

A Presidential Frame Treatment: Monroe's Lafayette

Elizabeth Robson
The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation



Above: Portrait of the Marquis de Lafayette (Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-Roch-Gilbert du Motier de Lafayette) (1757-1834)

Background

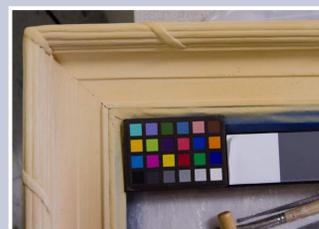
The portrait of Marquis de Lafayette owned by Colonial Williamsburg is attributed to Samuel Lovett Waldo, a 19th century American portraitist who worked primarily in New York City. It is said to have an inscription on the reverse of the canvas reading: "General Lafayette AE [age] 67 painted for President James Monroe by S.L. Waldo 1824" which is now covered by a lining. Based on the timing, it follows that the portrait would have been painted during Lafayette's triumphant return to and thirteen month tour of the U.S. in 1824-25, during which he visited all 24 states. He was able to meet with many of his old friends with whom he had fought in the Revolutionary War, including then President James Monroe. He also visited the tomb of George Washington and celebrated the anniversary of the British surrender at Yorktown. Many American portraits of him date to this period, as well as songs, medallions, and other souvenirs of his visit. It is possible that this was Waldo's attempt to win a commission from the City of New York to paint a large portrait of Lafayette when he visited, which Samuel Morris won and completed. Lafayette's friendship with Monroe traces back to the 1777 Battle of Brandywine Creek, when French-speaking Monroe watched after the wounded Lafayette. Monroe later served as the American ambassador to France and helped Lafayette's wife attain a passport and travel with their daughters to where the general was being held captive by the Austrians while their son escaped to the U.S. Lafayette addresses himself to Monroe in an 1828 letter as "your earliest, your best, and your most obligated friend." It is clear that such a portrait, if indeed owned by James Monroe, would have been a dear possession as a remembrance of his French ally. However this may have simply been an honorific inscription added by the artist or a subsequent owner. Future imaging of the writing or de-lining of the canvas may help resolve some questions.



Above: Overall view of frame before treatment
Insert: Detail of top proper right corner and profile



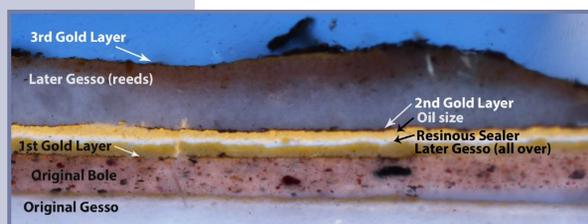
Above: Upper proper right corner; bronze paint removed from left side, top right cleaned to original material, top left still untouched



Above far left: Removal of tape following spraying of white PVOH gesso on outer courses
Above middle left: Yellow PVOH gesso on outer courses
Above middle right: Gilding begun and gesso reshaped and sealed
Above far right: New gold with water gilding on ribbons and taenia; oil gilding on reeds, cove, flat, and sight edge



Above: Sample from sight edge in visible light, 400x magnification
Below: Same sample in UV light, 400x magnification



Treatment

The frame had undergone at least 3 campaigns of gilding in its life, all of which had been variously worn down and re-built with new gesso and gold leaf or bronze paint (see below). In order to recover the original definition of the frame decoration, particularly in the outer reed course, the newer layers were removed wherever possible to reveal the underlying original gold, bole, or gesso that remained.

To remove the bronze oil paint, many different cleaning methods were tested, but the best result was given by an 18% solution of benzyl alcohol in Pemulen® gel. This was agitated and left on the surface for about 2 minutes and then cleared with water. The solvent exposure for the conservator is much less using this method than with other cleaning methods which were tested, such as commercial stripper or Carbopol gels. The yellow layer underneath the most recent gilding was discovered to be a protein-based glue, which required a weak acid to cut through it. Citric acid was applied and scrubbed on the yellow layer, then neutralized with a buffer solution of 10% TEA (adjusted to pH 8 with citric acid). The remaining layers were easily removed mechanically with wooden skewers and Plexiglass® scrapers, being careful to leave original material where possible. Overall, the original material was left in poor condition, but the gold that was uncovered helped in the selection of the proper karat of gold leaf with which to re-gild.

The next step was to re-define the prominent reed and ribbon decoration using Araldite AV 1253. After sealing the frame by spraying Paraloid™ B-67 over the entire front surface, the sight edge was covered with tape (see below) and a thin mixture of whitening, kaolin, and LMW polyvinyl alcohol in water was sprayed onto the rest of the frame. A thicker mixture of gesso and PVOH was used to fill and smooth the reeds and ribbons while the other courses were lightly sanded. Then the frame, minus the sight edge, was sprayed with a similar mixture with the addition of yellow ochre pigment.

