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FRAMES CONSERVATION IN AUSTRALIA and GOCSIG: Reflections on the Past and Thoughts for the Future

Holly McGowan-Jackson

Abstract

In recent decades, picture frames have been increasingly recognised as works of value that should be conserved to the same standards as other cultural material. This has inspired the development of the field of frames conservation, and in 1996 the establishment of the Gilded Objects Conservation Special Interest Group of the AICCM. The field has advanced through the on-going work of specialists in the area, and numerous activities such as workshops, meetings, research and publications. Frame making is a closely aligned area and the provision of training in both frame conservation and traditional frame making crafts is an issue of major importance.

Background - The changing face of framing

Throughout history, frames original to paintings have been removed and replaced, for reasons such as changes in ownership, changing fashions in interior decoration, or damage to the frame. This practise reflects a general view of picture frames as items that are to some extent “expendable”, and that have limited intrinsic value, an attitude that was widespread in Australia, and elsewhere, until relatively recently. It appears as though this view particularly relates to frames of the eras most recently past; for example for much of the twentieth century, the ornate, gilded frames of the mid to late nineteenth century were considered old fashioned and were often undervalued and unappreciated.ⁱ And this perception holds true for the current era, when it can be difficult for us to feel appreciation for the linen-covered mounts and *Schlagmetall* gilded mouldings of the 1960s and 1970s.

In the past it was also very common for frames that had areas of localized damage due to wear and tear, such as abrasion to the gilding, to be treated by overall re-surfacing. Re-gilding of frames is part of a long tradition of picture frame repair and adaptation, undertaken by frame makers using the skills of their craft, and for many years was the standard approach for good quality restoration. However, re-surfacing, in the form of regilding or over-painting, not only obscures the original gilding, and the nuances of the original gilding scheme, but also reduces the definition of the ornamentation, and

therefore significantly compromises the original appearance of the frame. In addition to repair by framing specialists, there are disturbingly numerous examples of exceptionally poor quality previous restoration work on frames, including inferior gilding, ill-defined ornament replacements, and the widespread use of ubiquitous “bronze” paint, on occasions with an under-layer of red automotive lacquer, in “imitation” of red bole.ⁱⁱ Clearly, many of these repairs were undertaken without consideration of modern conservation principles.

Over the last couple of decades, in Australia and around the world, there has been a growing appreciation of the value of frames, alongside an increasing sophistication regarding the presentation of pictures. There is a growing recognition that frames are works of artistic, historic and cultural significance in their own right, and in relationship to the pictures that they house. Since the mid-1980s, numerous articles and publications on the history of picture frames have been produced, a number of which have had accompanying gallery exhibitions of frames. Naturally, the field of picture frame conservation has developed with this increased focus and interest, and indeed the work undertaken by conservators in the technical examination, documentation and treatment of frames has informed many of the major historical publications on the subject, internationally and in Australia.

Frame making and conservation

Frame conservation has its roots in the traditional crafts of frame making and repair, shaped by modern conservation ethics and methodology. Frame conservation is part of the broader conservation field of gilded, polychrome and wooden objects conservation, and has close links to furniture conservation.

Over-riding the field of picture frame conservation is the challenge of conserving objects that still have an active function, providing both protective encasements and visual borders for pictures. In this respect, picture frame conservation is necessarily at the more “interventive end” of the treatment spectrum as far as objects conservation is concerned, as both physical stability and visual integrity are key treatment goals. Consequently, in addition to knowledge of traditional materials and methods of construction, frame conservators benefit from the attainment of a certain level of technical proficiency in traditional frame crafts, to enable the recreation of missing ornament and surfaces. As outlined below, traditional techniques may be adapted for use with synthetic materials to meet reversibility/ re-treatability criteria.

