

# *Replicating a French Regence Frame*

*By Roland Ostheim*

I am always up for a challenge when it comes to carving frames, and when one of our clients chose an eighteenth-century French Regence frame for their painting, I was very excited. I have carved over a thousand frames for Goldleaf Framemakers in my 20 years with the company. These classic French-style frames are always the most intricate and labor-intensive carves. Because of their elaborate design, they require a very sculptural approach compared to the simpler relief carvings of the American impressionist style, which comprise the majority of frames that we create.



● *Running the rough basswood boards through the planer.*

The Regence style was a period roughly around 1710-1733 before the death of Louis XIV and continued into the coming of age of Louis XV. The taste of these frames changed from the classical restraints of the Louis XIV period to lighter, freer, elegant designs. The profile was an ogee design that rose from convexity to concavity, which was an inversion from the previous period. The top rails were typically straight with a continuous decoration to emphasize the dominant corners and centers that would project over the rail and sight edge. Typically, there would be a sand panel as well to separate the sight edge from the elaborate body of the frame.

Due to the opulence of these frames, they were highly regarded and valued, as much as the art that would go in them. At the time both the artist and craftsmen were considered of the same importance. The carpenter would construct the rough body of the frame, usually from oak. The carver was commissioned from a handful of well-known artisans. The gesso recutter was of high importance; the recutting of the gesso, which was applied in many thin layers with a brush, was an integral part of the finished design. It was here that much of the sharpness of the carving would be accentuated. This is where crosshatching, leaf veins, punchwork, and incised lines and designs would be added. After the gesso was surfaced to smooth perfection, the bole (clay) would be applied and the frame would be water gilded.



● Getting the shape of the moulding and adding the blocks to corners and centers.

## The Journey from Wood to Gilded Frame

The first step in the process is acquiring the wood to make the body of the frame. The wood of choice these days is basswood. It is in the hardwood family, but is softer and has a tight and consistent grain pattern that lends itself to smooth carving. Additionally, it has a stable surface for the application of gesso and water gilding.

When selecting the lumber for carving, I looked for wood that has a nice, straight grain pattern and no knots. After selecting the wood, I brought it back to the shop and ran it through our planer to the exact dimension of the moulding. To get the shape of the profile, I started by making cuts on the table saw and then finished the shaping by hand with chisels and hand planes. Because the corners and centers needed more material to carve, I removed part of those areas and added thicker blocks of wood by implanting them into the moulding.

Once the frame was all joined up and the glue was dry, it was time to start laying out the design of the carve. I started with the corners and centers first, then followed with the ribbon and reed carving on the top rail and the acanthus and tongue design on the nose of the frame to tie it all in.

Lastly, I carved the cabochon back edge. All the carves on this type of frame (site, top rail, and back edge) are a pretty straightforward layout, but the corners and centers are much more involved and obviously took the most amount of time. With the corners and centers, I drew out the design and carved into the wood to achieve the basic shape. Then I drew more detail and continued the carve. This process took many steps to get to the final details in the design.

## Gesso and Clay

After many days of carving—about six weeks—the frame was ready for gesso preparation. This process requires sanding out all the facets from the carving gouges (strokes) and getting the carve to look smooth and fluid. Once this was achieved, I used a rabbit skin glue and water mixture that I brushed over the entire surface of the frame to further stabilize it for better adhesion to the multiple coats of gesso.

In our shop, we have the luxury of spray guns and a booth in which we can apply the gesso as opposed to the original method of painstakingly brushing multiple coats. I applied about eight coats of gesso to make sure the surface was thick enough for recutting and incising. Because of the



● A series showing the different stages of hand-carving. This frame is 5" wide with a rabbet size of 48" x 62" (overall dimensions: 58" x 72").



● A view of the frame after multiple coats of gesso were applied.

detail in this carve, I had to be careful to apply even coats and not flood the carve with gesso.

We usually spray gesso at the end of the day and allow it to dry overnight. Once the gesso completely dries, it is ready for surfacing, recutting, and incising. The gesso is important in that it creates a smooth surface for the gold to transform the frame from a wooden object into what appears to be a solid gold object. Gesso surfacing is one of the most important and painstaking procedures in the art of gilding. If you have a beautifully smooth surface of gesso, it will translate on through the gilding process, and vice versa; if you have a bad surface, the imperfections will be evident as you apply the clay and gold. There was no sandpaper in the eighteenth century, so artisans would rely on linen cloth or fine abrasive powders such as rottenstone, pumice, and loose sand. On heavily carved frames, I forgo sandpaper as well and use loose cotton and clean rags moistened with water. I can get a very smooth surface this way without losing the shape of the carve, and there is no gesso dust.

After the gesso was added, much of the edges of the carve became softened, so I went back in with gesso recutting tools to sharpen everything up. At this point the frame was ready for incising and for the sand to be applied to the frieze. I added veins and other details to the leaves, crosshatching on the lower parts of the corners and centers, and a repeated straight scratch on the nose of the frame. A mixture of rabbit skin glue and water was applied to the frieze and sand was sprinkled on evenly.