The majority of the frame was sealed with shellac and oil gilt while the taenia course and ribbons were coated with red-orange clay bole and water gilded, to retain the burnished look they would have likely had originally. The build-up of layers mimics the original gilding scheme, though using modern techniques and materials at times.

Finally, the new gold surface was patinated to complement the condition of the painting by spraying pigmented Regalrez™ 1126 Hydrocarbon Resin. The original artistic intent has been regained in this fine frame, likely original to the painting, and will join the conserved painting at the Painters and Paintings in the American South: Part II exhibition at the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum in 2017.



Near right: Proper left lower corner before treatment

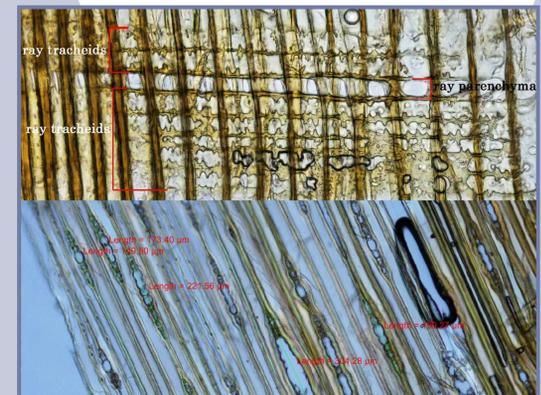


Far right: Proper left lower corner after treatment

Wood Identification

To determine the origin of the frame, wood samples were taken from a damaged area on the reverse, representative of all the wood in the frame. The radial samples revealed dentate ray tracheids (long thin longitudinal cells) and window-like crossfield pitting of the ray parenchyma (rarer longitudinal cells) indicating that the wood is either *Pinus resinosa* (Red pine) or *Pinus sylvestris* (Scots pine). In the tangential view, the average length of the fusiform rays, or horizontal resin canals made up the tracheids and parenchyma, was calculated to be less than 280 microns, so the wood must be *Pinus resinosa*. The other would have an average length greater than 340 microns. The result of 192 microns proves that the wood is American and the frame was likely made in the U.S., though woods were also exported to Great Britain in the period.

Below: Radial sample in 100x magnification and tangential sample in 100x magnification



Analysis of Samples

At least 3 layers of gold were found on the frame, as seen in the images to the left. The frame was originally covered all over with white gesso, and then 2 preparatory layers (either gesso or bole) that appear to be yellow-orange and pink/red were added. Finally the frame was water gilt, which is known due to the lack of oil size below the original gold in any sample. These orange and pink prep layers were found on every course of the frame, indicating a united gilding scheme overall. It is possible that the ribbons and/or reeds and taenia courses were burnished while the rest was left matte, which was a popular frame style at the time. The next addition of gold includes white gesso (the depth of which varies greatly making it almost non-existent in the samples to the left), a bright yellow preparatory layer, a fluorescing resin, and an oil size beneath gold leaf. Finally, some areas of the frame were re-gilt a third time, with more gesso and a red-orange bole. The outermost edge was over-painted with bronze oil paint as well. This analysis helped inform our treatment of the frame and determine its original appearance and therefore effect on the viewer.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Chris Swan, for his help and guidance with this treatment. Also thanks to Laura Barry for her input on the frame and painting history. Finally thank you to AIC and CAC for the opportunity to present this poster at the 44th Annual Meeting/42nd Annual Conference in Mon-



Literature Referenced

- American Council of Learned Societies. *American National Biography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Dorge, Valerie, ed. *Solvent Gels for the Cleaning of Works of Art: the Residue Question*. Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 2004.
- Hoadley, R. Bruce. *Identifying Wood: Accurate Results with Simple Tools*. Newtown, CT: Taunton Press, 1990.
- Ravenel, Nancie. "Pemulen® TR-2: An Emulsifying Agent with Promise." Accessed 15 Oct 2015. <<http://cool.conservation-us.org/waac/wn/w32/w32-3/w32-304.pdf>>.
- Stavroudis, Chris. "The Modular Cleaning Program." Accessed 15 Oct 2015. <<http://cool.conservation-us.org/byauth/stavroudis/mcp/>>.
- Unger, Harlow Giles. *Lafayette*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2002.
- Wolbers, Richard. *Cleaning Painted Surfaces: Aqueous Methods*. London: Archetype Publications, 2000.