

# LOWY

A Newsletter Published By Julius Lowy Frame & Restoring Company, Inc. 223 East 80th Street, New York, NY 10075, 212 -861 -8585. www.lowyonline.com

## Reviving a modern master



"Tulips" by Gershon Benjamin, ca 1945 in a Lowy 20th century modernist style gilt frame.

Many brilliant artists throughout history, although recognized in their time, have remained long and undeservedly forgotten, for one reason or another. A select few, however, have been fortunate enough to be rediscovered at a fortuitous future moment. Such is the case with Gershon Benjamin (1899-1985), an American modernist painter who was the subject of a dazzling retrospective earlier this year at New York's Spanierman Gallery, who represents the artist's estate. The first-large scale presentation of Benjamin's art, the exhibition featured more than sixty landscapes, still lifes, figurative works and portraits that Benjamin produced over the course of a seventy-year career.

For the past two years, Lowy has played a significant role in bringing these works to a new audience by restoring them to their original beauty and creating frames that complemented their understated elegance. "It was important that the paintings be in the best possible condition for this landmark exhibition," says Ira Spanierman. "I have known Larry Shar and worked with Lowy for many years. I knew that they would understand the character of these sensitive paintings and the Zeitgeist of the early modernist aesthetic. The paintings needed a good cleaning and frames that highlighted the quiet spiritual quality of Benjamin's art. I have always had great confidence and faith in Lowy's taste and expertise and knew they would do an exceptional job."

Scene and Regionalist painting and Social Realism trends to pioneer what they called an "expressionist art" that integrated European modernism in an American context. Along with his progressive colleagues, Benjamin held the belief that art should convey feeling and abstract ideas, rather than doctrine and content, while both borrowing and breaking away from art traditions.

Drawing inspiration from an array of sources, including his own academic background, Japanese prints, folk art, primitive painting and the European modernist artists he admired, such as Cezanne, Picasso, Matisse, Vuillard and Pissarro, Benjamin captured the life around him in thoughtful, reductive images with a masterful interplay of form and color that revealed his innermost feelings, while expressing the true essence of his subjects. In his quest to evoke "the quiet beauty of the everyday," in Ira Spanierman's words, Benjamin left behind a sublime body of work distinguished by its powerful simplicity and intense emotion. Of Benjamin's art, the New York Sun critic Melville Upton wrote in 1937: "His work as a rule has a poetical, pensive bent, though never descending to prettiness, and finds its expression in a low-toned palette....His form is 'felt' rather than vigorously insisted upon, which gives certain of his canvases ... a certain aloofness and air of reserve, as though he were enamored of the virtues of understatement."

Born in Romania, the young Benjamin immigrated to Montreal, Canada with his family, where he attended art schools, while also studying photo engraving, which enabled him to establish a commercial career with newspapers throughout his life. He moved to New York City in 1923, married the actress Hilda Zelda Cohen and took a job in the art department of the New York Sun, where he worked for twenty-five years on the late-night shift so that he could paint by day. By the end of the 1920s, he had become part of a dynamic group of young artists who gathered around Milton Avery. Along with his wife, Sally, Avery advocated a freedom of self-expression and experimentation that appealed to Benjamin, whose paintings reveal Avery's imprint. Benjamin and Avery remained close friends throughout their lives, traveled together and often depicted each other in portraits. Benjamin painted in the evenings with Avery and other artist friends, including Rothko, Gottlieb, John Sloan, Arshile Gorky and Raphael and Moses Soyer, who critiqued each other's work and often shared the cost of hiring models. During the Great Depression, Benjamin's job at the Sun provided him with economic stability, which many of his fellow artists lacked. "Benjamin was passionately devoted to his art, but he never sought to make a living from it or to promote himself like some of the other artists in his circle, although he did participate in a number of exhibitions," says Spanierman. "For this reason, his art has remained largely unknown to the general public." By the mid-1930s, when he showed with the Uptown and Secession galleries (*continued on page 4*)



"Milton Avery #2" by Gershon Benjamin, ca 1935 in a Lowy mid-20th century "Ludins" style frame.



# An Unconventional Approach



"Maroon Pink White" by Sean Scully reframed by Lowy in a 17th century broadly carved Italian style giltwood frame.

When it comes to contemporary paintings, from Pop Art and Minimalism to Photo Realism and Conceptual Art, many collectors prefer simple gilded frames with a clean, smooth surface that function primarily as unobtrusive protective borders simply finishing and protecting the art they enclose. But some contemporary paintings, particularly those done in more expressive styles can be best enhanced by using more traditional frames with expressive carved and ornamented surfaces that compliment both the style and personality of the artwork. Lowy is always ready to advise collectors, dealers and curators who prefer this less conventional and 'riskier' approach to framing contemporary art.

