

# QUIT & A ROLL IT



**BORDER PATROL**

Framer Eli Wilner with Frederic Church's *Heart of the Andes* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City. Right: Picasso's *Nude, Green Leaves, and Bust*, which Wilner also framed.

ART

## Gilt Complex

An artist with a golden touch makes the craft of framing shine.

BY MARK ROZZO

**B**ACK IN THE EARLY 1980s, A TWENTYSOMETHING NEW YORKER named Eli Wilner got into the habit of cruising up and down Route 28 in the Catskills in his girlfriend's Toyota Celica, eyes peeled for antiques shops, flea markets, the occasional estate sale. He had always had a thing for painting and sculpture, but what really stoked his passion—and the hunt—was barely even considered art: picture frames, particularly 19th-century American ones, tricked out in gold leaf and carved with the kind of exacting craftsmanship that had all but vanished in the modern age. In the 1800s, upstate New York had been thick with artists, and Wilner developed a

flair for sniffing out their half-forgotten artifacts. When the Celica's hatchback was full, he'd head back down to New York City with a dusty cargo that others with less imagination might write off as junk.

"They were just castoffs," Wilner, now 56, says, every bit as pumped up by the idea as he was 30 years ago. "I could get them for 25 bucks apiece!" Today those frames will likely cost you a good bit more, and Eli Wilner & Company, the business Wilner started in 1983, has evolved into the most revered source for antique frames and master reproductions in the United States. (The girlfriend with the Celica, Barbara, eventually became his wife.)

In the intervening years, Wilner became the go-to guy in American framing. He executed 28 pieces for the White House, including a frame for Childe Hassam's *The Avenue in the Rain*, which hangs in the Obama Oval Office. He framed Picasso's *Nude, Green Leaves, and Bust*, which secured what was at the time the highest price ever for a painting at auction when it was hammered down



for \$106.5 million at Christie's in 2010. Until two months ago, Frida Kahlo's *Roots* held the auction record for a Latin American painting and, yes, Wilner framed it, too, along with works for the Smithsonian, Corcoran, Kimbell, and Metropolitan Museum of Art, including John Singer Sargent's *Madame X*. A sizable chunk of his client list comes straight out of an Art History 101 slide lecture, but he also works with living artists and collectors. When the fully restored American Wing of the Met opened this year, Wilner's most high-profile project yet was unveiled:

Photograph by JONATHAN BECKER

a monumental basswood frame for Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. It is flanked by another Wilner masterpiece. Asked to find a proper new frame for Frederic Church's *Heart of the Andes*, he produced from his inventory one designed by the artist himself nearly 150 years ago, which Wilner then repurposed and restored.

At his 11,000-square-foot workshop in Long Island City, 15 blue-coated craftspeople—including his master carver, Felix Teran—go about their tasks, immersed in concentration. Everything, of course, is done by hand. “We’re like a Renaissance guild in the way we work,” Wilner says. “That’s our frame of mind—no pun intended.” And at his Upper East Side gallery, Wilner waxes poetic over acanthus ornaments and fluted-cove ogees. (Frames go from about \$8,500 up to more than a million.) “I just love being in this space,” he says of the narrow walk-up, where frames reside inside frames—the perfect symbol of how Wilner has established the painting’s stage as art in its own right. ●



### MAKING HISTORY

Wilner's team—led by carver Felix Teran (top left)—crafted the 3,000-pound basswood frame for *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (with 12-foot eagle crest) at his Long Island City workshop, located in a former egg roll factory.