

A PORTRAIT AND ITS FRAME: TWO FASCINATING STORIES

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Marjorie Merriweather Post purchased a wooden rectangular frame carved in high relief, topped by an eagle with outspread wings resting on a cluster of leaves and flowers, decorated with large clusters of leaves, fruits, flowers, and fish from auction in 1948.¹ (Fig. 1 Originally enclosing a mirror, Post used the frame in the first floor library at Hillwood to decorate a half-length portrait of her mother, Ella Post, painted in 1913 by the American artist, Alphaeus Philemon Cole (acc. no. 51.150). Prior to the purchase of the frame, Post hung the portrait of her mother in a rectangular gilt frame in the stairwell at The Boulders, followed the dining room at Tregaron. (Fig. 2)

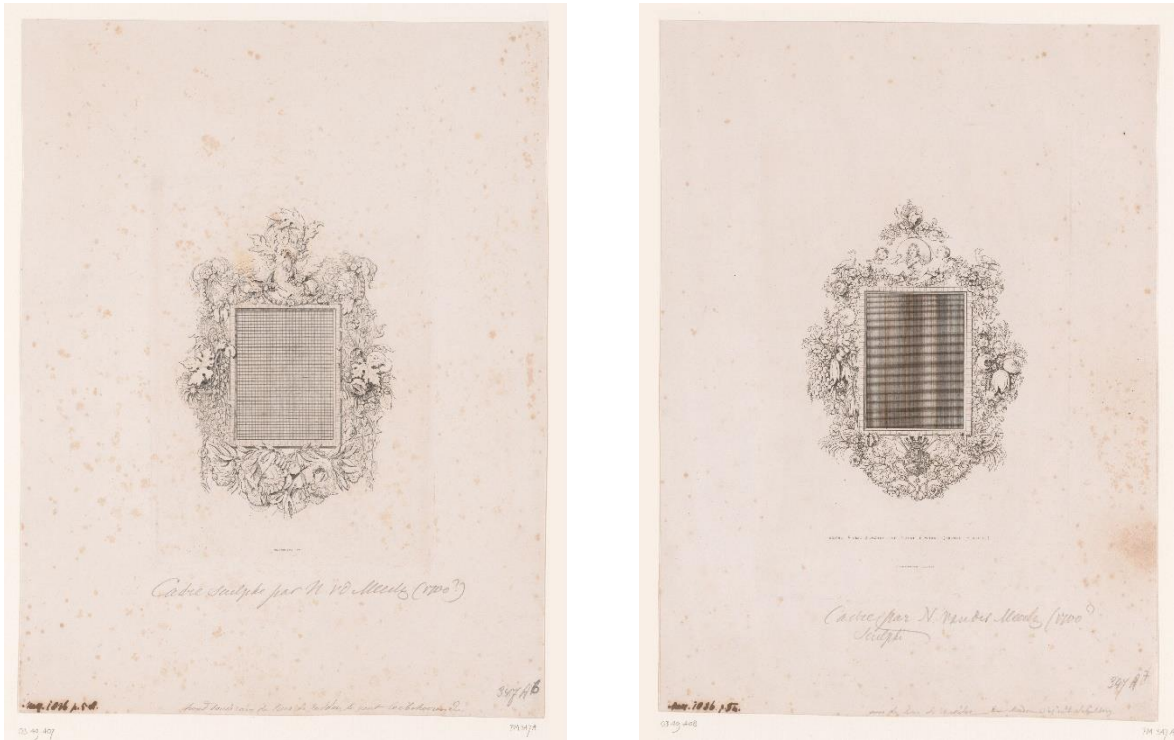


Figure 1. Two mirror frames, carved by N. van der Meulen, 1700, printed by Charles Onghena, 1836, etching. Rijksmuseum

Grinling Gibbons became the most celebrated woodcarver of all times, developing an extraordinary style of realistic foliage carving in limewood. Born in Rotterdam to English parents, he trained in the Netherlands and, as many artists and craftsmen of his generation, moved to England, where he embarked on a spectacular career working on some of England's most iconic buildings, including Windsor Castle, Hampton Court Palace, and St. Paul's Cathedral. He was also commissioned by King Charles II and James II to produce wood panels as diplomatic gifts. Gibbons' unpainted and unvarnished limewood carvings were designed to hang against oak paneling, creating a dramatic contrast between dark oak and light lime which worked to heighten the effect of their abundance, depth, and incredible detail.

