

Frame Detective:

HOW TO IDENTIFY ANTIQUE PICTURE FRAMES

By Kimberly Biesiada

“We tried to find out who the artist is, but we have no idea.”

That was the challenge presented to William Adair by one of his recent clients. Adair, a world-renowned frame historian and gilder and the owner of Gold Leaf Studios in Washington, D.C., was determined to discover who had painted the framed antique portrait.

Upon further discussion, Adair learned that the portrait originally hung in his client's grandparents' home in Southampton, NY. He examined the front and back of the piece, looking for a frame maker's label, pencil marks—anything that could narrow down his search. On the back of the frame, he found the old backing paper that had begun to rot.

“I looked carefully, and I could see through the backing paper that at the center-top of the frame, there was a rectangular buckle the size of a label,” Adair said.

Underneath the paper was the original art dealer's label, which included locations in Southampton and New York City. A quick search revealed that the dealer still ex-



Adair enjoys the investigative work that comes with identifying a possible period frame such as this one, which he is currently seeking information on. Courtesy of William Adair



The framed portrait in the top-right photo included a label on the backing paper—an important clue as to its origin.

ists today; Adair reached out to them and is in the process of identifying the artist in question. He also found pencil markings that read, “Gold leaf finish—old gold look;” they are what he believes to be the frame maker's toning instructions to the gilder, indicating the frame might have some value.

His investigation went from his client having no information on a treasured family heirloom to the client “jumping for joy at the possibility we could find out what the artist's name was,” Adair said.

Adair, former conservator at the National Portrait Gallery and a popular instructor with The National Conference at the WCAF Expo in Las Vegas, enjoys this kind of detective work. “It's an exciting moment,” he said, when such a discovery is made on a piece of art or a frame. “It's

like meeting a long-lost relative.”

Knowing what to look for in these situations can lead to the kind of extra-mile customer service moment Adair described. It can also be helpful when trying to determine the value of an antique-looking frame put up for auction or brought in by a customer for a repair or reframing. There are several ways you can identify a frame’s style, time and place of origin, and approximate value, as well as a wealth of resources you can use for guidance when assessing a possible period frame.

BACK OF THE FRAME

As a first step, Adair recommends photographing an antique-looking frame when it comes in, including overall shots of the front and back and closeups of each corner. Ideally, the customer will allow you to keep the frame in your shop so you can take your time examining it.

In particular, the back, or verso, side of a frame can offer numerous clues to its origin.

“The back will tell you more than the front will tell you,” Adair said. “The back of the frame is really how you tell the authenticity.”



● A 19th c. mass-produced frame. Frames like this, with machine-applied ornament, were produced in lengths; less expensive than hand-carved frames. Courtesy of Suzanne Smeaton

Pay close attention to any labels or pencil markings that may still be visible, and take note of the suspected age of the wood. Hanging devices can also offer insight: is there old hardware on the frame, and if so, what kind? For example, when hook eyes are placed in the dead center of the side rails of a frame rather than more towards the top, that can indicate it is a period frame. Victorian frame makers often used that hanging method so the frame would tilt forward off the wall, keeping glare off the glass, Adair