A major aspect of work for frame conservation departments involves the manufacture of reproduction frames. With the prevalence of reframing in the past, there are many pictures in gallery collections housed in frames that are now considered inappropriate, both historically and aesthetically. At the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), much effort goes into reinstating the original presentation of pictures, through the manufacture of historically accurate frames.ⁱⁱⁱ This is a cooperative process between conservator, frame maker and curator. We have found that the best results are

achieved when an appropriate prototype frame is identified that can be copied in its entirety, or otherwise several prototypes that each provide details for different aspects of the frame, such as ornament or surface finish. The conservator brings to the process the skills of technical examination and documentation, as well as an exacting eye to the accuracy of form and finish. Ornate, gilded frames require a very high level of frame making skill to produce a convincing reproduction, and frame making or gilding specialists are often engaged for the major part of this work. To develop and maintain their skills, NGV conservators are encouraged to carry out aspects of frame manufacture, including ornamentation and gilding, and most commonly the final toning and distressing of the newly gilded surfaces, with reference to the actual picture.

Steps in the development of frames conservation in Australia

For many years, a number of the state art galleries employed framers, whose role often focussed on the manufacture of frames, in addition to frame repair and the re-housing of paintings. The role of framer continues to be a key position in several institutions.^{iv} In the late 1980s and 1990s, the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) and the NGV established specialist frame conservation studios with (eventually) two or more frame conservator positions, plus additional resources for frame making.^v This change in emphasis from making to conserving demonstrated a growing appreciation of the significance of frames as objects to be valued in their own right. These developments were followed by the first workshop in Australia on the application of modern conservation principles to the treatment of picture frames, and the formation of the Gilded Objects Conservation Special Interest Group (GOCSIG) of the AICCM, both of which occurred in 1996.

The workshop was presented by Professor Jonathan Thornton of Buffalo University USA, and hosted by the AGNSW. The approach and methodology advocated by Professor Thornton, who presented a second workshop in the region, in Wellington, New Zealand, in 2001, has very much shaped the profession here. Thornton has published widely on both traditional craft methods and the use of modern materials in frame conservation.^{vi} A feature of his approach is the use of synthetic resins, applied in other fields of conservation, for such purposes as barrier layers and as in-gilding media, to allow the removal of restoration additions without further damage to original surfaces.

During the workshop, Malgorzata Sawicki, Head of Frames Conservation at the AGNSW, proposed the formation of an AICCM Special Interest Group (SIG) for gilded objects. After four inspiring days of learning and interaction the workshop participants readily agreed, and Malgorzata was elected first GOCSIG coordinator. Obviously, the coverage of GOCSIG extends beyond picture frames to the wider field of gilded and polychrome objects conservation. In brief, the purpose of GOCSIG is to encourage communication amongst people working in the area, to promote research in the field, and to encourage the highest standards of examination, documentation and

treatment of these types of objects. At its inception, picture frame conservation was specified as an area of particular interest for GOCSIG, with one of the aims to encourage authenticity in the manufacture of reproduction frames.^{vii}

GOCSIG 1996-2008

Since 1996, GOCSIG has provided a focus of energy for the development of gilded objects conservation and specifically frames conservation in Australia. In this period, three people have served in the position of GOCSIG co-ordinator, Małgorzata Sawicki from 1996 to 2001, Holly McGowan-Jackson from 2001 until 2007, and most recently, MaryJo Lelyveld, NGV Frames and Furniture Conservator. In the past dozen years there have been seven meetings and symposia with speakers, and two workshops. Topics have included conservation treatment techniques and case studies, documentation methods, research on frame makers, research on historical materials and methods for frames and other gilded objects, reproduction frame making techniques, and the conservation of furniture finishes. In addition, eight editions of the group's newsletter, *GOCSIG News*, were produced from 1997-2001 (for a list of titles and authors see Appendix).

