

THE BONFOEY GALLERY

A TRADITION OF QUALITY

BY MICAH BROWN AND MARGARET LUPINE

MORE THAN 120 YEARS AGO, AN ENDURING CLEVELAND FRAMING ESTABLISHMENT WAS FOUNDED AS THE RESULT OF A SIMPLE BUT ELEGANT VALENTINE'S DAY GIFT

In the late 1800s, Asher D. Bonfoey arrived in Cleveland to play violin at the stately Euclid Avenue Opera House as a member of the prestigious Cleveland Philharmonic Orchestra. Little did he realize that a side interest would lead to the founding of an art gallery that still bears his name today. As a violinist, Bonfoey undoubtedly appreciated how a quality piece of spruce or maple could be carved into something that was both lovely and useful. That appreciation may have inspired him to craft an elegant frame to better display a silhouette valentine he had given to his wife, Della. In very little time, Bonfoey was receiving requests from friends to create matting and frames of the same quality and beauty that had enhanced his wife's gift.

In September 1893, the Bonfoeys officially opened an art and framing business to the public at the Mayer Marks Building on 268 Erie Street (currently East 9th). The company's growing staff created beautiful hand-crafted frames and mats for the notable families of Cleveland, including John D. Rockefeller, who subsequently introduced Henry Ford to the Bonfoey Company.

Ten years later, a fire ended the Bonfoeys' operations on Erie Street. They soon found a new location a block away—2069 East 4th Street. The fifth floor of the Buckeye Building (currently Ellastone) would house the Bonfoey Company for the next 60 years.

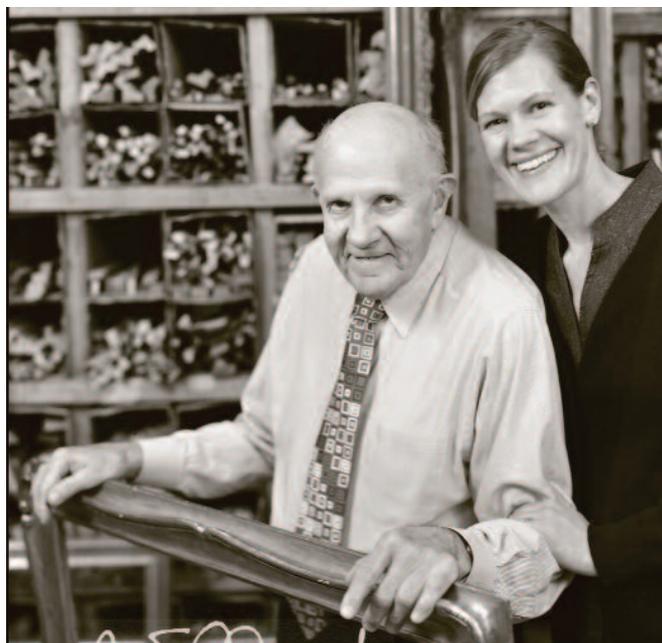


Photo courtesy of Herb Ascherman

Bonfoey Gallery owner Richard Moore and daughter Kate Zimmerer.

In 1928, George Ransom Moore, a 21-year-old revenue accountant at Ohio Bell, joined the Bonfoeys. Bonfoey soon began grooming Moore to be his successor and started the young apprentice in the front office as a salesperson. Eventually, Moore was assigned to work in every area of the company, learning all aspects of the business, including how to create frames. Along the way, Moore learned that framing artwork was not the only service offered by the Bonfoey Company. One of his first projects was to line coffins with silk and velvet fabric. He would also see “exotic” items, including an Eskimo totem pole, a wedding gown complete with a veil, and a pair of pink bloomers framed by the company's artisans.

A new era at Bonfoey began in 1939 with the retirement of Asher and Della Bonfoey and the ensuing transfer of company ownership to Moore. With an eye to the future, Moore hired his first sales representative, purchased a new delivery car, and continued to add to his list of clients. In early 1953, Moore decided to expand the business by displaying and selling prints and artwork furnished by London-based art dealers



The main gallery space at Bonfoey.

Frost and Reed, Ltd. In 1955, after a stint with the St. Louis Cardinals farm system, Moore's 21-year-old son Richard joined the company. Like his father, Richard was assigned to learn every aspect of the business, starting as a delivery boy.

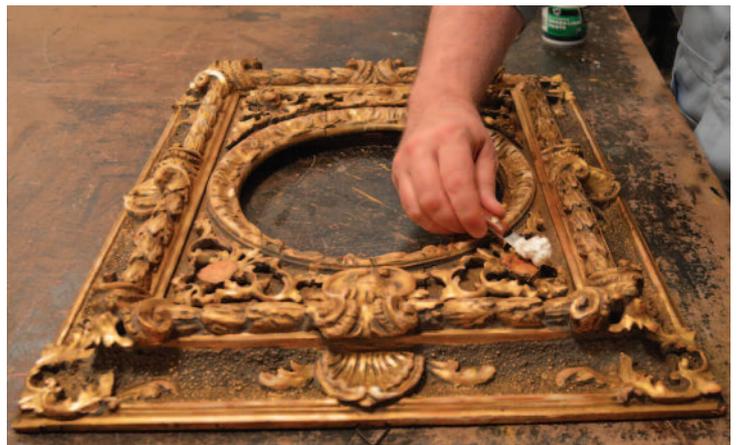
In 1961 a fire at a neighboring jewelry business forced the Bonfoey Company to relocate to 1710 Euclid Avenue. The fire chief recalled watching an older gentleman running into the building several times in an attempt to save some of the valuable pieces housed inside. Unfortunately, only four articles survived the fire—a safe, a cash register, a letter opener from the 1890s, and a stool—all quite likely having been dragged out by the older gentleman who ignored the fire chief. With the business completely gutted by the fire, the company not only lost the beautiful materials that made up its inventory, but it also lost invaluable pieces of company history, including business receipts from John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford. Kate (Moore) Zimmerer's future father-in-law was also at the fire with his fire company.