GILDING CHART COURTESY OF WILLIAM ADAIR	MATERIAL	METHOD	CHARACTERISTIC SIGNS TO DETERMINE MATERIAL & METHODS USED	
	Gold Leaf	Water Size Burnished	Brilliant Gold Tone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very smooth surface due to agate burnishing - Overlapping of gold leaves visible - Bole under-surface visible - Often used on higher parts of frame
		Water Size Matte	Subdued Gold Tone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No overlapping visible, solid gold - Usually coated with delicate glue size solution - Often used in conjunction with burnished gold
		Oil Size Matte	Subdued Gold Tone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Occasionally a thin line visible between leaves - Sometimes contains rough surface due to adhesion of dust particles to size before application of leaf
	Silver Leaf	Oil Size	Subdued Gold Tone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tarnishes if not given protective coating - Usually covered with orange shellac to imitate gold leaf - Silver visible in chipped areas
		Water Size Burnished	Brilliant Silver Tone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Overlapping leaves visible - Bole under-surface visible, usually blue or gray color - Also covered with shellac to simulate real gold
	Gold Metal Leaf	Oil Size	Brassy Metallic Tone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sheets of metal leaf supplied in 5" x 5" dimension - Usually a visible line between sheets
	Bronze Powder	Mixed with Bronzing Liquid or Oil Size and Dusted on	Gold Paint Tone Dull	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Usually specks of powder visible under close examination
	Special Bronze Powder Used Labeled “Burnish Bronze”	Burnished Bronze	Rich, Old Gold Tone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bole under-surface usually visible - Very smooth surface due to agate burnishing
	Gold Paint “Radiator Paint”	Sprayed or Brushed on	Dull, Gold-Like Tone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Usually quite opaque and very dull - Entire surface same tone; chips easily under pressure
	“Treasure Gold” Wax	Rubbed on with Finger or Swab	Dull Gold Tone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Used on top of ornaments to cover damaged surface



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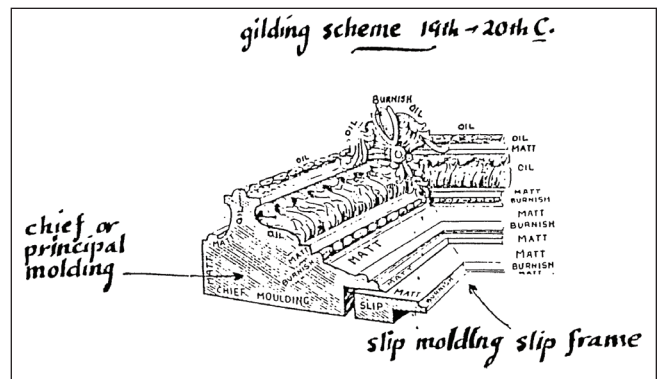
There are many aspects of the front of a frame that can give you an idea of its age and quality. If you have identified a frame's style using your reference books, knowing the time period in which that style was used can tell you whether or not it was carved or a wood-and-composition ornament (compo) combination, Smeaton said. For exam-



● A frame sample showing how a 19th c. frame with applied composition ornament appears prior to gilding. From the Olana Historic Site, courtesy of Suzanne Smeaton

ple, most nineteenth-century frames are made of wood and composition ornament, while frames made prior to that period were most likely carved. Carved frames in America saw a resurgence in popularity during the early years of the twentieth century.

The appearance of cracks along a frame can help you determine whether a frame is carved or compo, according



● A diagram of a 19th-20th century gilding scheme, which includes chief and slip (liner) mouldings. Courtesy of Suzanne Smeaton

to Smeaton. Compo reacts differently to temperature and humidity than the wood to which it is affixed; this reaction can cause cracks to appear at regular intervals and at a right angle to the length of the frame. On the other hand, if the frame were carved wood and cracking occurred, the cracks would appear lengthwise with the grain of the wood.

Smeaton also advises being on the lookout for any losses on the frame's surface where you might see what the material underneath is.

Still Not Sure? Ask an Expert

Did the research and still coming up with more questions than answers? Industry experts are available to field your questions about the potential authenticity of a specific frame.

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● This frame illustrates the distinctive vertical cracking pattern specific to compo. Courtesy of Suzanne Smeaton

“One thing I always caution people about is if you see a chip, and you see white, don’t automatically assume that it’s plaster,” she said. “You might just be looking at the gesso layer.” The depth of the chip can help you determine which material you are seeing.

Smeaton also advised becoming familiar with methods of fabrication and gilded surfaces to better assess possible period frames. Knowing the differences between oil gilding and water gilding, or the differences between gold leaf and metal leaf, allows you to interpret visual clues when examining a frame’s finish.

The color of the bole underneath a gilded frame is often a clue to where the frame is from, she said. “We’re all used to seeing red bole, which is typically a French or German frame. Gray was the prevalent color of bole in the United States; because it’s this gray or gray-blue color, people don’t understand that they are looking at a clay surface. They sometimes think it’s dirt. That’s where knowledge of frame styles comes in.”