The first three meetings, in 1996, 1998 and 1999, were SIG sessions of AICCM National Conferences. One of the most well-attended GOCSIG events to date was the 2000 seminar *Compensation of Losses in Gilded Surfaces: In-gilding and In-painting Using Traditional and Modern Materials and Methods*, held the day preceding the 50th IIC Congress in Melbourne. The seminar attracted almost 50 participants, including 10 from overseas. In 2002, a stand-alone GOCSIG symposium was held, consisting of a day of presentations, and two half-day workshops on *The Chemical Patination of Schlag Metal on Picture Frames*, with around 30 participants.^{viii} The past three GOCSIG events have been held in conjunction with other SIG groups; in 2004 as part of the Paintings SIG symposium, in 2006 the workshop *Cleaning and Preserving Finishes on Furniture* was held in partnership with the Objects SIG, and of course this year, 2008, the symposium *Frames: past, present and future* precedes the Paintings SIG symposium.^{ix}

This is a fine record of activities, especially considering the group's relatively small size; in 1999 there were approximately 45 members, with this number growing to 65 members in 2006, at which time it had the third smallest membership of AICCM SIGs. As with other small SIGs, there are fewer people to spread the workload of organising and contributing to events and publications, and indeed to attend events, and for this reason there has been a move towards working in conjunction with other SIG groups. One of great strengths of GOCSIG is the way it has encouraged connection, bringing together a diverse group of specialists, from both public and private sectors, including conservators from various fields, framers and frame makers, art historians, artists and students. GOCSIG has encouraged the sharing of knowledge, and provided essential professional development opportunities.

Additionally, GOCSIG has raised the profile of gilded objects conservation in the Australian conservation community, and in the wider museum and arts sector.

Work in the field, research and publications

Over the last decade or so, conservators and framers have undertaken major work programmes in the conservation and reframing of collections. The on-going work of specialists in the area has contributed to the development of the field, in terms of the development of skills and knowledge, the improvement of work methods and practices, and the education of colleagues and the wider public about frames conservation.

Research and publication in the area include conservation, reframing and frame history topics. Around twenty articles and reports were published in *GOCSIG News*, including the written versions of ten presentations from the first four GOCSIG meetings (see Appendix for listing of titles and authors). *GOCSIG News* helped to keep members in touch and provided a forum for getting specialist information in print. However, it was found that the considerable time required to produce the newsletter could not be sustained given work pressures. In addition, the AICCM National Council requested that SIG information to be published more widely, to a greater AICCM readership. Subsequently, Suzanna Shaw's paper from the 2002 GOCSIG symposium, on the manufacture and use of gold leaf in Asia was published in *AICCM National Newsletter* as the lead article.^x

Malgorzata Sawicki has been a leading contributor to the field of gilded objects conservation with on-going research and publication, as well as teaching.^{xi} Over the last several years, she has undertaken extensive testing of non-traditional in-gilding techniques, particularly for the compensation of losses in matte water gilding. These studies form the subject of Malgorzata's PhD research with the University of Western Sydney-Nepean. In 1999, Malgorzata was named AICCM Conservator of the Year in recognition for her contribution to the field. Other papers in recent years include an article co-authored by Holly McGowan-Jackson on the reframing of a nineteenth-century crystoleum, and a paper by Barbara Dabrowa, Conservator-Frames, Art Gallery of NSW, outlining three frame treatment case studies at the Victoria and Albert Museum.^{xii}

Frame history studies are vital references for day-to-day frame conservation and reframing work. Publications providing technical data on individual frames, including materials and methods of construction and profile drawings, are particularly useful. The research and publications to date form a valuable body of knowledge about the history of Australian frames and frames in Australian collections. Paintings and frames conservators have made important contributions in this field, and it is on their work that this paper will focus. In 1997, a significant step forward was the publication of the first book in Australia devoted strictly to frames by Therese Mulford, formerly Paintings Conservator at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art

Gallery.^{xiii} This was followed in 1999 with release of the first volume of the *Melbourne Journal of Technical Studies*, dedicated to the topic of frames.^{xiv} The journal contains a collection of important articles from leading researchers of the time, including listings of historic frame makers in Sydney, Melbourne and Tasmania. In 2003, the AGNSW conservators Paula Dredge and Malgorzata Sawicki were among the authors of *S.A. Parker Framing Works*, a useful survey of frames by the company S.A. Parker.^{xv} Most recently, in 2007, John Payne, Senior Conservator of Paintings at the NGV, produced the major work *Framing the Nineteenth Century: Picture Frames 1837-1935*. Consisting of 288 pages, lavishly illustrated with colour photographs and line drawings.^{xvi} This book has set a new benchmark for frame publications.

