

## MOLDED BEAUTY

**Cast Ornament: Reviving the 19<sup>th</sup> Century at Lowy.** The use of molded ornamentation can be traced as far back as Hellenistic times (ca. 3rd century B.C.), when stucco was first employed. In the history of frames, molded ornaments are traced to 15th century Italy, when both the pastiglia and stucco techniques were used. Composition, or “compo,” as it is commonly known, was developed as an alternative to stucco and to supplement carved wood in producing both elaborate and simple ornamentation as early as the 17th century and was used occasionally into the 18th century. It appears on the main decorative areas of frames in the Directoire and Empire styles of the late 18th and early 19th centuries and by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century had replaced wooden ornamentation almost entirely.



**Above: Two 19th Century gilt composition frames**

As a consequence of its popularity, skilled carvers were called on to produce only the intricate reverse boxwood molds from which the compo moldings were cast, and the number of skilled carvers declined. Compo is usually made from a mixture of chalk or whiting, animal glue, linseed oil, and resin that is pressed into rigid molds. (It is sometimes mistakenly referred to as plaster.) Compo is pliable when mixed but dries harder than wood. Composition ornaments are usually applied to a wooden substrate and then gilded. Because the wood expands and contracts and composition does not, age and climatic changes can cause compo to form cracks and break off. Therefore, to preserve them, composition frames must be handled and stored with care. Composition frames reproduced many of the styles of earlier carved frames, capturing their opulence at much lower cost than hand carving. In addition to its being less expensive than wood ornamentation, the use of compo enabled artisans to execute exquisite detailing that would have been difficult or impossible to carve in wood, in a timely fashion. Framemakers soon began to make use of its possibilities to develop original and diverse styles. When those distinctive composition frames became identified with the work of individual artists and art movements, the frames took on a historical significance of their

own. Currently, the Lowy inventory includes more than a thousand examples of antique composition frames: early 19th century applied palmette-and-cornucopia ornaments on French Empire frames, scrolling foliate and anthemion ornaments on American frames, elaborate late 19<sup>th</sup> century deeply cast acanthus-and flower ornaments on Barbizon style frames, and the complex pierced grille patterns of Stanford White frames. In an effort to supplement the line of frames from all periods that Lowy currently reproduces, our skilled craftsmen are currently copying an extensive selection of composition frames from our inventory employing traditional 19th century tools and techniques. At Lowy we understand that preserving the integrity of reproduction frames means creating them with as much historical accuracy as possible. Please call for more information or to make an appointment to view our exciting new line of composition frames.