DIFFERENT KINDS OF VALUE

To determine approximately how much a specific frame is worth, Adair suggests searching for frames in that same style on eBay. Checking the selling prices of frames similar to yours will give you a good idea of its real value.

Of course, value isn’t always monetary; sometimes it is emotional. And that is often the case when a customer brings in a heirloom piece for restoration. Adair recalled a recent meeting with a client who had a beat-up 1920s frame, its varnish crackled “like it’s been in an attic for 100 years,” all but one corner broken.

“Instead of saying, ‘Why are you bringing this to me to repair? It’s hardly worth \$100,’ I asked her to tell me about

Building Your Reference Library

Here are some essential books on frame styles that you can use as reference guides when examining an antique frame. They are listed alphabetically by author’s last name.

- The Frame in America, 1700-1900: A Survey of Fabrication Techniques and Styles William Adair
- The Art of the Edge: European Frames 1300-1900 Richard R. Brettel and Steven Starling
- The Secret Lives of Frames: One Hundred Years of Art and Artistry, Deborah Davis
- One Hundred Years on the Edge: The Frame in America, 1820-1920, Tracy Gill
- The American Frame: From Origin to Originality Gill and Lagodich Fine Period Frames
- The Art and History of Frames, Henry Heydenryk Jr.
- Looking at European Frames: A Guide to Terms, Styles, and Techniques D. Gene Karraker
- A History of European Picture Frames, Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts
- The Art of the Frame: American Frames of the Arts and Crafts Period Suzanne Smeaton
- The Gilded Edge: The Art of the Frame, Eli Wilner

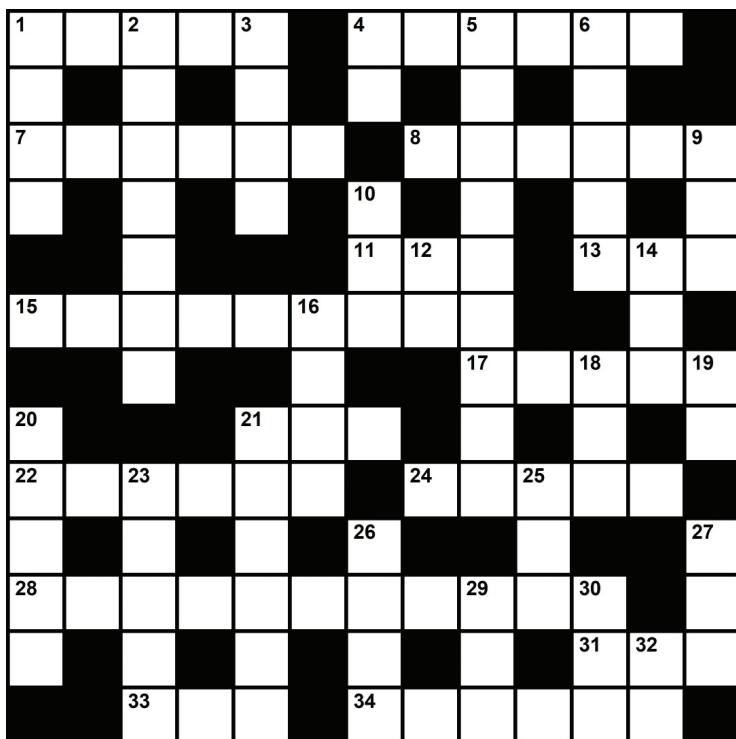
the frame and why it is important to her,” Adair said.

His client said her grandparents were the original owners of the frame; she recalled seeing it on their wall during childhood visits to their coastal New Hampshire home. The frame was passed down to her parents and was going to be discarded by the family following their deaths, but she’d held onto it, wanting to restore the object that brought back many happy memories.

“Establishing that is important,” Adair said. “The initial meeting with a client should consist of establishing the connection between the frame and the person or people.”