One art collector, in particular, a longtime Lowy client, always frames his contemporary paintings in traditional frames. He recently brought a painting by Sean Scully, "Maroon Pink White," and a pair of lithographs by Jean Dubuffet to Lowy for framing. Though Scully is usually thought of as an abstract painter, his seductive painterly grids are imbued with a Romantic emotional quality that extends beyond pure abstraction. Scully's irregular-edged, brick-like masses, executed with a light-infused palette, suggest solidity and vulnerability, order and chaos, precision and poetry, the tension of life itself. Not surprisingly, his highly expressive style lends itself to frames of equal expressive strength, such as the 17th-century Italian Bolognese-style frame that Lowy created specifically for Scully's painting based on an antique frame from its extensive inventory of frames. This frame has a receding profile, which appears to "push" the painting forward into view; carved continuous acanthus leaf ornament, which dazzles the eye with its organic exuberance; and a rich, glowing finish that enhances Scully's subtle, carefully chosen colors. Together these elements lend drama to the painting, complementing rather than overshadowing it.

"For the Scully painting, we could have selected a simple geometric molding that made no particular state-

ment, or interpreted the artist's work to make a more personal framing statement that enhanced the artist's personality, sensibility and purpose," says Larry Shar, president of Lowy. "In this case, the owner wanted to draw attention to the presentation without diminishing the artist's intent. Many collectors like to put a personal stamp on their collection, and framing is one way to this. Scully's painting reminded us of paintings by Nicholas de Stael, whose Swiss dealer, Daniel Varenne, was a proponent of bold, anachronistic frames for de Stael's work. The frame we made for the Scully painting is undeniably a bold statement, but why not think outside the box?" To make the anachronism more palatable, Lowy "floated" Scully's painting, using a hidden, recessed supplementary frame that allows for space between the main frame and the painting, thereby producing a levitational effect that reveals the edges of the painting. In doing so, Lowy demonstrated that this practice, which is often used when framing contemporary paintings with modern and contemporary frames, could also work with traditional frames.

For the Dubuffet lithographs, which depict the naïve, child-like figures for which this Art Brut pioneer is known, Lowy and the owner chose to create reproductions based on a 16th-century Spanish cassetta frame. Developed in Italy during the late 15th century, cassetta frames consist of a central flat recessed band or frieze with applied inner and outer mouldings. "The flat panels of cassetta frames work well with the flat planes of much contemporary art," says Lisa Wyer, vice president of sales and marketing at Lowy. "In fact, many modern frames are based on cassetta frame designs." Additionally, the chunky, strong shape of this cassetta frame particularly complements Dubuffet's bold, sculptural images.

Cassetta frames also express the love of decorative ornamentation that characterized Renaissance frame making. The antique frame model used to create the Dubuffet frames has faux *pietre dure* (inlaid stone) panels and is gilded and decorated with *sgraffito* (stenciled and painted scroll-like decoration) at the corners. These whimsical features enhance the playful quality of the prints. In an effort to make the reproduction frame even more authentic, Lowy copied the traditional lap joinery of the original, which echoes the primitive, handcrafted look of Dubuffet's prints. Lap joinery produces a more complex, detailed corner than the common machine mitered corner. "This frame was a quirky, unique approach for an artist who was very much an individual; I felt a simple contemporary frame would not do justice to his spirit of individuality," Lisa says.

Among traditional framing choices, 16th- to 18th-century Spanish and Italian frame styles tend to work best with contemporary art, according to Larry. "Antique Spanish and Italian frames are not as fussy and mannered as 18th-century French frames, for example," he says. "They often have a more expressive bold and less refined quality which when paired properly can enhance the expressiveness of a contemporary artist." Indeed, some of Lowy's most famous artist clients

throughout its 100-year history, including Salvador Dali and Alfonso Ossorio, have preferred such frames for their own artworks.

Lowy prides itself on keeping its framing services new and fresh, and will work with clients to deliver any type of frame they prefer. Unlike other framing firms, Lowy is equally skilled at creating and supplying both contemporary and traditional frames for contemporary art. Some clients use antique frames as inspiration to design their own frames, and Lowy can craft these as well. Lowy has for many years framed this particular client's contemporary paintings with historically accurate replicas of antique frames. "But he didn't want his frames to look too old or distressed," Lisa says. "While the frames we created for Scully's and Dubuffet's art have the character of the antique originals on which they were based, they don't show the wear and tear that inevitably builds up over time on antique frames. This cleaner, fresher look was deemed more appropriate for these contemporary paintings."