There remain many opportunities for conservators to contribute to the area as frames offer a relatively new area of enquiry. Research topics in frames conservation include research into frame materials and methods of construction; factors of deterioration for frames; and materials and techniques used in frames conservation. In terms of frame history studies, further investigations into the work of specific frame makers would be most useful.

Key issues for the future

The provision of training in both frames conservation and traditional frame making crafts is a major issue for the profession. There are no specific training courses in Australia for frame conservation, or for the related areas of gilded and polychrome objects conservation, and furniture conservation. Consequently, there is often a scarcity of appropriately qualified candidates to fill conservator positions. Current personnel working in the area have either received specialized training overseas and/or on-the-job training in addition to qualifications in paintings or objects conservation. A positive step has been the introduction of the subject of frames and furniture conservation to second year objects conservation students in the masters program at the University of Melbourne, consisting of a two-hour laboratory visit and tutorial at the NGV, in 2006 and 2007. For staff working in the field, professional development opportunities occur infrequently through GOCSIG activities and other specialist courses, or require substantial funds to attend training programs in Europe or the USA.

Of equal concern is that there are only a small number of specialists highly trained in traditional methods of frame construction, ornamentation and finishing, and due to the relatively small commercial demand, this number is becoming fewer and fewer as the years go by. These skills are highly specialised and vital to the continued creation of exquisite, historically accurate reproduction frames with which to enhance pictures in collections throughout the nation.

In putting together this paper, the importance of publication for the development of the profession was highlighted. Obviously, finding time in our busy lives to prepare

papers is often a challenge. However, without publication, the progress of the profession is limited. The knowledge and experiences held in the minds of working professionals is incredibly valuable, but this value is increased many-fold when put into print, to be read and considered for years to come. There is still much education to be done in the arts and museum sector, and in the community at large, about the value of picture frames, particularly frames that are original to pictures, and those with original surfaces. Once again, publication can be an effective way of spreading this message.

Conclusion

Over the last dozen years there has been significant developments in the field of frames conservation in Australia. GOCSIG has provided a focus for developments, predominantly in terms of bringing people together for meetings and symposia. Specialists working in the field and related areas have contributed to the growth of the profession in their on-going work, and through presentations and publications on conservation, reframing and/or frame history topics. Ensuring the availability of skilled specialists in frames conservation and frame making in Australia into the future, and developing means of encouraging and facilitating research and publication in the field, remain key issues for GOCSIG and the profession as a whole.

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Author biography

Holly McGowan-Jackson graduated with a Bachelors degree, specializing in Objects Conservation, from University of Canberra in 1991. She studied cabinet making at night school and in 1994 moved to New York to undertake an Andrew W. Mellon fellowship in the furniture section of the Objects Conservation Department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Since 1996, Holly has worked in Frames and Furniture Conservation at the National Gallery of Victoria. She recently returned to work after a year of maternity leave.

ⁱ For example, at the NGV in the late 1930s and 1940s there was a program of modernisation of the Australian galleries that included the reframing of a considerable number of keys works. The original nineteenth-century frames were removed and replaced with standard “Whistlerian” style frames. John Payne (Op.cit at note xvi, p.9) cites a report on the process from the *Melbourne Herald*, June 21st 1941, that gives an insight into contemporary attitudes of style and its influence on framing decisions: “...the

director (Mr J.S. MacDonald)...is putting dull gold frames around pictures in the eastern bay...Already, eight paintings demonstrate the new system. All of them gain surprisingly from the change. The beach scene by Rupert Bunny and the landscape by Frederick McCubbin, which hang on the end wall, look twice the pictures they did...The mouldings are actually copied from the frame of Augustus John's 'Canadian Soldier' in the National Gallery of N.S.W. The lines are straight and simple, and there is none of the teaming ornament which makes some other frames in the Gallery so disturbing".

