



LOWY

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The Reblooming of Two Martin Johnson Heade Florals



Above: Two floral still lifes by Martin Johnson Heade before treatment. Right: The still lifes after conservation.



The restoration journey of two floral still lifes by the American painter Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904) began when James Maroney, a Vermont-based dealer in American art, received a phone call from a library in the Midwest. "They had just discovered the paintings in their basement and thought they were junk," says Maroney. "Nevertheless, they called for my opinion. I told them that they were definitely not junk!" The paintings were, in fact, among eight different variations of vases of white and red roses that Heade painted from the 1860s onward. Noted for his luminous still lifes, salt marsh landscapes, seascapes and portraits of tropical birds, Heade is considered one of the most important artists of his generation.

Maroney believes that the two still lifes, although not a pair because they vary in format, could be companion paintings that were meant to be hung together. But before they could be viewed in their full glory, they needed a skilled restoration. "The paintings had never before been conserved and had accumulated more than a century of serious grime, and some of it was very stubborn," Maroney says. "There were also a few small punctures in the canvases and minor losses to the paint surface. I always get excellent advice in both conservation and framing from Lowy, so I knew exactly where to go. I met with Lowy's conservators, and together we determined what needed to be done."

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A Tall Order

Lowy's gilding department faced a time-pressing challenge, when a private client needed custom frames for his set of 81 hand-tinted engravings by Karl Bodmer (1809-1893), a Swiss born painter of the American West. Larry Shar, his son, Brad, and the client worked together to create the frame design. They chose an elegant, but simple 19th-century Hicks-style frame from Lowy's inventory, which best complemented Bodmer's traditional renderings of Native Americans in their natural landscape. The antique frame's distinguishing features included fine crackled black panels with accents of water gilded pyramids on raised corner blocks and a gold cove at the sight edge.

Moldings of two different widths (2 1/2 inches and 1 1/2 inches) were required to accommodate two print sizes (27 x 33 inches and 17 x 22 inches). As with the majority of Lowy's reproduction frames, the

moldings were milled from basswood. Lowy's framemakers also milled 324 corner blocks, which they glued and nailed onto the *(continued on page 2)*



One of a set of 81 engravings by Karl Bodmer shown in the custom made Lowy reproduction frame.



(A Tall Order *continued from page 1*)

cut and joined moldings. After the nail holes were putted, the frames went to the finishing department, headed by R. Wayne Reynolds.

The finishing process began with sanding the putty and sizing the frames with hot rabbit-skin glue. Then three coats of traditional gesso were applied, followed by two coats of crackle gesso—a combination of cornstarch and stock gesso that forms a fine crackle pattern upon drying. While the frames were being gessoed, Wayne designed and made 324 pyramids in two different sizes using 20 dental impression quick-set molds filled with a gilding friendly epoxy putty. “We decided not to make wood pyramids, because it would have taken too long to gesso and surface each of the 1,296 sides!” says Wayne.

After three coats of red bole were applied to the pyramids, they were secured to a strip of wood with Quake wax and water gilded. Upon drying, they were removed from the wood support and burnished. Wayne’s team also applied three coats of red bole to the front coves, which they then water gilded and burnished using 22-karat gold leaf. A thin, low tack tape prevented the gold from sticking to the crackle gesso, which saves time when making a large number of frames at once. Using steel wool and alcohol, the gilders then lightly abraded the gold to reveal the bole and sealed the frames with shellac, which protects the gold and helps to stabilize the corn starch crackle in the gesso.

A black shellac primer (made of black dry pigment, Transtint black dye and shellac) was applied to the main section of the frames, followed by a black casein paint. Casein was chosen, because when it is fully cured it is insoluble in water, producing a more durable surface, according to Wayne. It also lends itself easily to the application of a wax and pigment patina. “The finishers were careful to paint right up to the edge of the cove and not beyond it,” Wayne says. “I wanted to have a soft transition between the black and gold. And with only the black shellac at the edge, it was easy to feather the black into the red bole. It was also important to fine-tune the level of gloss, so that it would blend perfectly into the final tone.” After the black casein brush coat was applied, each side of the frame was hand rubbed with steel wool to smooth out the variations in the brushwork and to augment the shine. Then the pyramids were burnished, sealed with shellac and glued onto the frames. “To ensure good contact, I lifted up each pyramid to see where it had made contact with its corner block,” says Wayne. “If it looked ample, I set it



A finisher applying a stippled patina on the gold front cove.

back in place.” The pyramids were allowed to dry overnight so that they would not shift during the next step.