¹ See "Chippendale & Other Georgian Furniture, Silver, Porcelain, Rugs belonging to Marsden J. Perry," Parke-Bernet Galleries, May 7, 1948, lot 167. At the time of the sale, the frame was credited to Grinling Gibbons. Prior to Post's purchase, the frame was previously in the collection of Marsden J. Perry (1850-1935), a financier and banker of New York and Rhode Island who collected furniture, porcelain, American Colonial art, and Shakespeare.



Figure 2. Frame with portrait of Ella Letitia Merriweather Post, attributed to Laurens van der Meulen (Flemish, active in England, 1679-1687), probably Belgium, about 1700, limewood. Bequest of Marjorie Merriweather Post, 1973 (34.2)

Many experienced Flemish sculptors worked in Gibbons's London workshop as collaborators. While these artists produced various commissions, their specific contributions are not always identifiable. Among Gibbons's associates, Flemish sculptor, painter, and frame-maker, Laurens Vandermeulen (1643-1719), worked with Gibbons between 1679-1687 before returning to Belgium. A group of Vandermeulen's lost carvings of mirror frames, highly distinctive in style with naturalistic detail similar in design to Hillwood's frame, are known from prints conserved in the Rijksmuseum today. (Fig. 3) Hillwood's frame, long associated with Grinling Gibbons (1648-1721), can therefore firmly be attributed to the work of Laurens Vandermeulen and was likely made in Belgium.



Figure 3. Above: Stairwell at The Boulders, before 1917.
Below: Tregaron dining room, before 1948. Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens Archives

A future publication by Ada de Wit entitled "Grinling Gibbons and the Golden Age of Woodcarving, The Netherlands and Britain, 1650-1700" (Bepols, 2022) will soon shed new light on Gibbons's origin and style, as well as the work of his contemporaries and collaborators in the Netherlands and Britain. As part of the year-long Gibbons tercentenary celebrations, the upcoming conference "Grinling Gibbons and the Story of Carving" will be held at the Victoria & Albert Museum on June 24-25, 2022. For more information, visit: [V&A · Grinling Gibbons And The Story Of Carving \(vam.ac.uk\)](https://vam.ac.uk)

Additional information about Hillwood's frame may hopefully reveal itself as a result of this new research.

ELLA M. POST AND HER EARLY 1910S PORTRAIT DRESS

In fashion history, society portraits from esteemed artists are a valuable resource for those studying formal apparel and jewelry of the elite. Sitters chose interestingly embellished, colorful garments.² Often, the garment worn by the sitter has been lost to time, but we are fortunate at Hillwood for Marjorie Merriweather Post's great reverence for history, preservation, and design. In this instance, the 1908-1912 evening gown worn by Ella Letitia Merriweather Post (1853-1912) in the posthumously completed portrait is among the five garments that belonged to Post's mother in Hillwood's collection today. Although we know very little of Ella Post in comparison to her former husband and Post's father, CW Post (1854-1913), the intricately beaded gown faithfully represented in Philemon Cole's portrait sheds a bit of light on its mysterious sitter. (Fig.4)



Figure 4. Portrait of Ella Letitia Merriweather Post, Alphaeus Philemon Cole, (American, 1876–1988), New York, 1913. Oil on canvas. Bequest of Marjorie Merriweather Post, 1973 (51.150)

The reserved expression on Ella Post's face in the portrait confirms frequent descriptions of her seriousness, but the colorful beadwork and fashion forward-silhouette of the gown worn for the sitting aligns with accounts of her penchant for travel, art, and other cultural expressions. Although the gown features a modest, high collar of the previous era, the layered, asymmetrical drape of multicolored silk satins (pale blue, vivid teal) on the bodice paired with the higher, empire-style waistline and narrower skirt suggest that Ella Post was aware of contemporary fashion and artistic influences. (Fig.5)

² For more on portrait garments, see de la Pera Celada et al. *Sorolla and Fashion* (Madrid: Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2018).