ii The term "bronze" paint is misleading to the actual composition, which is infact, a copper-zinc alloy (brass) powder, combined with a binder. Although 'bronze' paint has a bright appearance when first applied, the surface of darkens considerably over time with oxidation.

iii Reinstatement of the original presentation of pictures is the ideal; in practice we aim to achieve as close as possible replication of the first or an early framing of the picture, based on the evidence available.

iv Current gallery framers include Robert Zilli at the Queensland Art Gallery, Ray Prince at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Trevor Gillies at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, and David Butler at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Until 2007, John Hay worked as framer at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, at which time the position was made redundant in a restructure of the organization (*AICCM National Newsletter*, No. 103, June 2007, p.2). The National Gallery of Victoria does not currently have a framer on staff. Former NGV framers include (in reverse chronological order) Robin Murdoch, Matthew Adams, Peter Chaloupka, and Leo Wimmer, who subsequently worked as framer at the National Gallery of Australia.

v At the AGNSW, two frame conservator positions were created in 1987. At the NGV, an initial frame conservator position was established in 1996, followed by two additional frame conservator positions in 1999.

vi Thornton, J., "Compo: The History and Technology of 'Plastic' Compositions", *AIC Preprints*, 1985, pp.113-126.

Thornton, J., a, "Minding the Gap: Filling Losses in Gilded and Decorated Surfaces", *Gilding and Surface Decoration*, UKIC 1991 pp.12-17.

Thornton, J., "The Use of Nontraditional Gilding Methods and Materials in Conservation", *Gilded Wood*, 1991, pp.217-228.

Thornton, J., "All that Glitters is not Gold: Other Surfaces that Appear to be Gilded" in *Gilded Metal: History, Technology and Conservation*, Papers presented at the Gilded Metal Conference, St Paul, Archetype Publications Ltd., London, 2000.

Thornton, J. and Adair, W., *Applied Decoration for Historic Interiors: Preserving Composition Ornament*, Preservation Brief 34, The National Parks Service, Washington D.C. 1994.

vii Sawicki, M., *Gilded Objects Conservation Special Interest Group Aims and objectives*, unpublished document, 1996.

^{viii} The workshop *The Chemical Patination of Schlag Metal on Picture Frames* were presented by Graham Reynolds, of the frame making company Graham Reynolds Pty Ltd, Brisbane.

^{ix} The workshop *Cleaning and Preserving Finishes on Furniture* was presented by Arlen Heginbotham, Associate Conservator, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, U.S.A.

^x Shaw, S., “Gilding the Lotus: A Literature Search of the Manufacture and Use of Gold Leaf in Asia”, *AICCM National Newsletter*, 88, 2003, pp.3-7.

xi

Sawicki, M., “Picture frame conservation or...repairing?”, *AICCM Bulletin*, 20, No.2, 1995. pp.17-25.

Sawicki, M., “*The Visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon* by Edward Poynter, 1884-1890. The Frame Revisited”, *AICCM Bulletin, December*, 2000, pp.21-32.

Sawicki, M., “Research into non-traditional gilding techniques as a substitute for traditional matte water-gilding method”, *Preprints of the ICOM Committee for Conservation 13th Triennial Meeting, Rio de Janeiro 22-27 September, 2002*, ICOM-CC, vol.2, 2002, pp.524-531.

Sawicki, M., “From ‘Lady in Black’ to ‘Art Students’: the story behind changing a frame”, *AICCM Bulletin*, 30, Canberra 2007, pp.44-50.

Sawicki, M., “Practical implications of research into non-traditional in-gilding techniques: loss compensation in conservation of gilded objects”, *AICCM Bulletin*, 30, Canberra 2007, pp.63-69.

