

Mass



When a client is looking for high-quality frames at a modest price, polymer reproductions of classic frames finished in metal leaf can be the winning ticket.

Artist and gilder Bob Kulicke once said, “The best way to succeed at the [frame] reproduction business is to constantly develop new designs and make them cheaper than anyone else so the competition will come to you to buy the product.”

This kind of work is often supported offshore by government-subsidized industry. But for American companies who rely on a free market to survive, there are still opportunities to get to the market early with a new product and ways to develop new looks so the competition can't catch up. Take, for example, a traditional hand-carved and gilded frame. Many designers work for hotels, condominium projects, and other clients who are interested in the look of quality frames but find that the real thing is financially unfeasible. The result is a need



Top: A wood-simulated polymer reproduction of a Stanford White tabernacle frame makes an outstanding frame for a large mirror. Bottom: The reproduced frame shows a great amount of the detail, closely resembling the original.



The polymer is poured into a mold at the Foamtech factory. Each mold can be used to produce 60 to 75 reproduction frames each before wearing down.

Producing Classic Frames

By William B. Adair

for an alternate product, one that offers the look of traditional period frame but has a more affordable price.

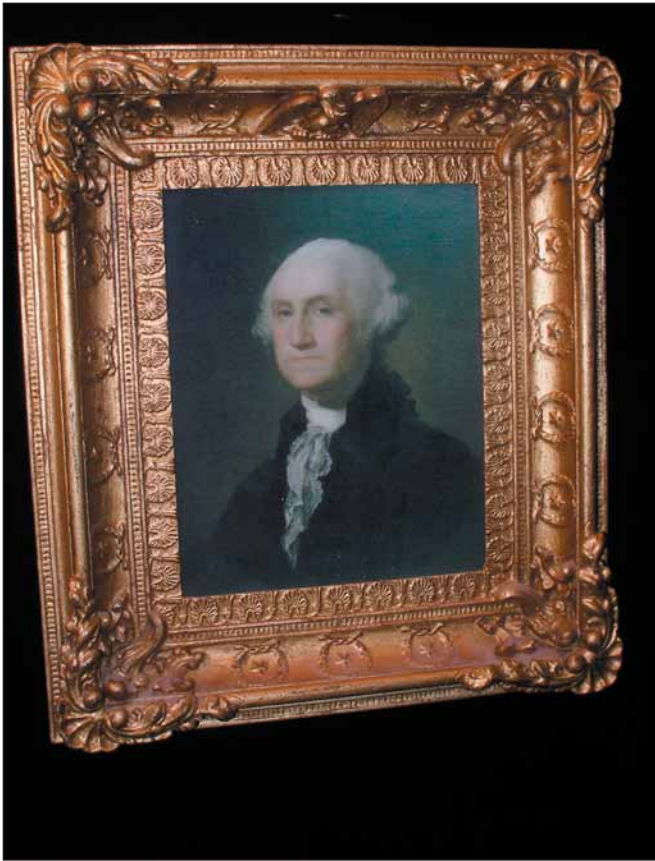
One such product is a reproduction of a classic frame made with wood-simulated polymer (WSP). This material is stable for long-term use and can be produced at affordable prices. It can also be finished in a variety of materials, just like real wood. Typically, WSP frames are produced in runs of 60 to 75 units before the mold breaks down. It is somewhat like a limited edition etching, because the surface breaks down from the constant pressure of the molding process. When that happens, you move on to another design or you make a new mold of the same design, depending on the size and specifications of the order.

For the last few years we at Gold Leaf Studios have been working with Foamtech to produce quality WSP frames, primarily for mirrors. You can also use WSP classic frames for artwork; you just have to find a separate source of reproduced art.

The prime market for these frames are designers, especially those



These reproduced classic Predella frames holding the author's works were modified to have a variety of surface finishes—virtually anything except water gilding.



Classic frame reproductions can be used to frame art prints in a way that looks very authentic.



Resin and metal leaf reproduction antique frames, such as this Kulicke "Baroque-style" design, can have a very appealing decorative effect, as shown in this mirror frame.

who act as a specifiers for design projects. They typically are outfitting hotels or condominium lobbies. For example, one of our clients was a designer who came in with a circular mirror and wanted it modified. We did, and ended up making 30 to use at every elevator stop in a hotel.

Clients who are interested in WSP frames are at a pretty high level. They want something that looks great, but they want it as cheap as possible. If they want a product that is unique and economical, then their only real option is a WSP frame. We also get artists who want multiples and don't want to spend a lot of money. So we design a frame and have it copied. The clients end up with 60 or 70 frames that they finish themselves.

WSP frames offer a huge savings for these types of clients. While the actual cost depends a lot on the complexity and the design of the frame, what you get

for your money is impressive. For example, the price on an original period gilded frame we have on hand may be \$7,800. The cost for a copy of that frame in wood would be around \$3,500. If you were to create a run of 60 or so WSP copies, each finished frame would be in the \$30 to \$50 range, depending on how many you need. That's

why this product makes a lot of sense when you have a job in which you need 60 up to a few hundred quality reproduction frames.

We work with model maker and manufacturer Kent Herman, owner of Foamtech Industries. Kent has been in the furniture business for 20 years and bought Foamtech seven years ago to provide architectural moldings for the building industry. He also began making frames, mirrors, and other furnishings that don't warp, crack, swell, or shrink like wood does during shipment. Foamtech is also the only company I know of in the U.S. that makes WSP reproductions.