Enough patina was made to cover the black crackle finish on all 81 frames. The patina recipe included White Diamond paste wax, black Japan, bone black dry pigment and rottenstone. The last two ingredients allowed for dialing in the exact level of gray and shine when the mixture was applied and wiped back. “I wanted to accentuate the crackle and not lose the overall impression of the frames being black, and the rottenstone was ideal for that,” says Wayne. “So each frame was given this glaze and hand-rubbed when the mix dried. It left the surface with a very subtle soft shine and achieved the harmonious balance with the art that our client wanted.” The last step in the gilding process was to apply a thin, warm Japan tone to the sealed gold elements, paint the backs of the frames and hot stamp each one with the logo that identifies Lowy’s reproduction



A stack of raw basswood frames prior to the gesso application.

frames. Lowy’s fitting department then fit them with Optium Plexiglas which is a non-reflective product that also offers protection from ultraviolet light. (The prints previously had been supplied with rag mats and museum mountings.)

“Looking back, the most challenging task was having to fit this job into our heavy schedule of hand-carving ornate reproduction frames and restoring period antique frames,” Wayne says. “There *(continued on page 4)*

Lowy Profile

“All my interests have come together in this job,” Michael says. “The neoclassical structures I’ve always loved to photograph—the pediments, arches and other architectural details—are aesthetically similar to the frames I now photograph at Lowy.” In addition to photographing oversize frames that cannot be accommodated by Lowy’s scan system, Michael also takes digital photos of clients’ artworks to help them find the best frame from Lowy’s digital inventory. And for documentary purposes, he photographs paintings that have been restored in Lowy’s workshops.

Lowy’s transition from traditional film-based photography to digital imagery is both time- and cost-efficient, according to Michael, who purchased state-of-the-art equipment for Lowy’s new digital darkroom. “We save time with digital photography, because film processing can take several days,” Michael says. “Now, we can do everything in house. We can either burn the digital images to a disc or print them instantly. But if a client still wants a transparency, we can supply that, too.” A digital camera also allows Michael more control over how the image looks. Transferring digital photos to his computer, he can delete and edit them as he wishes or adjust the colors to produce cleaner, more accurate images. From his personal computer archive, he chooses a final image of each frame and painting for Lowy’s general database.

In his capacity as manager of Lowy’s antique frame collection, Michael enters a description and catalogue number for each frame on Lowy’s database so that the frames can be easily identified and located. Whether photographing a painting or handling an antique frame, he feels right at home at Lowy. “This is such a wonderful job,” says Michael, who plays tournament billiards in his spare time. “The work is creative and diverse and offers a great combination of aesthetic inspiration and physical labor. Holding a 16th-century frame in my hands gives me such a sense of history. I’ve already learned so much about the frames and artworks that pass through here, and my colleagues are so skilled and knowledgeable. Working here is like being transported to an old-world atelier. Lowy really is a special place.” n



Michael Tramis

It’s a convenient coincidence that Michael Tramis, Lowy’s new fine art photographer and manager of its antique frame collection, has lived just a block away from Lowy for 16 years. Passing by, he often paused to peer through Lowy’s windows, admiring an ambience that reminded him of an old-world European atelier. But he never dreamed he would someday work here. “It was a stroke of luck,” says Michael. “When I walked in one morning, it just so happened that Lowy’s long-time photographer, Chris Erb, was retiring. Lowy wanted to convert entirely from traditional to digital photography, and I had experience in both.

Michael, who grew up near Mystic, Connecticut, has been taking photographs since he was a teenager, a passion that led him to Vancouver Film School in British Columbia, and then to The School of Visual Arts in New York City, where he studied photography and graphic design. In 2002, he began working for product and advertising photographers in New York, while freelancing in architectural photography for private clients. He is also completing a documentary film on the rise and fall of Penn Station and its intended rebirth as a post office. Michael enjoyed woodworking in his youth and often visited museums to study both the art and the frames.