Applying the clay, or bole, is the next step after the gesso is



● After the gesso was added, it was recut to ensure the details could clearly be seen. Then it was smoothed to perfection.

surfaced to perfection. The clay is very important for the process of water gilding and the foundation for the gold leaf in that it provides color, the burnish, and is what the gold actually adheres to. Clay comes in many colors and varies depending on the style and period of the frame. Many of the frames of this period were a deep orange or red color, and over time this color would show through as the frame was handled and the gold was rubbed away. For this frame I used a base coat of yellow with red highlights. The yellow base coat works well to help hide any breaks in the gold which will happen in the lower areas of the carve, and the red highlights will be key in replicating the patina of an eighteenth-century frame.

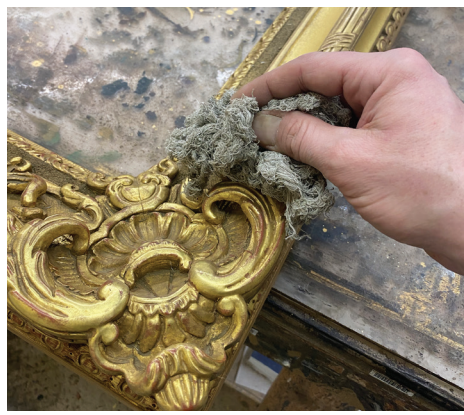
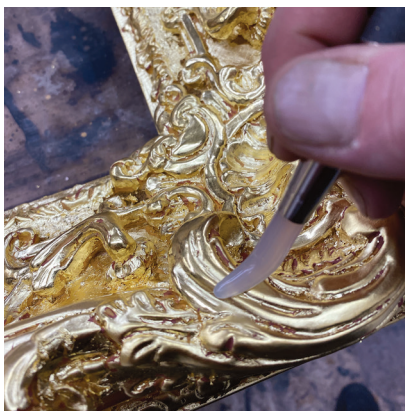
As with the gesso, I used our trusty spray booth to apply the yellow clay. I sprayed many even coats until the color was opaque and no signs of the white gesso remained. The red clay was then applied by brush selectively on the higher parts of the carve and the areas that would typically be worn over time. After the clay was dry, I surfaced the whole frame with oil-free 0000 Liberon steel wool to give the clay a nice sheen.



● Applying the gold leaf with a gilder's tip.

## Gilding and Finishing

It was time to gild! I used 22K gold leaf on this frame for its color and finish. First, I mixed up some gilder's liquor, which is a mixture of purified water and isopropyl alcohol. This activated the glue in the clay. As it dried, the gold adhered and took the shape of the surface of the frame. This was brushed on liberally with a gilder's mop, and I pulled the gold straight out of the book with a gilder's tip and



● Left: The carvings are burnished to add more shine and sparkle to the frame. Right: Adding the final touches to the patina of the frame.

onto the frame. This particular profile was very tricky because of its size, ornamentation, and concave panel, so I had to get into a nice rhythm in laying the leaf. When there is good rhythm in your gilding, the frame will look very clean and less patching will be necessary. But there is always some patching, and this frame was no exception. Once the initial gilding was finished and dry, I went in and cut smaller pieces of gold and applied them to the places where the leaf broke and to the hard-to-reach areas in and around some of the carved areas.

It is pretty gratifying when your frame is gilded after all the work that was put into it. The next thing to do is put the finishing touches on it to make it look authentic. To really make the carvings pop, I went in and burnished



*Due to the opulence of French Regence-style frames, they were highly regarded and valued as much as the artwork inside them.*

certain areas. This process utilized an agate, a polished stone, that creates an almost mirrorlike surface. These are generally the higher areas of the carves and molding, and are typically the areas that are rubbed through to reveal the clay highlights. Once all the selected areas are burnished, that is exactly what I did by using cotton and a mixture of pumice stone and denatured alcohol. This step requires finesse or you could rub too much gold off and have to patch again!



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Satisfied with the rub of the frame, it was time to seal it with shellac. We have different recipes here at Goldleaf for our frames, and of course I went with a French-toned shellac. The shellac was sprayed on evenly to create a barrier to protect the gold from the patina I would subsequently apply.

The patina is the finishing touch to any period replication. I distressed the frame by adding some small fake cracks using a razor blade to replicate aging and shrinking gesso. Then a wash of mixed casein paints was liberally applied and then pulled back with a cotton rag. Once the wash was thoroughly dry, I went back in with a wet rag to clean off the tops of the carving to bring back the brilliance of the burnished areas. This left the wash in the lower areas to create contrast and dynamics to the whole frame. To create even more pop to those burnished areas, I used a liquid finishing wax to give more sheen. Finally, I used a mixture of rottenstone and pumice to create dust to apply to the entire frame. The surface was buffed again with a clean cotton rag, and that was that.

This 58" x 72" frame took about 10 weeks to produce. This would not have been possible without our great crew at Goldleaf to support and maintain production on other orders. During this time, we produced around 150 frames while I was able to concentrate on just this one! **PFM**



**Roland Ostheim**

Roland Ostheim lives and works in Santa Fe, NM. He is a master craftsman at Goldleaf Framemakers of Santa Fe. He started his picture framing career at a small shop in Cleveland, OH in 1995. Since 2002 he has been honing his skills at Goldleaf Framemakers in all aspects of frame making, including carving, gilding, finishing, and archival presentation. Roland has a unique integrity for preserving the traditional techniques and craftsmanship of handmade objects in a machine-driven world.

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