of surface cleaning in conjunction with the consolidation of loose and flaking gesso. We used a new Swiss polyacrylic acid product by Lascaux to do the consolidation, and it worked far better than the former laborious two-step method. It penetrated the loose gesso and when

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Major areas of missing ornamentation were replaced with hand-carved wood. Spring clamps were used to apply pressure to the newly fabricated wood. Smaller areas were left alone to show the effects of age.



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dry, all the fragile areas were stable.

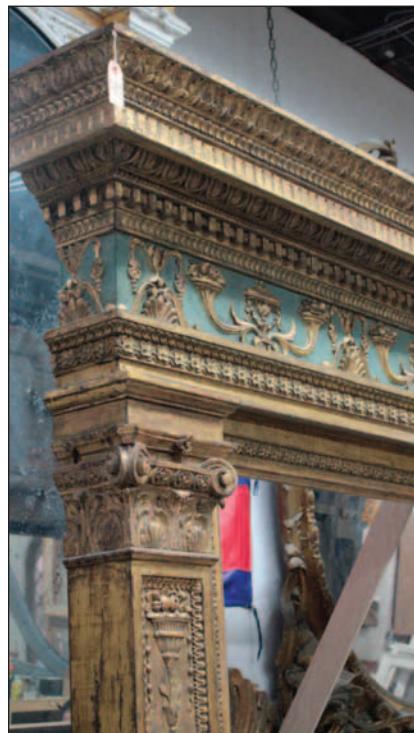
There were also numerous areas of damaged gesso covered with bronze paint. Radiator paint was used by handymen as an expedient method to cover up gilding damage in the past, and unfortunately, this technique obscured much of the original gilding. In addition to the Lascaux medium, we also used a new gel product that contained organic solvents of acetone and methylene chloride and we applied it carefully with cotton swabs. This seemed to be the best improvement in the most noxious part of the job. In the past, we had to use commercial paint strippers that were hard to control and extremely toxic, requiring us to use elaborate safety equipment. Now, with the gels and a more controlled fume extraction system, we seem to spend more time on the bench focusing on the task at hand.

Once these areas of overpaint were removed, we exposed severely degraded gesso and traces of the

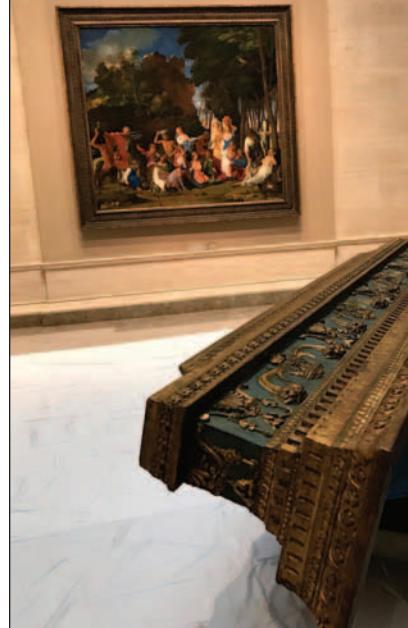
original gilding were revealed. We then repaired the broken gesso and re-gilded and toned them using traditional materials that matched the delicate soft patina of the frame.

The biggest challenge was to replace the entire part of the carved entablature that was missing on the cornice. We started the task by drawing the profile of the molding to be carved. Based on this drawing, we then shaped the wood by table saw, router, and then by hand with chisels to refine the details. Then we joined the missing piece with splines and PVA glue to create a strong bond. We reinforced the weak joints along the back of the frame with strips of oak affixed to add support. Once all the repairs were done, we reassembled the frame in our studio and called the curators in for a viewing and critique. After their approval, we were all set to deliver and install it the following week.

Perhaps the artwork was owned



Once restored, the frame was installed at the National Gallery of Art, housing the Bellini painting.



The installation at the gallery, prior to the completion of the reframing.

by Catharine the Great. Perhaps the obscure Russian clue on the frame will give future scholars a chance to reassess the history of the painting. One thing is certain: its full story has yet to be told. For us, it was a proud achievement to be able to save much of the frame's original surface and allow it to be seen and appreciated by the public once again. **PFM**

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."



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