Ask Lowy

As a regular feature, Lowy answers commonly asked questions about art conservation and handling. We hope that you will continue to find them informative and that in the future you'll ask some of your own.

What are pentimenti?

Pentimenti are 'ghost-like' images visible in areas of an oil painting that had been painted over by the artist, when he or she decided to move elements of the composition, and which gradually reappear. These images, which may range from a barely noticeable coat hem to a full figure, are usually invisible to the naked eye when the painting is completed. They are sometimes visible in raking light, however, as the paint surface becomes more transparent with age. Pentimenti show the natural progression of changes and corrections that an artist typically makes while creating a painting.

There are several signs that pentimenti are present. For example, the top paint layer may have cracked and revealed a different color paint below. Or there may be an impasto ridge that does not correspond with the design of the finished brushwork. A shadowy image may be visible that does not make sense as part of the rest of the painting or duplicates an existing element in a different position. Radiographic analysis of a painting will reveal more of the overall image and artist's changes than what is usually discernible to the naked eye and can provide further information about the artist's creative process.

However they are detected, pentimenti do not necessarily detract from a painting. They can also be helpful to scholars, because they reveal the artist's thought process and techniques as he evolves toward the final composition and can, therefore, help to verify the authenticity of a painting. Forgeries, of course, most likely would not show such subtle artistic changes and progressions. Conversely, the absence of pentimenti does not mean that the painting is not an original. A painting does not have to be old to exhibit pentimenti, as many modern paintings also show artists' changes that have become visible over time.

When conserving paintings with pentimenti, conservators in concert with their clients need to decide how much intervention or "tweaking" is required to present the painting in as close to the final state intended by the artist as possible. If minor penti-



An example of pentimento is visible in the form of a 'ghost like' image of a tree (see area indicated by white arrow.)

menti, such as earlier versions of a coat hem or a flower, are selectively mitigated, one needs to document the process and ensure its reversibility. If, however, the pentimenti are too dense and extensive to be easily camouflaged, then they should be left untouched as too much repainting would be necessary which would compromise both the integrity of the artwork and its value. In all cases, Lowy's conservators favor the least invasive approach, following the same guidelines for pentimenti as for condition pitfalls such as tears, cracks, flaking and other structural losses. n

I have an old frame. How do I know who made it?

Master craftsmen in Europe and America created many extraordinary frames over the past 400 years, however there is little information today and few books written that provide us with clues about the origins of these frames. Most often we can only make an educated guess as to the country or date of origin based on stylistic characteristics, materials used or signs of aging, and very rarely is it possible to determine the maker. It is always exciting, therefore, to turn over a frame and discover identifying markings that provide clues to its origins. There are only a few periods in frame history when frames were signed, stamped or labeled, and Lowy is fortunate to have a number of these in its collection.

A glimpse into the history of frame making reveals why some frames were signed. France, for example, produced some of the finest frames in the world. In the late 18th century, Parisian frame makers frequently stamped the verso of their frames. Such stamps were required by the very powerful carpenters' (menuisiers) and cabinet makers' (ebenistes) guilds. Becoming a member of this guild was extremely difficult, as the training was long and rigorous, and fees were high. Among the 22 framemakers identified by stamps only Jean Cherin and Etienne-Louis Infroit were registered as both menuisiers and ebenistes. Three frames known to be by Jean Cherin are in Lowy's collection. Two of these – a pair of Louis XV carved and gilt double sweep frames – bear the stamp "CHERIN" on the verso. A similar frame is in the Getty Museum. There is also a frame stamped "Infroit" in Lowy's collection.

In the 19th century, when frame making became more production-oriented in Europe and America, frames were made more often by manufacturers than by individual frame makers. Moldings and ornaments were cast instead of carved. Some frames carried the company's label on the verso, but because these labels were usually made of paper most have been lost. Examples at Lowy include a late 19th-century American gilt composition frame with a label on the verso from the Philadelphia firm

G. Sauter and a late 19th-century French gilt composition frame with a label on the verso from the Parisian firm L. Souty Fils & P. Lescudier.