Wayne Reynolds, head of gilding at Lowy, oversaw the painstaking, time-consuming process of creating these frames. "The specific challenge was to capture the character of the early craftsmanship and the rich layers of patina of the original frames," Wayne says. "This involved using the traditional skills of the workshops of the period, which included carving, gilding, faux finishing and *sgraffito* decoration." Framing contemporary art with antique frames or antique frame reproductions may be a controversial approach. But that doesn't mean it can't be done. "Lowy has always tried to remain on the cutting edge of the framing profession," says Larry. "Once we even framed a painting by Mark Rothko for a client, despite the artist's own well-known preference that his work never be framed! Shame on us!" ■

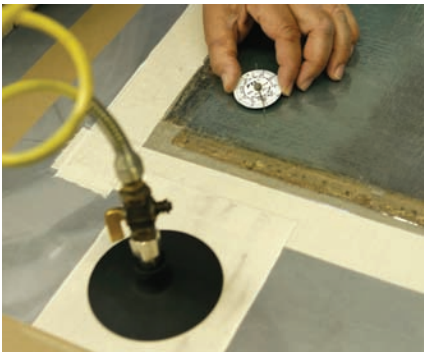


"Nez Carrot" by Jean Dubuffet reframed by Lowy in a 16th century Spanish style cassetta frame with faux *pietre-dure* panels.

# 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. The answers from this feature can also be found at our website along with the archives of past newsletters. Please visit [www.lowyonline.com](http://www.lowyonline.com).

## What are the latest materials and techniques used in lining paintings?



A painting being lined on the vacuum hot table.

When a client brings a painting to Lowy for conservation, it may sometimes require lining—a procedure whereby another canvas is adhered to the verso of the original to consolidate tears, stabilize lifting paint, correct surface distortions or provide structural support to an oxidized or damaged canvas. A variety of materials and treatments are used in this multi-step process providing a range of options so that the least invasive approach may be selected to ensure that a painting is structurally stable.

When treating a painting for structural problems, Lowy's conservators first carefully apply humidity, heat and pressure on a vacuum-hot table to mitigate any surface distortions. The canvas verso may then be infused with the thermoplastic Beva 371 to further stabilize the painting. Recognized by conservators worldwide as the preferred adhesive for lining, Beva 371 was developed by the renowned conservator Gustave Berger, who worked for Lowy in the 1960s and trained Lowy's chief conservator Bill Santel.

In the past, adhesives such as wax and animal skin glue were used for lining paintings, each of which has specific drawbacks. Because wax thoroughly permeates the paint and canvas layers, it can cause the ground and paint layers to darken. Also, when beeswax is used, its chemical properties tend to reverse the natural hardening of the paint layers over time, making them more soluble and, therefore, less resistant to solvents used for cleaning. Animal skin glue, on the other hand, is a strong adhesive that can create tension between the original paint and canvas layers, causing the paint to flake or crack. And because it is an organic material, it not only dries and hardens with age, thereby losing its original adhesive strength, but can also attract detrimental molds and other parasites. Additionally, neither animal skin glue nor wax can be easily removed during later conservation treatments. Beva 371 is an inert, reversible substance that does not add extra tension to the support or cause a weakening or visible darkening of the paint layers. For these reasons, it is the preferred adhesive of conservators today.

Once the canvas has been infused with Beva 371, the decision may then be made to line the painting by applying additional layers of structural support, if necessary. In this case, Beva 371 also serves as the adhesive between layers. Lining is typically employed when a painting is either structurally weak and/or suffers from large tears or distracting surface distortions which can be caused when the stretcher bar support exerts too much pressure on the painting. Extensive flaking, cracking or cupping, whereby heavy paint layers can be seen lifting off the canvas, also often necessitates lining. In all

cases, the client, in cooperation with Lowy, must weigh all factors to determine how much treatment is necessary. For example, if the painting is structurally stable yet displays minor surface distortions, then the client may opt not to line, even though the surface distortions may not be completely corrected using other treatments. Lowy offers a range of conservation materials and methods as options so that the treatment can match specifically the needs of a particular painting. In all lining procedures, Lowy's conservators favor the "less is more" approach that is consistent with today's conservation standards. For example, Lowy's conservators can use Beva to apply a layer of T/tex, a transparent synthetic, stocking-like material when the existing support is fairly stable so that any markings and signatures on the verso remain visible. If a painting requires more support, then Lowy's conservators will apply a lining canvas. But first, a synthetic Pecap interlayer is always inserted between the original canvas and lining canvas for extra strength and durability. In more challenging cases, a DuPont Mylar interlayer may also be inserted. This plastic sheet, which is occasionally used when a painting displays large tears and/or severe cupping, provides even more structural support.

