

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.



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

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 cut and joined moldings. After the nail holes were puttied, 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 stack of raw basswood frames prior to the gesso application.

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 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 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 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 multitasking, problem solving and, most important, developing time saving systems so that we could meet our deadline."