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De-Composing Composition

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Jeffrey Husar, the president of Husar Picture Frame Company in Chicago, stands beside a frame that was fully ornamented using composition and is now ready to go on to the finishing process.

Every good recipe demands a few necessary ingredients, just as every good song calls for meaningful lyrics, and every good photograph yearns for great light. Good, here, is as relative as any other adjective of degree. But to every chef, musician or visual artist, a characteristic staple of production tends to be utilized with loyal conviction. In the world of frame making, one such staple demands particular attention: composition ornament, or as it commonly referred to, compo.

Composition is a putty-like substance that is used by many frame makers to create ornamentation without using more labor-intensive means such as hand carving. A man-made material that is made soft, or plastic, by applying heat, compo belongs to a class of materials known as thermoplastics and is valued for the changing qualities that result by varying temperature. When warm, composition is soft and pliable. It can be handled easily and pressed into molds. However, as it cools, it becomes firm, though still flexible, and once completely dry, the material is rigid, hard and durable.

This combination of characteristics allows for the creation of elaborately designed, long-lasting ornaments. From its conception, compo proved a welcome alternative to more traditional means of frame ornamentation. Easy to work with and cost-efficient, the use of compo resulted in frames that appeared hand-carved, and pleasantly deceiving the eye of the viewer. In time, it became a staple in producing richly ornamented picture frames and in restoring old frames as well.

Although a precise history of composition doesn't exist, a general understanding of its various uses through time can be traced. Centuries ago, the Egyptians used composition to adorn mummy cases and furniture. Years later, as early as the 14th century, Italians experimented with mixtures called pastiglias to embellish picture frames and wooden boxes. During the Renaissance, compo became more extensively used as various recipes were contested and debated by writers of the time. Wood and marble dust, pigments, eggs, sheep's wool and gypsum were only a handful of the ingredients that found their way into recipes.

Frames ornamented with composition appear hand-carved but are less costly to produce and require less intensive labor than actual hand-carved frames.

However, it wasn't until the fervor of the Neoclassical Age in Europe during the late 18th and early 19th centuries that composition was universally recognized as a new means of ornamentation for architectural interiors, pictures frames and other canvases. Ornament manufacturers in both Europe (especially England) and the United States increased drastically in number as a result of the vast potential of the material.

Around the same time, numerous technical publications written by craftsmen circulated recipes and methods to the broader public, both de-mystifying the

A composition ornament is carefully applied to the curved edges of a picture frame.

craft and broadening its use.
With the rise of industrialization and the desire to reduce production costs, compo grew increasingly valuable due to its mass-manufacturing capabilities.

Starting in the late 19th Century and into the early 20th century, the Arts and Crafts Movement encouraged a return to more traditional methods of art making and veered away from the notion of mass-manufacturing therefore momentarily stalling the use of compo in picture framing. However, World Wars I and II caused a decrease in craftsmen as many were called into duty. This forced the need for a new means of production to be instated. Composition became more popular than ever.

Even today, after repeated ups and downs in demand and numerous experimental changes in recipes and methods, the production and use of compo has remained surprisingly constant. Though valued for its low cost, composition is still scrupulously made and meticulously applied by hand.

How To Make Compo

The standard recipe for compo is a mixture of chalk, glue, water, rosins and linseed oil, which gives compo its characteristic light-to-medium brown color. To make the material, amber-colored pine rosin is heated in linseed oil until both are melted and thoroughly mixed together. Rosin is an organic material extracted from the wood of various shrubs and trees. Linseed oil is a yellowish oil originating from flaxseed and commonly used in varnishes, paints and printing ink. These two ingredients are blended together until a smooth, caramel-like consistency results.

Then, in a separate container, animal glue and water are heated until they form a thick, uniform solution. The two components are then stirred together until well blended. At this point, chalk is added, and the mixture is stirred until the previously smooth caramel-like consistency becomes thicker, like that of fudge. The particular type of chalk varies between companies. Following a family recipe dating to 1934, Husar Picture Frame Company in Chicago uses English Cliffstone whiting, obtained from the Cliffs of Dover and imported by barge in 50-pound bags. Many sources, however, are available and granted differing preference by various manufacturers.

Once prepared, compo is formed into loaves, which can be stored for four to six weeks.

Once the proper consistency is reached, the mixture should resemble a kind of dough and is then formed into small, circular loaves and stored. In such a form, the composition can be stored for four to six weeks. However, it can be stored frozen for up to a year. Here, another advantage of composition is revealed: it can be made in bulk, which is both time and cost efficient. Husar Picture Frame Company, for example, makes up to 200 pounds of composition every four to six weeks.

During production, the amber-colored pine rosin and linseed oil are heated and stirred

During the molding stage, a loaf of compo is warmed in a steamer for a few hours in order to soften the material. Meanwhile, the chosen mold (typically made from copper, pitch or boxwood) is prepared with a thin coat of oil, such as kerosene, and is sometimes dusted with talcum powder as well. A piece of compo is then sliced from the loaf, kneaded and rolled into an Italian sausage-type link. The link is hand-pressed loosely into the mold (with excess compo left above the mold's surface), after which a damp board is placed on top, sandwiching the compo in between the two blocks.

A screw press is then used to squeeze the mold and board together, which forces the compo into the finest details of the mold. Once pressed, the sandwich is removed from the press and flipped over.

The mold is lifted straight up, and the compo is left stuck to the board. By cooling to room temperature, the compo reaches a tough, rubbery consistency and is ready to be trimmed off the board with a thin blade. Having reached this rubbery thermoplastic state, the compo can be manipulated while still maintaining the original design. The excess composition is then removed from the board and returned to the steamer for reuse.
At this point, the composition ornaments can be used immediately or stored and used at a later date.

together until a smooth, caramel-like consistency is obtained.

Using The Compo

To adhere an ornament, it is first steamed on a piece of canvas that is placed over a steam tank. This once again softens the ornament and, because of the gluing component, makes the compo sticky enough to self-bond to the frame or other chosen surface without the need for additional adhesive. In this state, the composition ornament can easily be bent around curved surfaces or the corner of a frame without cracking or breaking. It can even be stretched or compressed without damaging the initial design. Smaller ornaments can be combined into larger, more complex designs, and bits of one design can be sliced off and added to another design. Finally, after the composition ornament is placed on the wooden frame, it is set aside to cool and harden. The ornamented frame is then ready to go on to the finishing process. It can be polished with a damp cloth, stained, painted, varnished or gilded.

A thin blade is used to trim the composition ornament from the board and remove the excess compo.

Although the recipe for composition is basic, variations and adaptations allow for unique, personal touches and are encouraged. The possibilities of using composition are also endless, which provides a new vocabulary for wood carvers and frame makers alike. And while the characteristics of a “good” frame will surely be debated for some time, composition will undoubtedly remain a staple of production for countless picture framers for years to come.

Kate Husar is the daughter of Jeffrey Husar, president of Husar Picture Frame Company in Chicago. Husar Picture Frame Company was established in 1934 by Ervin A. Husar. Now in its third generation, Husar remains family owned and operated, maintaining the high standards of old-world quality for which it is renowned. Kate Husar recently graduated from the University of California, San Diego with a bachelor’s degree in visual arts media.

(all images courtesy of Kate Husar)

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