Figure 5. Views of the front and back bodice of Ella Post's portrait gown, DV McGrath, (Probably American, active 1900s) New York ca. 1908-1912, silk satin, taffeta, crepe, cotton lace and net, metallic embroidery, glass and jet beads. Bequest of Marjorie Merriweather Post, 1973 (48.4.1-2)

The gown projects Ella Post's Gilded Age sensibility for decorum with its machine-made embroidered lace collar (held straight at the neck with four interior bones) and décolletage. The interior bodice of black silk taffeta also features nine bones placed strategically under the bust line, and the addition of silk striped taffeta dress shields stitched into the underarms to absorb the wearer's perspiration. Dress shields were common beginning around 1840, when they were typically made of leather! (Fig.6)



Figure 6. Interior bodice view. Note the 9 bones visible, and one of the dress shield in the upper right of the photo. The strip of grosgrain at the bottom is the *petersham* bearing the dressmaker's label.

A dressmaker's label appears on the *petersham*, or piece of grosgrain ribbon that fastens at the interior waist. The label, now faded, identifies the gown's maker as DV McGrath at 141 East 50th Street, New York. Two additional gowns from the Edwardian period bearing the McGrath label (including the gown Marjorie

Post wore for her eldest daughter, Adelaide Post Close's 1908 christening) exist. This dressmaker is undergoing further research.

This confection of sumptuous layers: multicolored silk satins, sheer beaded panels, and lace elements are all indicative of a fashionable gown from the mid-late Edwardian period. Influences, including archeological discoveries, the rise of Diaghilev's vibrant *Ballets Russes* dance troupe and an antiquity revival all informed different elements of the gown. (Fig 7)



Figure 7. Panel of sheer silk crepe suspended from the front waist with heavy glass and jet beading in floral, vegetal, and geometric motifs.

Jet beads, popular as mourning ornamentation during the preceding Victorian era, festoon the silk panels at the front and back of the skirt, along with brightly colored metallic toned beads in bands of floral and vegetal motifs at the sleeves and bodice. Unfortunately, this beautiful ornamentation is also the inherent vice of the dress. At the manufacturing point, these glass and jet beads must have had an unstable alkaline product added. Other minerals, such as pyrite, were occasionally added to create the iridescent sheen. Overtime and perhaps due to a period of less-than ideal storage in the mansion's basement during Hillwood's nascent years as an institution, the jet and glass beads began to irreversibly stain the silk satin underskirt.³ (Fig. 8 and 9)

Ella Post's portrait gown from around 1908-1912 is an excellent example of the transition from formal Victorian to pre-war modernity in women's fashionable dress. Ongoing research into its dressmaker, DV McGrath of New York has the potential to further reveal stories of the American fashion industry. Despite its "glass bead disease," the object could serve as an interesting conservation study. (Fig.10)

³ To learn more about glass bead disease, please see the Minnesota Historical Society's report titled "Glass Beads" accessible here: https://www.mnhs.org/preserve/conservation/connectingmn/docs_pdfs/repurposed%20book-glass%20beads.pdf

A scholarly study of glass bead disease: O'Hern, Robin and McHugh, Kelly "Red, Blue, and Wounds all over: Evaluating Condition Change and Cleaning of Glass Disease" *Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume 21*, 2014. American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Work (AIC)

<http://resources.culturalheritage.org/osg-postprints/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2015/03/osg021-09.pdf>



Figure 8. Detail shot of fringed panel damage to the back of the gown's skirt. The "bleached" imprint is irreversible and likely due to unstable materials added at the manufacturing point of the beads combined with a period of storage in a humid, moist environment.



Figure 9. Similar damage visible on a wool knit sweater beaded with jet in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute ([C.I.45.79.51](#))



Figure 10. Polaroid of gown from the last time it was installed on a form, 1980s-1990s. The gown is no longer stable enough for installation. At a minimum, tears and breaks in the sleeves would need to be stabilized by a textile conservator. The imprints left by the reactive beads are irreversible.