In America in the 20th century, many frame makers were also artists who designed frames for themselves and their colleagues, signing and dating them as they would a painting. Childe Hassam, for example, would sometimes have his initials carved on the frame where they were integrated into his design. In Boston, the Carrig-Rohane workshop, operated by the artists Herman Dudley Murphy, Charles Prendergast and Walfred Thulin, produced frames with the artist's signatures or monograms (and often the date and frame number) carved on the verso. Other artist-frame makers known to have signed the verso of their frames at this time were Kuehne, Harer and Yates. Also at this time, the Boston firm Foster Brothers often identified its frames with engraved brass medallions on the verso, and The Newcomb-Macklin Company stamped the backs of its frames. Early 20th-century labels can be found from the New York frame maker Albert Milch. As early as the 1930's, Lowy also began to label its frames.

Other countries, such as Italy and Spain, produced frames over the centuries for which there are no identifying markings whatsoever. In these cases, we recommend that the frame be brought to a reputable framer for help in identification. If it is clear that a frame is original to a particular painting then information about the origin of the frame sometimes can be determined. For more information on this subject, you might find *The Secret Lives of Frames* by Deborah Davis an interesting read. n



Above from top to bottom: the verso of a late 18th century frame by Etienne-Louis Infroit showing signs of age and French perpendicular spline joint construction with a close up of the signature stamp 'E.L. Infroit'; Front of the Infroit frame.

(Reblooming... continued from page 1)

The heavy surface dirt and soot combined with a layer of yellowed natural resin varnish obscured the paintings' images and colors, as revealed under ultraviolet light. Lowy's conservation team, headed by Bill Santel, first cleaned the paintings using the appropriate detergents and solvents. They were careful not to disturb the canvas supports, which had weakened and oxidized with age, exhibiting scattered bulges, corner draws, cupping and stretcher bar creases. After a thorough cleaning, the paintings were removed from their stretchers and treated with heat and humidity on a vacuum table to eliminate planar distortions.

The paintings were then ready to be lined, a process that can involve reinforcing the original canvas support with a layer of mylar, Tetex (a synthetic textile) and a linen backing using the thermoplastic adhesive BEVA 371. "But for these linings, we chose a less invasive approach," says Bill. "We used a BEVA infusion to

mount only the Tetex, which is a thin, strong, virtually transparent material that looks like a nylon stocking. It not only allows you to see the back of the original canvas, but because it is so lightweight it does not distort the character and surface of the painting. Heavier linings can sometimes cause weave interference with the original canvas or put pressure on the paint layer. It was my hunch that the Heades would respond to a less is more approach, even though paintings in this condition would usually require more aggressive treatment. Lowy always strives to keep interventions as minimal as possible, in accordance with current conservation standards."

After being lined, the paintings were re-stretched onto their original stretchers and given a protective coating of synthetic resin varnish. Losses, selective craquelure and scratches were filled with a reversible vinyl gesso and inpainted using pigments mulled in acrylic resin. A final coat of synthetic resin varnish was applied to protect against environmental pollutants and provide

an aesthetically pleasing surface. By the end of the process, Bill was satisfied that the cleaning, structural work and inpainting were in top order. And Maroney could not have been more pleased with the result. "The paintings were extremely vibrant, revealing once again the details and highlights that had been obscured by layers of surface debris," Maroney says. "I'm thrilled with Lowy's work. The Heades now look magnificent. Good conservation means doing as little as possible for maximum effect, and I depend on Lowy to make that judgment."ⁿ

(A Tall Order continued from page 2)