The first step in reproducing a classic frame is to make a mold of it. The

"One very good reason to reproduce frames using this process is that you can use shapes you can't normally make by cutting and joining, especially ovals and sculptural frames."



Left: The Predella design is modifiable top and bottom so that the reproductions can be kept as-is or cut to change the design without having to make a new mold.



Polymer frame reproductions can be given hand finishes that closely resemble the patina of a real wood frame from the past.

simplest way is to mount the frame on a board and pour rubber around it to form a mold. After this mold is done, the WSP is poured into it to create the reproduction frame.

Pouring rubber directly onto an antique frame to obtain an exact replica, hairline cracks and all, is a risky prospect that could damage the delicate surface of an antique. An alternative is to make a mold by scanning the original frame. That way, nothing touches the surface. The whole frame is scanned and a three-dimensional map is made of the original. This 3D file is then sent to a fabricator, who has two options: to extrude the WSP and build it up with a resin or to have it carved. If the design is complicated, the frame is extruded. If the design is simple, the frame would be carved. Either way, all the work is done mechanically.

This scanning technology was developed first for NASA and is now available for commercial use. Michael Raphael of Direct Dimensions, which developed the scanning system for frames, says that “no harm will come to the surface because the surface isn’t touched; it’s scanned in 3-D.”

Typically, a metal leaf finish is then put on a WSP frame. But it lends itself to other finishes, such as faux marble, oil gilding, faux tortoise shell, and marbled surfaces. It’s just that water gilding doesn’t lend itself very well to WSP. Any decorative finish can put on with a brush or sprayed on by hand. The result can look a lot like an actual gilded frame depending on the skill of the finisher. In many

cases, the frame’s basic metal leaf finish is modified at the factory based on custom orders. This helps keep the price down while adding an individualized look.

These are complete frames that have finished corners and complicated designs. While you could change the dimensions from the original, you’d have to modify the mold to do that and that’s really not worth the money. These are fixed-size frames, and the designs are usually chosen because they are complicated. These really treated a lot like making reproduction sculptures. So far, we have made WSP frames ranging in size from a few inches to 3’x4’. They usually need to be backed with wood because they can warp over a period of time if you don’t add a good structural component. When you order a run of these frames, the turnaround time is typically a month to six weeks, depending on how busy the factory is. These frames, especially the larger pieces, arrive finished, with a mirror, and boxed.

Another reason to go to a WSP frame is to reproduce classic oval frames, something that is very cost prohibitive to do in wood. For WSP reproduction, frame shapes don’t really matter. In fact, one very good reason for reproducing frames using this process is that you can use shapes you can’t normally make by cutting and joining, especially ovals and sculptural frames.

The framing market is varied, and the frames that Foamtech has created for us at Gold Leaf have sold to clients who want quality design.

“A mold of a delicate antique can be made by scanning a frame. This ‘three-dimensional’ map of the original is then sent to a fabricator to make a physical mold.”



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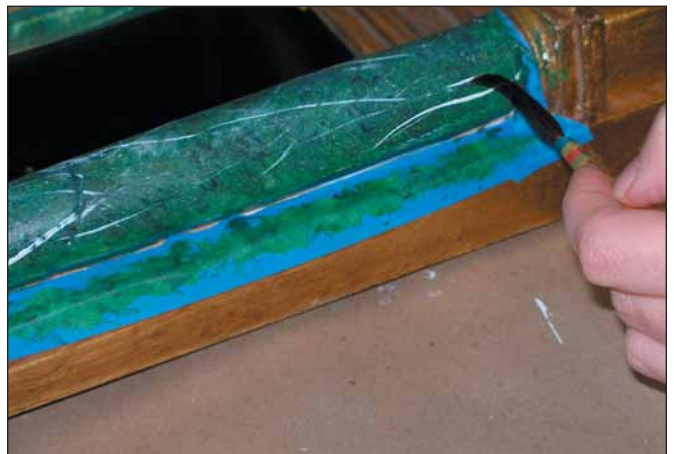
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There is a design fee and a project development fee, plus mold-making and production costs, depending on the finish desired. You do have to have a classic frame in hand to get started. When you find one you like, you can have it reproduced. A lot of designers find the frames they want to reproduce in antiques stores or at estate sales. You can also call us and provide the parameters, and we can find a frame for you. Other framers who carry period frames or antiques stores can do the same.

Economics plays a big part in the decision to reproduce exclusive designs on a limited basis. When you're stumped and need multiples, WSP can be the answer for producing multiples that are cheap and offer something more than standard wood moulding. By the time your competitors get a hold of that classic design you've had reproduced, you can already be working on your next frame idea for another client. ■



Studio designer and artisan Jennifer Janicki applies a marbled acrylic finish to the columns of a small tabernacle mirror frame.



William B. Adair received his B.F.A. in studio art from the University of Maryland and worked for 10 years at the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery as a museum conservator specializing in the treatment of picture frames. In 1982 he formed his own company, Gold Leaf Studios, for making frames and conservation of gilded antiques. Over the years his clients have included the U.S. Department of State and the National Park Service. He is the founder of the International Institute for Frame Study, a nonprofit archive dedicated to collecting and disseminating information on the history of frames.