An 18th-Century Frame

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Fig. 1 Maurice Quentin de La Tour (1704–1788), Marie-Sophie de Courcillon, Duchesse de Pecquigny, Princesse de Rohan (1713–1756), married to (1) Charles François d’Albert d’Ailly, (2) Hercule Mériadec de Rohan, c. 1740. Pastel on paper, 58.2 x 47.8 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMB 2650. With the soiled and damaged frame.
The Nationalmuseum owns a substantial number of 18th-century frames, many of which are still on the painting they were originally made for. Inventories, collection catalogues and accounts confirm that frames were an important, and expensive, aspect of art collections in the 18th century. They were made in the workshops of famous, skilled ornamental carvers, in styles that closely matched the current interior trends. For pastels, moreover, frames were essential, due to the sensitive surface; a pastel work could not leave the artist’s studio without the protection of glass – and the requisite frame.

When the Nationalmuseum bought Maurice Quentin de La Tour’s portrait of Marie-Sophie de Courcillon, Princesse de Rohan, yet another 18th century frame was added to the Museum’s collection. The pastel has been remounted and it is unclear whether the current frame is the original one (see article on p. 203). It is unquestionably from the same period, however, and an
excellent example of the kind used for pastel portraits of this stature. The basic design, a concave moulding, is embellished with typical rococo, mussel-like cartouches, from which tendril ornaments as well as the curved outer edges of the frame seem to grow.

The frame is made of oak in several sections, joined together with animal glue. On acquisition the frame had extensive damages (Fig. 1). Longitudinal cracks had appeared where the glue had come unstuck. The ornaments were also loose in places, and some of the decorative elements had thus been lost. Moreover, there was some mechanical damage. Some details were missing on all four sides of the frame, and their appearance had to be reconstructed by studying other frames from the same period. In addition, the bronzing was of a later date, and the patina was worn and soiled.

The damages and changes conveyed an articulate history of the original materials and design of the frame. With the aid of pictures, films and descriptions, we have carefully documented its condition at the outset, our work process and the materials used, and the information that could be deduced from the frame in its original state has thus been preserved.²

The standard procedure for replacing missing ornaments is that the Nationalmuseum’s frame conservation studio makes replicas by taking casts from preserved details on the same frame.³ However, since such large sections of ornamentation were gone, it was decided that the missing pieces should be carved in wood. This method also meant that the frame would be closer technically and materially to its original condition. The task was assigned to the carver and conservator Felix Ginzburg. Other measures were performed at the Nationalmuseum’s studio by the Museum’s frame conservator and gilder, Ellinor Lindeborg Moberg, with assistance from Rebecka Hjukström, studio apprentice.

The project began in the conservation studio, where dirt and the later bronzing and patina were removed with a gentle alkaline gel solvent. Animal glue was used to attach loose parts and to

Fig. 5 The frame gilded with gold leaf.

Fig. 6 The frame after integrating the newly-gilded areas with the existing.
fasten and secure the original gilding. The frame was then handed over to Felix Ginzburg, who carved replicas of the missing parts out of limewood. This material is more malleable than oak, and the difference in appearance makes it easier to distinguish the old and new frame parts from each other. The techniques and tools used today are more or less the same as those used by 18th-century ornamental carvers. The process, however, was somewhat different, since it involved working on a finished object rather than performing all the stages from scratch. The wood pieces to be used as replacements are first given a basic shape (Figs. 2–3). Using various irons, the ornaments are carved out, minutely adjusting them to the place in the frame where the replicated part will be fitted. To assist the work, the contours are continuously redrawn on the wood as the details are carved out.

When Felix Ginzburg had completed his task, the frame was passed on to the Nationalmuseum’s gilder. First, the wood surfaces were primed with a layer of glue. After drying for a day, a gesso made of chalk, glue, water and alcohol was applied to the new parts and damaged surfaces. Three layers, with one day to dry in between, correspond to the characteristic thin layer found in 18th-century frames. In the next phase, the gesso is processed – details and lines are touched up, and the decorative effects of the frame can be further enhanced by engraving shallow patterns into parts of the surface, in this case in the form of grids and hatching. When the gesso processing was completed, the surfaces that were to be gilded were prepared with warm glue tinted with gold ochre, and then a base of Armenian bole – a mixture of finely ground clay and animal glue or gelatine – was applied to the areas where the gilding was to be polished (Fig. 4). The gilding thus involved using a typical feature of Rococo frames, namely the contrast between matte and polished gold, to emphasise and heighten the appearance of the details. When the bole had dried it was brushed with a burnisher. The prepared surface was then softened with a mixture of alcohol and water, and the shaped pieces of gold leaf were applied with a squirrel hair gilder’s tip. The parts to be shiny were polished with an agate stone. All handling of the gold leaf required the utmost care, since it is exceedingly thin – a one krona coin rolled into gold leaf would be sufficient to gild an entire life-sized equestrian statue.

The frame still has sections of its original gilding, and these were not re-gilded. The final task was to blend and integrate the newly-gilded areas with the existing, older gilt surfaces. Coloured wax and varnish glue were used for this.

The overall impression of the finished frame was thereby achieved at different levels: the structure and shape of the underlying, carved ornaments, the touching up and patterning of the gesso, and, finally, creating contrasts between the gilt sections. Compared to what the 18th-century frame looked like when it was new, however, the effect is somewhat subdued (Fig. 6).

Notes:
2. Video clips will be published on the Nationalmuseum’s website.
3. The following description of the restoration process is based on information from Felix Ginzburg and Ellinor Lindeborg Moberg.
4. For 18th-century techniques, see Mitchell and Roberts 1996, pp. 201–202.