Malgorzata Sawicki has presented several short courses on picture frames conservation: at the Art Gallery of NSW in 1997, in Auckland, New Zealand, in 1998, and at the University of Canberra in 2003.

^{xii} Crombie, Isobel, Angeletta Leggio and Holly McGowan-Jackson, ‘Framing Nicholas Caire: *Fairy Scene at the Landslip, Black’s Spur c.1878*’, in *Art Bulletin of Victoria*, 42, 2002, pp.27-35.

Dabrowa, Barbara “The Conservation of Three Gilded Frames for the New Paintings Galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum”, *V&A Conservation Journal*, No.46, Spring 2004, pp.6-8.

^{xiii} An accompanying exhibition *Framework – Frames in Tasmania from 1830* was held at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, 13 July-22 September, 1997. See Mulford, T., *Tasmanian Framemakers 1830-1930 – a directory-*, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston. 1997.

^{xiv} *Melbourne Journal of Technical Studies in Art*, Payne, J., Galbally, A., Macnaughtan, J., and Mulford, T. (eds.) Vol. 1, Frames, The University of Melbourne Conservation Service, Melbourne, 1999.

^{xv} Dredge, P., Miller, S., Parker, L. and Sawicki, M. *S.A. Parker Framing Works*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. 2003.

^{xvi} Payne, J, *Framing the Nineteenth Century: Picture Frames 1837-1935*, Peleus Press and National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2007.

Appendix Listing of articles from GOCSIG News

Includes articles one page or more in length. * Indicates that the paper was presented at a GOCSIG meeting.

Title	Author
1997	
Volume 1, Issue 1	
Frame Conservation Documentation Methods*	Holly McGowan-Jackson
Research on Australian Frame Makers at the National Gallery of Victoria*	Holly McGowan-Jackson
Volume 1, Issue 2	
Framework – An Exhibition of Frames after 1830, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston	Therese Mulford
The Elusive Mr Cetta	Elizabeth Cant
Ethics in Frame Conservation	Malgorzata Sawicki
1998	
Volume 2, Issue 1	
New Frame Documentation, Frame Pertaining to John Webber Portrait of Captain James Cook	Matthew O'Rielly
Preserving Original Presentation – Frames for Prints and Watercolours	Malgorzata Sawicki
Volume 2, Issue 2	
What Did This Frame Belong To?	Raaf Ishak
My Visit to USA	Barbara Dabrowa
1999	
Volume 3, Issue 1	
Solvent Gels to the Rescue! – Conservation Treatments on Frames Using Carbopol Solvent Gels to Remove Overpaint and Varnish Layers*	Holly McGowan-Jackson
Gilded Objects in Vietnam	Malgorzata Sawicki
Volume 3, Issue 2	
The Deportment of Paintings: The History of Nineteenth Century Australian Picture Frames	Elizabeth Cant
Picture Frame Ornaments: A Mould making Methodology using Modern Materials*	David Butler
2000	
Volume 4, Issue 1 & 2	
Compensation of Losses on Gilded Surfaces – Review of Current Methods and Practices*	Malgorzata Sawicki
Compensation of Losses on Gilded Picture Frames and the National Gallery of Victoria*	Holly McGowan-Jackson
Conservation of a Gilt wood Frame using Traditional and Modern Methods*	Louise Clarkson
Reducing Handling Marks and Discoloured Size from Two Large Watergilded Neoclassical Frames*	Lisette Burgess
Experiments in Gilding on the Foundation of Microcrystalline and Paraflint Waxes*	Louise Bradley
Cowboys, Commercial Cleaners, and Colonial Cover-ups: Treatment Options for a Much Worked Over Mid-Nineteenth Century Picture Frame*	Matthew O'Reilly
2001	
Volume 5, Issue 1	
Translation of the text headed “Argento Meccato” in the conservation section of the book <i>La cornice fiorentina e senese – storia e tecniche di restauro</i>	Carolina Izzo (translation). Carlo and Stefania Martelli (Original text).
A note on the identification of white metals on picture frames	Holly McGowan-Jackson