

# Charles I: A Tale of Two Frames

By William B. Adair

Every picture frame is like a detective story waiting to be solved. A frame can provide information that the painting sometimes cannot, but it takes a lot of research—and a little bit of luck—to glean additional knowledge about the frame itself.

A frame historian must physically examine the frame—and, ideally, the painting—to discover the nature of the relationship between the two. Occasionally there is a backstory as to why a frame was chosen that adds to the appreciation of the painting, enabling us to fully understand the nature and significance of these historic portrait frames.

Recently, I conserved a late-eighteenth-century, hand-carved Neoclassical frame that housed a portrait of King Charles I of England. Through my study of and conservation work on the frame, I learned the story of the portrait inside it, as well as its twin, which is currently hanging in Windsor Castle.

## The Two Frames

Anthony Van Dyck's 1636 portrait of Charles I in Robes of State, which is housed in a Louis XIII-style frame, is the one which hangs today in Windsor Castle. A second portrait, a contemporaneous replica, was housed in the Neoclassical frame I conserved and now hangs in the collection of the Maryland State Archives. The Maryland painting is attributed to Van Dyck's protégé, David Stone, who was also known as "Old Stone."

Charles I has particular significance in the state of Maryland. In 1625, Charles married Henrietta Maria, the youngest daughter of Henri IV of France and Marie de Medici. He developed an extensive collection of Italian



art and became an ardent supporter of the Roman Catholic faith. In 1632, Charles established a Catholic colony in North America and named it Maryland in honor of his wife, Queen Henrietta Maria (Queen Mary).

Maryland Governor Albert Ritchie acquired the painting in 1925. It was purchased for 280 pounds from a London art dealer, Charles Newman, of J. Leger and Sons. In a letter to Gov. Ritchie, Newman comments on the authenticity of the replica, presumably to close the deal: "... I cannot say, nor can anyone else ever, that this is Old Stone's work, but it is a most reasonable assumption."

The attribution of a painting can be a matter of conjecture. At least the study of frames, with enough luck, can potentially provide clues to establish a painting's veracity.

## The Conservation

I conserved the frame housing "Old Stone's" portrait of Charles I last year. Although the frame is not listed in the 1925 bill of sale, according to state records, it is the frame that came with the painting.



● Only traces of remaining original water gilding existed on the frame when it arrived at my studio for conservation.

When the frame arrived at the studio, it was suffering from years of neglect. Smearred over the original water gilding were layers of dust and grime, radiator paint, and a layer of oil gilding from the nineteenth century. The radiator paint was most likely applied by the London dealer in an attempt to cover gesso damages throughout the frame. I determined the original eighteenth-century surface was water gilding by conducting a solvent test with methylene chloride and a cotton swab. Unfortunately, there were only traces of remaining water gilding.

There were areas of instability, especially the hand-carved egg-and-dart moulding on the outer rim. It was loose and separating from the frame and in danger of falling off. The ornamentation was originally carved separately and applied to the chief moulding with cut nails and glue (an eighteenth-century English method of frame construction).

All four corners had open miters; however, the chief moulding of the frame was stable because of the mortise and tenon construction method used. Frame makers from this period would have made a tapered and chamfered spline that is positioned perpendicular to the miter, but in this case, the mortise and tenon may indicate that a cabinetmaker—rather than a frame maker—constructed the frame.

Gesso was loose and flaking throughout the frame. The frame had suffered severe gesso losses caused by water damage, especially along the outer scotia and astragal of the frame. Many of these areas were worn down to the wood. In addition, the frame's rabbet was too shallow and was not deep enough to safely protect the canvas. There was a gilded identification plaque nailed into the center

face of the frame, a typical method of identification in the nineteenth century. At the client's request, the label was removed from the front of frame and the nail holes filled.

The frame was carefully cleaned using organic enzymes. The bronze paint and oil gilding were removed from the frame using organic solvents such as methylene chloride, revealing as much of the original water gilding as possible.

Animal hide glue was injected into the seam between the chief moulding and egg-and-dart ornamentation and then reattached, reusing the original cut nails to ensure stability. PVA glue was injected into the corners of the frame and balsa wood was inserted into the open areas. Balsa wood is dimensionally stable and flexible and will fill the gap created by shrinkage of wood over the years. Lascaux consolidating medium (a poly acrylic acid) was applied to the gesso losses. The major losses were filled with traditional gesso putty. The newly applied gesso was sanded to match the existing contours of the frame. Minor gesso losses were in-painted with Lascaux medium and mica powders suspended in microcrystalline wax.

The newly restored areas were water gilded with double-weight Italian 22K gold leaf over color-matched red bole. These new areas were then blended in with fine steel



● Maryland Gov. Albert Ritchie acquired the replica painting in 1925 from a London art dealer.

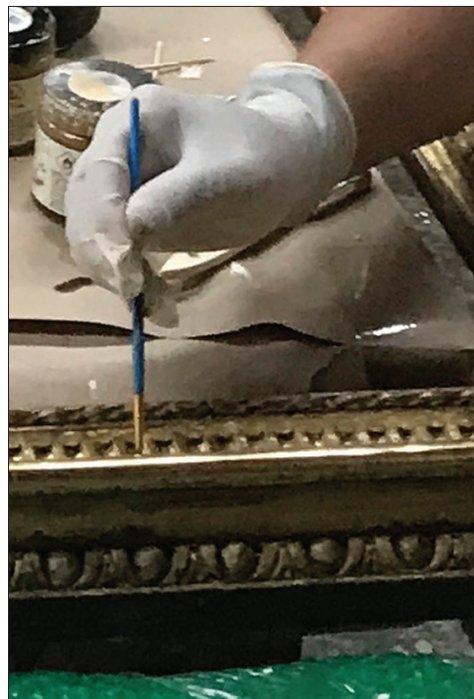
wool and toned to match the original finish as closely as possible. The rabet was lined with self-adhesive Volara polyethylene to protect the canvas from abrasion. In the end, the frame was ready for another hundred years of service.

## The Story Continues

As was previously mentioned, a Louis XIII-style frame surrounds Van Dyck's 1636 portrait of Charles I in Robes of State and hangs in Windsor Castle today. The artist, Anthony Van Dyck, is well known—they even named a beard after him, the ubiquitous “goatee”—but to my knowledge, nothing has been written about this hand-carved, gilded frame.

Not having had the opportunity to physically examine the piece, I nevertheless suspect this is not the original frame, although it is historically appropriate. The frame is decorated with acorns and oak leaves, which are typical of the period and symbolize strength of character. An acanthus leaf adorns the corners of the frame, symbolizing longevity.

According to *The History of European Picture Frames* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts, “This is the more common type of Louis III frame pattern consisting of a torus section enriched with garlands of laurel or oak leaves, bordered by ribbon, husks or leaf tips .... this style developed during the middle third of the seventeenth century.” The frame at Windsor on the original portrait appears to be a seventeenth-century English version of a French Lou-



● After restoring the damaged areas, the frame was water gilded with double-weight Italian 22K gold leaf. It was then blended with fine steel wool and toned to match the original finish.

is XIII design—perfectly fitting for an English king married to a French princess.

Sometimes it takes years to learn the secrets of a historical frame. After a thorough analysis of the frame itself, it is imperative to look at the life of the sitter, the habits of an artist, and the provenance of ownership. All of this combines to illuminate our understanding and appreciation of a work of art. **PFM**

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### **William Bruce Adair**

William 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 Heydennik 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.”