

Pouring Out the Past

Inspired by stories of everyday life, items of historical and personal significance from a World War II-era purse were used to win the fourth annual Tru Vue® Framing Competition

By Baer Charlton

The inspiration for my entry into the 2016 Tru Vue Framing Competition was the memory of my grandmother's "war purse," a black handbag she used to keep on her mantel. During one of my childhood visits to her home in San Diego, I asked her about it, and she poured the items in that handbag onto a table, much in the way the purse spills into the frame in the design.

That one question turned into an afternoon of hearing an important story in my grandmother's life, one that reflected the experience of many people living in that era. My grandmother spent hours explaining how the war had changed the lives not only of those on the front lines but also at home. Households were rationed two pounds of butter and ten pounds of sugar sold in one-pound bags each month. She and a neighbor pooled their gas ration stamps for a picnic at the beach—a rare, once-a-month pleasurable outing. Life was limited mostly to simple necessities. For example, the silver case featured in the competition piece was her rouge container, holding the only makeup she wore.

When World War II ended, and she had word that her two sons and daughter (my mother) were coming home, she removed her ID card and shut the purse. She closed the clasp on an era, but she did not forget. Whenever she had a bad day, she could come home, look at the purse on the mantel, and know—times could always be worse.

This image from my childhood made for a great concept for the competition theme, but there were some challenges to overcome in the completion. Three-dimensional design is always tricky.

The intent was to create an authentic representation of a woman's purse in the war-era 1940s, but what actu-



The role of the custom framer is to help tell people's stories. This shadowbox of items from a World War II-era purse represents the story of many who lived through those times.

ally fits in a purse could overwhelm the display area. Being selective in the items was important to convey the story while keeping it visually manageable. The purse was a Goodwill find, meant to be as similar as possible to the original. Although some items came from family members, a day in and out of a few antique galleries rounded out the collection and added authenticity to the story being remembered.

Choosing substitute items to complement and sometimes represent the originals is something I recommend to customers. For example, to tell a more complete story of a whittled item, I have suggested a customer buy an antique pocketknife or another related item. Sometimes, something as small as a few old horseshoe nails can make a story complete and help recreate the memory of an experience.

In the case of “War Over,” the goal was to create a piece that mimicked the experience of a purse spilling onto a tabletop. Each item needed to be both secure and visible. The solution was to use three layers of Tru Vue Optium Museum Acrylic® for the direct mounting of objects. Optium was chosen for its clean look in this application, having less of the residual shadowing that can occur with stacked use of Museum Glass. This created the depth needed to convey a sense of movement and provide a visible path to each



Without access to everything original that was in my grandmother's purse, a combination of items owned by her and from antique store finds were used to tell a more complete story.

AMPF's 1110 and Framers's Inventory's #900070, which stood on its back to provide the 2" depth. There was a wider moulding available, but the secret to a better shadowbox is constructing the least depth you can get away with. This allows the most light into what could otherwise end up looking more like a dark coffin.



Experimenting with several different layouts was necessary to make sure that each item would be visible and to achieve a natural flow.

item. Every woman takes one look at this piece and starts nodding; they have all “been there, done that” with their own purses.

The frames that hold the three layers of Optium were the first to be tackled. Then the base frame was built, and finally, the top frame was fitted onto the base. Once those were married, they were carved and remodeled to fit the purse. The base frame fits all the way into the purse to fill it out. There is a median wall married up to the top frame. Once the purse was attached to the frame, the frame was filled and waxed to match the finish on the purse.

The two mouldings are AMPF's 1110 and Framers's Inventory's #900070, which stood on its back to provide the 2" depth. There was a wider moulding available, but the secret to a better shadowbox is constructing the least depth you can get away with. This allows the most light into what could otherwise end up looking more like a dark coffin.

The purse is built into the frame so that the spill of the items under the glazing looks as natural as possible. The back (actually the front of the purse with the latch) was cut away after the final fitting to the frame. Because natural organic hide responds differently than the wood of the frame, a form of tetrachlorophenolacetate was used as the bonding agent. Over years and temperature changes it will remain plastic enough to withstand the micro-movement of the wood.

To restrict the wood from its usual seasonal movement, I soaked the raw portion of the frame in a stabilizing solution that hardens the wood at a cellular level. Possibly a little overkill, but better to err on the safe side up front than have it fail later.

Conforming to the contest requirements



Multiple pieces of Optium Museum Acrylic® were used to provide depth and allow the viewing to focus on the detail of each item.

that pieces be no more than 24”x24”, “War Over” measures at 14”x24”. But this relatively small piece contains a story of an era, one that is accessible through those who experienced it. My goal with this piece and every frame job that I do is to create framing that helps tell the story better— not overwhelm it. Not

only did it speak to the judges at the Tru Vue Framing Competition, but it also spoke to a buyer who has already purchased it. **PFM**

The fourth annual Tru Vue Framing Competition asked entrants to take everyday objects and transform them into pieces of art as part of its theme “Making the Ordinary Extraordinary.” Baer Charlton of Americana Frames in Portland, OR, won the Grand Prize of Best In Show: Judges’ Choice, for his entry, “War Over.”

Baer Charlton, CPF, is an internationally recognized picture framer, teacher, mentor, and writer who has been in the industry for more than 40 years. As owner of Americana Frame in Portland, OR, he applies his various talents to create custom framing that has earned him numerous awards and, even more important, many loyal customers. He takes his experience as a Pulitzer Prize-nominated author and a degreed social-anthropologist to develop work from the philosophy that everyone has a story.



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