Conservators typically use either a linen or synthetic canvas for lining, depending upon the density of the artist's ground and palette and on the client's individual tastes and preferences. Some clients prefer the irregular, natural look of linen to the smooth, uniform appearance of a synthetic material. But there is a downside to using a linen canvas for lining. Because linen is an organic material, it oxidizes and weakens over time, thus it may require with time the painting to be lined more often. Also, the irregular surface of linen, with its bumpy knots, can create planar distortions on the paint surface.

Synthetic lining canvases are available in a range of weights and in darker or lighter beige and gray tones, which are inspired by the linen canvases traditionally used by artists prior to the 20th century. The heavier synthetics provide more support, whereas lighter weight examples often work best with small paintings. Lighter toned synthetic linings tend to complement contemporary paintings, many of which are executed on less expensive cotton canvases. Many contemporary art collectors prefer synthetic linings to cotton linings because of their greater durability. Unlike linen and cotton, synthetic linings do not oxidize or deteriorate over time, and therefore do not lose their tensile strength. Consequently, paintings lined with synthetic canvases are less likely to require future structural interventions.

After the appropriate materials and treatments have been applied to the original canvas stabilizing it for future generations to enjoy, the painting is ready to be re-stretched on its stretcher and enter the world with a vibrant new life. ■

## What is rabbit skin glue, and how is it used in gesso for gilding frames today?

Rabbit skin glue is a binder that has been used for centuries to make gesso, a white paint-like substance that serves as the ground layer for gilding a frame. Because of its unique properties, no synthetic substance has been found to replace it in the preparation of gilding frames. Produced from genuine rabbit skin shavings, which are mixed with water and then heated, this glue has high cohesion properties and a distinctive

color and odor. The rabbit skin component is processed as either a dry, granular substance or as small cubes and sheets. The protein in the rabbit skin forms a resilient, water-soluble bond that allows gesso to remain flexible, a critical requirement in the gilding process. The gesso surface must be able to flex with the pressure of burnishing, while providing a uniformly smooth surface over which gold leaf can be evenly applied. And because wood expands and contracts with climactic changes, the gesso also must be able to move in harmony with the wood. If gesso is prepared properly, with the right ratio of ingredients, then the frame will have a better chance adapting to variations in temperature and humidity.

A top-quality gilded surface needs a good gesso base to produce a brilliant, burnished finish. Although there is no single universal recipe for gesso, experienced gilders, like those at Lowy prepare gesso using a formula based on specific weights of rabbit skin glue and whiting (calcium carbonate or calcium sulfate) added to a volume of water. The gesso recipe used by Lowy also includes linseed oil, a binder used in oil paint that gives gesso added durability over time. Throughout history, gilders jealously guarded their own secret gesso recipes from their competitors. The competition for business and for a beautiful gilded finish generated different versions of the gesso recipe, and gilding shops, which were often family-run, were protective of the look they achieved with their frames. Some of these secret gesso recipes also included honey or sugar, which helps gesso to resist cracking, and garlic, which prevents insect infestation.

If the exact ratio of ingredients is not used when preparing gesso, then it may become either too hard or too soft, which compromises bonding to the frame's wood surface, leading to flaking, chipping and other damages to the gesso layers. Soft gesso, which contains too much whiting and too little rabbit skin glue, can be easily dented and does not burnish well. Hard gesso, which contains too little whiting and too much rabbit skin glue, can produce an uneven, scratchy burnished surface. Rabbit skin glue itself must also be prepared with the proper ratio of water and rabbit skin to ensure optimal glue strength. A coat of rabbit skin glue should be applied to the frame before the first gesso layer, in which case it serves as a primer that helps the gesso to bond more easily with the wood.

In addition to achieving the proper ratio of ingredients in both the gesso and rabbit skin glue preparations, gilders must also observe a few other rules when preparing gesso. Because rabbit skin glue is an organic substance, the gesso that is made from it must be properly heated and refrigerated. Overheating the gesso mixture not only produces pinholes in the gesso layers but also weakens the rabbit skin glue bond, which is critical to ensure the proper bonding of the first gesso layer to the frame. And if gesso is not properly refrigerated when it is not being used, it will be susceptible to bacteria. Like the great gilders of ages past, Lowy's corps



of skilled professionals makes every effort to achieve beautifully gilded frames with the right combination of technical expertise, superb craftsmanship and sound judgment. ■

The application of gesso to a reproduction frame.