No matter a frame’s price tag, it pays to know how to assess and identify antique frames for your business. With these tools and resources, you can better identify the hidden treasures that come through your door, build a loyal customer base, and enjoy discovering untold stories. And you may make a nice profit, too! **PFM**

CROSSWORD CHALLENGE



Across

- 1 Most common surface to be gilded
- 4 Technique of applying a high-carat gold-mercury amalgam to a bronze object
- 7 Distribute over an area
- 8 Gold layers
- 11 Chemical ending
- 13 Type of cloth used to clean gilded frames
- 15 Low relief decoration applied to build up a surface that can be gilded
- 17 Cut at an angle
- 21 Mt. Blanc is one
- 22 ____ skin glue, may be used as a coating prior to gilding
- 24 It's been used as the traditional ground for gilding frames
- 28 Relating to objects where only some surfaces are gilt, 2 words
- 31 Polish
- 33 Fall down slightly
- 34 Color of some gold

Down

- 1 Essential for use in any spray gun painting
- 2 A gilt surface does not ____
- 3 Very thin sheet of gold
- 4 Above
- 5 Capable of being bent and shaped, like gold
- 6 Appreciated
- 9 Cloud locale
- 10 ____ gilding can produce a beautiful surface coating of matte gold
- 12 English princess
- 14 Regret
- 16 Covered thinly with gold leaf
- 18 Hospitals for the military, abbr.
- 19 Weight measurement
- 20 Falls, as a liquid
- 21 Ventilating
- 23 Exposes
- 25 Spanish for sun
- 26 One of the materials used in the specialty glue and priming mixture used prior to gilding
- 27 Container
- 29 "____ take a look at it"
- 30 A couple of
- 32 __, shucks!

SEE PAGE 45 FOR THE SOLUTION

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555 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1/2"x36 yd	\$2.19	72+ \$1.99
556 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3/4"x36 yd	\$2.99	48+ \$2.85
331 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1/2"x60 yd	\$3.49	72+ \$2.99
332 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3/4"x60 yd	\$4.95	48+ \$4.65

3M 924 ATG TAPE

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554 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3/4"x36 yd	\$4.99	48+ \$4.79
588 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1/2"x60 yd	\$4.95	72+ \$4.75
589 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3/4"x60 yd	\$7.99	48+ \$7.69

3M 969 Hi-Tac ATG Tape

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557 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1/2"x18 yd	\$4.99	72+ \$4.49
558 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3/4"x18 yd	\$5.99	48+ \$4.99
559 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1/2"x36 yd	\$8.99	72+ \$8.39
560 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3/4"x36 yd	\$12.99	48+ \$11.99

DECOR HI-TAC ATG Tapes

2 mil Heavy-Duty Hi-Tac acrylic adhesive

BEST QUALITY

Item #	Min. 8 or 12 @		
371 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1/4"x36yd	\$1.60	72+ \$1.43
364 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1/2"x36yd	\$1.45	72+ \$1.25
365 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3/4"x36yd	\$2.77	48+ \$2.63
366 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1/2"x60yd	\$2.39	72+ \$1.99
367 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3/4"x60yd	\$4.68	48+ \$4.16

5 mil Heavy-Duty Hi-Tac acrylic adhesive

Pkg'd 12/box (1/2"); 8/box (3/4"). 1" Core

Item #	Min. 8 or 12 @		
1409 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1/4"x18yd	\$2.78	72+ \$2.57
368 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1/2"x18yd	\$3.35	72+ \$3.00
369 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3/4"x18yd	\$4.69	48+ \$4.28

3M ATG 700 Dispenser



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E1402 White	2	40x60	\$8.99
E1324 White, E2324 Warm White, E3324 Antique	4	32x40	\$9.69
E4324 Black	4	32x40	\$12.69
E1404 White, E2404 Warm White, E3404 Antique	4	40x60	\$18.09
E4404 Black	4	40x60	\$23.79
E1328 White, E2328 Warm White, E3328 Antique	8	32x40	\$24.19
E1408 White, E2408 Warm White	8	40x60	\$45.49

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