

Conserving Silver-leaf Mirrors in a *surtout de table* at Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum

Sarah Barack,¹ Jessica Walthew,¹ Drew Anderson²

baracks@si.edu, walthewj@si.edu ¹ Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum ² Metropolitan Museum of Art



Background: The Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum (CHSDM) recently conserved a spectacular ormolu *surtout de table* (ca. 1805) by Pierre-Philippe Thomire (1751-1843), chaser-engraver to Napoleon. This elaborate dining-table centerpiece consists of five silver-leaf mirrored trays, which together measure over ten feet long, each set in an ormolu frame. Over 50 gilt-brass elements comprising tiered servers with cut-glass bowls and other decorative elements sit atop the mirrors. While the flat glass supports for the mirrors were in excellent condition, examination of the object revealed that the reflective backings were unstable, requiring extensive conservation treatment.



Surtout de table 1991-31-1-a/ww; Photo: Matt Flynn© Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

Condition: Large areas of the metal leaf had cleaved from the glass and these islands of lifted leaf were adhered to the cardstock backboard in many locations. The silver still in contact with the support appeared crazed and oxidized, resulting in diminished reflectance. The edges of many flakes exhibited dark tarnish. Not surprisingly, the pattern of loss generally reflected the shape of the wood frame holding the glass and frames together, such that where air and moisture circulated more freely, more leaf had detached; this condition created an unintended cross-like appearance on the mirror.



Captions, from left: end panel before treatment; detail, corner, before removal from frame; recto, end panel before treatment and after removal from the frame; frame

Treatment: Glass specialist Drew Anderson devised a treatment protocol, using a system that had been successfully implemented during a large-scale verre églomisé treatment project at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The leaf was consolidated with a 25% solution of Regalrez 1094 in odorless spirits; this step required multiple applications to confirm the leaf was successfully re-adhered to the glass. This initial stabilization was followed by an application of microcrystalline wax in order to fill air pockets between the glass and lifted leaf. Loss compensation was achieved by layering semi-transparent reflective film and acid-free green paper between the glass support and the frame of the tray; this approach created completely detached, reversible “fills.” The paper successfully shifted the hue of the film to better mimic the yellowish/green tint of the remaining original, aged silver.



Captions, from left: end panel during treatment, note wax rectangles; detail, heating the wax; detail, applying consolidant; detail after treatment with compensation



Summary: The treatment allowed the object to be safely displayed in the galleries, and the reversible fills ensured that the restoration could be easily removed. A didactic video station in the gallery featured the entirety of the project, which also included treatment of the gilt brass and a related technical study. This outreach introduced the museum public to conservation and how professionals care for historic collections.

A Special Thank You to:

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