## *(Reviving a Modern Master* continued from page 1)

in New York, Benjamin had developed a reputation as an expressive painter of mood. In the ensuing years, he diverged from the increasing emphasis on abstraction favored by some of his fellow artists, such as Rothko and Gottlieb, choosing instead to keep his art rooted in his direct experiences of nature.

Benjamin increasingly began to distance himself from the New York art world, becoming more involved with a community of artists, writers and musicians who congregated in Free Acres, New Jersey, in the foothills of the Watchung Mountains, where he and Zelda settled permanently after his retirement in 1963. Although he continued to exhibit his art in New York and New Jersey until the end of his life, Benjamin stayed true to his own artistic path all along, even as he witnessed the rise to fame of the New York School in the 1950s. "To feel is to know and to know is to feel. ... all my paintings represent that through color, line, and subject," he said.

When Spanierman called upon Lowy to dress up Benjamin's paintings for the retrospective exhibition, they first needed to be thoroughly cleaned. "There was a lot of dirt and soot embedded on the surface of the paintings, probably due in part to the fact that Benjamin didn't use varnish, which usually protects paintings from accumulating surface debris," says Bill Santel, Lowy's chief conservator. "Because Benjamin applied his paint in thin, soluble layers, which gives his work an almost transparent look, the paintings were sensitive to some cleaning methods. We used a very mild detergent and rinsing agent, so that we could clean without running the risk of removing any paint. It was a tricky task; we had to be careful to maintain the integrity of the paintings."

Many of the paintings also displayed minor surface distortions, such as faint cupping, dents, bulges and stretcher bar creases. Lowy's conservators removed these imperfections with both humidity treatments and infusions—the application of a thermoplastic adhesive to a canvas verso in order to strengthen both the canvas and the original paint layers. Additionally, some of the paintings had areas of drying crackle

typical of paintings of this period and caused by the contraction of paint layers over time, which produces fine cracks on a painting's surface, revealing the white ground layer beneath. Lowy's conservators improved the appearance of these areas with inpainting. A final challenge in the conservation process was the presence of mold stains on both the fronts and backs of some paintings, which were treated variously with detergents and solvents. "We had to find a reasonable combination of treatments to deal with these different conservation challenges," says Santel. "And we had to adjust our approach for each individual painting to meet its particular needs. In the end, I was pleased that we were able to return the paintings as closely as possible to what we believed was their original appearance."

After the paintings were carefully conserved, they were ready to be framed. Spanierman selected a variety of frame styles based on examples in Lowy's extensive inventory of original and reproduction American modernist frames. "Benjamin's paintings were best suited to the modernist styles typical of frames made from the 1930s to 1950s," says Brad Shar, vice president and general manager of Lowy. "These simple frames with a homespun character using minimal carving and gilding were often made or designed by artists themselves, including Charles Prendergast, John Marin and Milton Avery, and complemented the expressive new look of these modern paintings. We created stylized, tailored versions of these frames specifically for Benjamin's paintings that evoked the frame aesthetic of that era."

Like mid 20th-century artist's frames, the reproductions have a naïve, hand-crafted look and are distinguished by a painterly distressed gold or silver leaf finish. "But we adjusted the finishes on Benjamin's frames to give them a slightly more high-style, high-quality look," says Brad. Spanierman was thrilled with the results. "From conservation to framing, Lowy gave Benjamin's paintings exactly the kind of sympathetic and skillful treatment they deserved. We could not have been more pleased with the interest they generated at the exhibition." ■

## LOWY ART EXHIBITION

Although Lowy has long been recognized as the country's leading art conservation and framing firm, few may know that many of its employees are also accomplished artists. Over the years, Lowy has showcased their artistic achievements at special exhibitions. This year, a dazzling array of employee artworks will be displayed in frames from Lowy's inventory at the firm's annual Christmas party at the Helen Mills Event Space in Chelsea, located at 137-139 W. 26th Street between 6th and 7th Avenues. Don't miss this opportunity to discover new talent and perhaps walk away with an inspired purchase!



Lowy conservation studio, 28 West End Avenue, ca 1989 by Arbit Blatas.

# LOWY

Fall 2008

# LOWY

223 East 80th Street  
New York, NY 10075  
212 - 861 - 8585