The new (and current) headquarters, like many structures built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has several nooks and crannies that reportedly made the space an ideal speakeasy during Prohibition. Sometimes, the projects were truly eccentric. Richard Moore recalls that in the 1960s, a man brought in his life's belongings and a picture of a crypt. He commissioned Bonfoey to create a 3'x5' crypt to hold all the man's personal possessions, including letters, clothes, and jewelry. The client loathed his family and had no intention of leaving them anything. Bonfoey's complied with the client's wishes, completing the crypt and packing the valuables inside, thus proving,

says Moore, that you *can* take it with you.

In 1965, an electrical short caused a fire at the 1710 location that disrupted several businesses, including Bonfoey. Rather than relocate, the Moores chose to repair the fire damage while continuing operations.

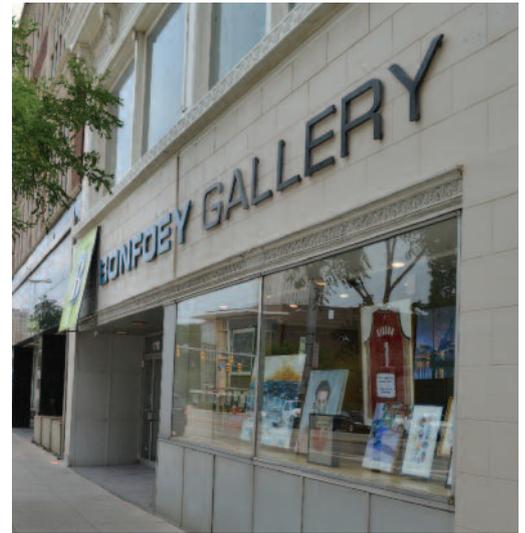
When Richard Moore was named company president in 1971, he initiated a new program that would add another important



Craig Summa repairs a handcarved gold leaf frame.



Chip M. Watzulik III joins a frame on the Cassese underpinner in the back-room at the gallery.



Bonfoey then (1964) and now (2015) at 1710 Euclid Avenue.

facet to the Bonfoey Company. Around 1972, Moore invited Richard Treaster, Cleveland's premier watercolorist, to exhibit his work at Bonfoey. The company had become a gallery, and the event made Bonfoey stand apart as the first commercial gallery to "present and promote Cleveland artists."

Today, as artists in their own right, company staff members offer impeccable credentials in art and art history. They apply their expertise in all sorts of areas, from

creating insurance or estate appraisals to hand-carving original frame designs to restoring fragile antique textiles and artwork.

For example, gilder Craig Summa, who has been with Bonfoey Gallery for 38 years, began his career working alongside Taylor Robertson. Working alongside Summa is Jim Bessner, who started 11 years later. As craftsmen, Summa and Bessner are responsible for the repair, restoration, and creation of nearly any type of frame imaginable.

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Kate Zimmerer, Richard Moore's youngest daughter, has been working with the Bonfoey Gallery since her early adult years. Some of her earliest memories are of her parents and grandparents taking her to art openings in downtown Cleveland. Zimmerer started with the Bonfoey Gallery much in the same way her father had: at the bottom, cleaning bathrooms and sweeping floors.

For more than 122 years, the success of Bonfoey has rested on the premise that quality matters. In an era of instant gratification, the Bonfoey Gallery continues to succeed where other galleries have failed by combining Old World craftsmanship with the needs of an ever-expanding clientele. Mats are still cut by hand, and, if needed, hand-covered in linen. Bonfoey's also offers black glass mats and hand-carved frames, often thought of as lost crafts.

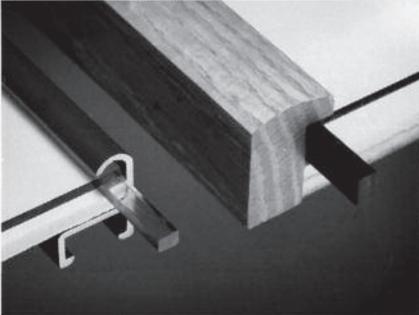
Today, the Bonfoey Gallery offers original works of art, custom framing, appraisals, art consultation, restoration, delivery/installation, and many other services. Looking back, it would have been impossible for Asher D. Bonfoey to predict what the small company he started with the humblest of beginnings would have grown into. And to think that it all sprang from a violinist's simple Valentine's Day gift. **PFM**

Thanks also go to Paul MacFarland for his assistance with this article.

Micah Brown is gallery assistant at Bonfoey Gallery; **Margaret Lupine** is author of *A Bonfoey History*. For more information about the Bonfoey Gallery, visit www.bonfoey.com or see the gallery in person at 1710 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, OH.

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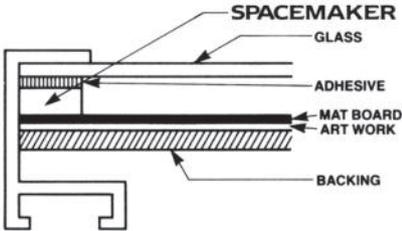
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