

RECREATING A CLASSIC FRAME DESIGN



Above: Patricia Watwood's "Ganymede", 2007

When a contemporary allegorical figure painting by the artist Patricia Watwood recently came to Lowy for framing, the new owner in Boston selected an early 20th century tabernacle frame design to complement the painting's classical style. He chose from among several digital images of various tabernacle frames supplied by the Lowy Scan system. But because the painting was so large (47 5/8" by 83 5/8"), it required a significantly enlarged version of Lowy's existing antique frame. The project was a welcome design challenge for R. Wayne Reynolds, Lowy's director of business development and new product design. The frame selected for design was a simplified, flatter, more modern version of earlier tabernacle frames traditionally used for Renaissance altarpieces—a style inspired by classical architecture that dates to the 15th century. Resembling the tabernacles or wall niches in churches where communion hosts were stored, tabernacle frames traditionally comprised a carved or ornamented entablature with a pediment at the top and pilasters (fluted columns) on each side over a predella (base). In the late 19th century, this style was revived with a new, more modern look, and used by artists such as the Pre-Raphaelites, who were unhappy with the mass-produced Victorian frames of the time. Lowy's frame is an example of this type of redefined Renaissance tabernacle frame. The first step in enlarging the frame design was to develop an exact profile drawing of the original antique frame, followed by another drawing scaled up to harmonize with the size and proportion of the painting. "In the second drawing, I doubled the size of the entablature and then enlarged all the other frame components accordingly," Wayne explains. "But when the drawing was matched to a cardboard template of the painting, which was not in house at the time, the proportions turned out to be too large." Wayne then went back to the drawing board and reduced the proportions of the frame in his profile. But he still wasn't finished. For better

visualization, he produced an additional shaded, dimensional drawing of the proposed frame depicting all its structural components. “Finally, we had a working drawing with the proper dimensions,” Wayne says. “This was required before we could hand-grind knives to make the molding, which was milled by the shaper.” In addition to the extensive design process required to create the new tabernacle frame, Lowy’s team faced another challenge when it came time to join the diverse frame components—the entablature, supporting side columns and molded base. “Unlike the more typical cove or cassetta frames, the top, bottom and sides of a tabernacle frame are different widths and shapes,” Wayne explains. “As a result, they do not have the same simple 45-degree miter joint. So the new frame required five miter cuts instead of the typical one cut at each corner. All in all, creating a tabernacle frame is far more painstaking, detailed and time-consuming.” Once the construction was completed, the new frame continued its journey through the traditional gilding process, with the application of gesso, clay bole and water gilding and burnishing. “Because the artist had gilded large areas in the background of her painting, we felt that it was important to create a perfect match using the same brand and karat gold leaf on the frame,” says Wayne. “Additionally, we applied very little patina on the frame, because the gold leaf in the painting was left relatively bright.” Both the design and construction of this tabernacle frame required an out-of-the-ordinary effort, and Lowy was ideally equipped to take on the challenge. “The real satisfaction came when the owner was thrilled with the result,” Wayne says.