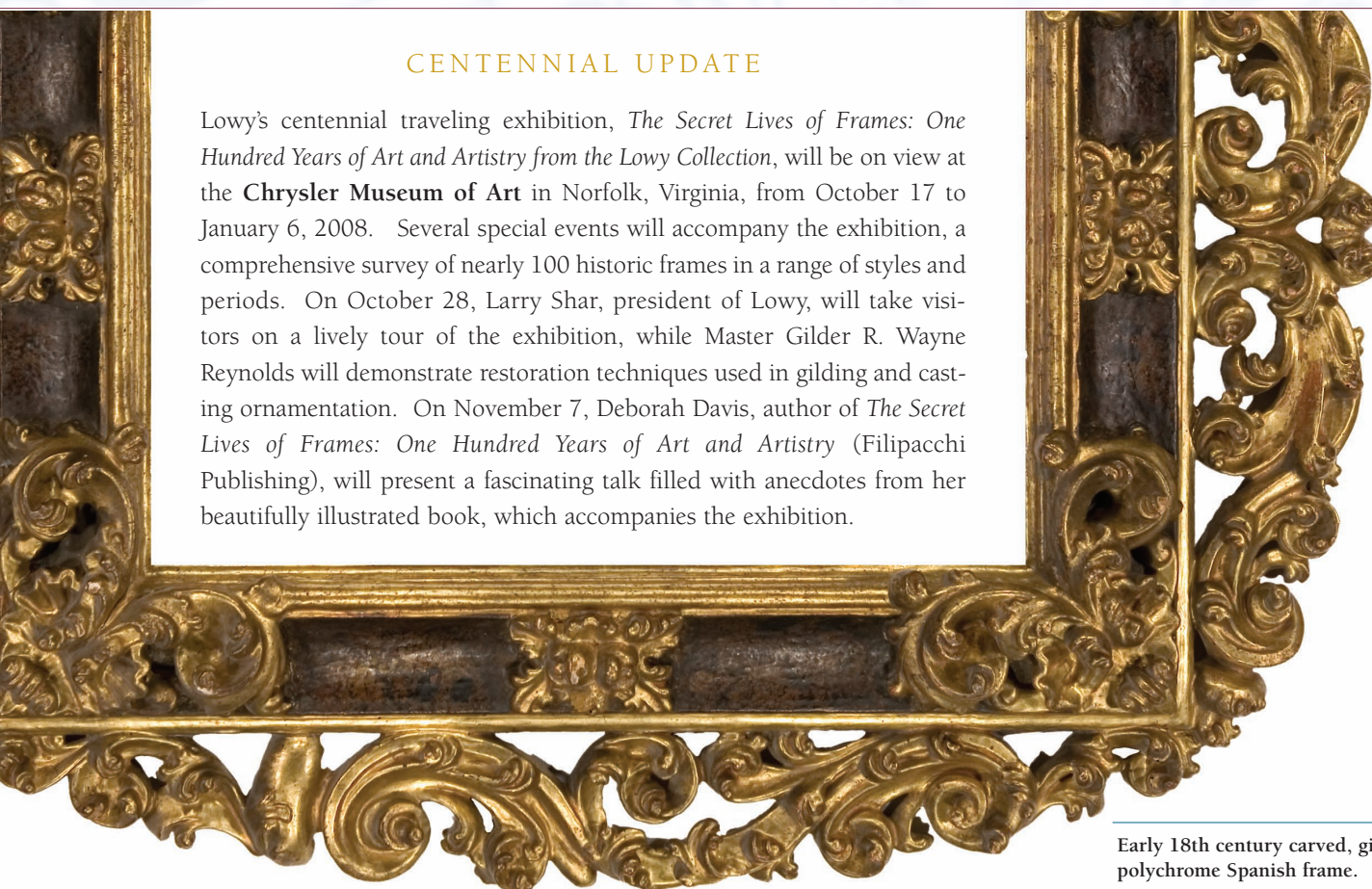
was always competition for space and talent to do both at the same time. But I really enjoyed the change of pace from the one-frame-at-a-time approach to multi-tasking, problem solving and, most important, developing time saving systems so that we could meet our deadline."ⁿ

CENTENNIAL UPDATE

Lowy's centennial traveling exhibition, *The Secret Lives of Frames: One Hundred Years of Art and Artistry from the Lowy Collection*, will be on view at the **Chrysler Museum of Art** in Norfolk, Virginia, from October 17 to January 6, 2008. Several special events will accompany the exhibition, a comprehensive survey of nearly 100 historic frames in a range of styles and periods. On October 28, Larry Shar, president of Lowy, will take visitors on a lively tour of the exhibition, while Master Gilder R. Wayne Reynolds will demonstrate restoration techniques used in gilding and casting ornamentation. On November 7, Deborah Davis, author of *The Secret Lives of Frames: One Hundred Years of Art and Artistry* (Filipacchi Publishing), will present a fascinating talk filled with anecdotes from her beautifully illustrated book, which accompanies the exhibition.

LOWY

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Early 18th century carved, gilt, and polychrome Spanish frame.

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