

BICYCLES



June 5, 2024

Today I want to share with you some of my bike projects over the past decade. Almost every winter now I restore a bike or two, just for fun. Sometimes I resell them. I sold a couple before I left Taos, and gave one away, and I have sold one to a reader since I got to California.

I got that frame above from Ebay recently for \$140. If you are a racing connoisseur, you may know it is worth much more than that. A top Gios specimen from the 1970s might go for \$1000 or more. I got it so cheap because it was heavily chipped and was missing the Gios coins in the fork crown. It had been repainted in the US and the decals were inferior. But it had no dents and was structurally sound,



and my size, so I knew I could fix everything and make it look almost new. Anyone else would have stripped it and started over, but I can't afford a repaint, which is very expensive. But as an artist I am very good at spot retouching, as you might expect. This one was hard, since matching that color was almost impossible. It is a cool Cobalt blue, and none of the retouch paints (like Testors or Model Masters) I bought matched. They were all too green. I finally had to use my expensive real Cobalt blue oil paints, from my portrait box. They dry much slower and won't be as hard, since they aren't enamel, but in this case that didn't matter as much as a good color match. It is just a few spots here and there. I then replaced the decals with ones from Serbia, and as you can see it looks much better. If you look closely you can tell, but otherwise not.

The thing I am most proud of on this one is the way I replaced the Gios coins with vintage Italian lire from 1908. They actually look better than the Gios coins, which are plastic inserts. I did a search on Italian coins with that diameter, and these were the prettiest ones that came up. The classical demi-nudes match my vocation, as you know.



The rear gear cluster is an 8-speed with a 32T top gear, for getting up the hills here in the Sierra Nevadas. Since the small chainring on the front is the period 42 instead of the now-common 39, I needed the big gear in the back. Almost everything on the bike is period Campagnolo except that rear hub, since finding big gears for Campy 8-speeds is almost impossible. I don't think they even made a 32. If they did and I could find one, it would cost more than the whole bike. Even so, I wouldn't think of putting anything on a bike like this except top-shelf Campy or Dura Ace. For a long time even Dura Ace was pooh-poohed by purists, simply because it is Japanese instead of Italian, but the events of the past 30 years have exploded that prejudice, since Dura Ace is now even more prestigious than Campy. Far more Tour de France riders ride Dura Ace than Campy now.

You will ask how I can afford either one on my "salary", and the answer is that I had most of these

parts in my boxes. I have been scanning Ebay for over a decade, snapping up deals, as I explained in my last paper on this subject. Some sellers don't know what they have, since it may be a wife selling her dead husband's old bike or parts. Or it may be sellers who think what they have is broken and unrepairable. Or it may be parts that are heavily scratched or missing parts. I have enough parts I can marry things together. I can also sand and polish these aluminum parts. So I grab what no one else wants. I never get in bidding wars and am almost always the only bidder. Plus, we are talking about old 6 or 7-speed Campy. I generally can't afford 9-speed or later, since those haven't yet dropped into the "deal" category at Ebay.

The other thing you may notice on that bike is the handlebars. I decided to try something different with this one, and those are track bars. Aka bull horns. I find I rarely ride on the drops anymore, so that is just useless weight. This looks better and rides better than just sawing off your drops. This way you don't have to ride on your brake hoods all the time, which I have always thought is kind of absurd. The trick was finding a Cinelli stem that fit that type of bar. Most Cinellis are 26.2, and those bars are 25.4. But Cinelli did make a few that size back in the day and I lucked across one.

You may also be interested to know that I build the wheels as well, including lacing the spokes. These old-style wheels are incredibly overbuilt, having 32 spokes front and rear. To give you an example how strong they are, my Torpado—which you are about to see—was built by me in 1987 on triangular Velocity rims, and I haven't had to true those wheels once in 37 years, despite putting thousands of miles on them! For comparison, Tour bikes now commonly have 16-18 spokes on the front. That is one of many reasons the new carbon bikes weigh 3-4 pounds less than my old Eroicas. It isn't just the carbon. In fact, my racing bikes weigh up to a pound less than they originally did back in the 70s and 80s, due to things like cut-out cogs, lighter chains, and clipless pedals. I don't still ride with toe clips, because that is just silly. I don't just ride these bikes in exhibition rides, I ride them on steep hills everyday, so I need to be able to get out of the pedals quickly if something goes wrong. I don't want to be dealing with straps.

Isn't it also silly to be building 32-spoke wheels in this day and age? Not really, since other than giving the bike the proper look, these old rims and hubs are far cheaper. Few people want them, so you can get them used for a song. And since I am not racing, I don't care if my bike is 20 pounds instead of 16. It is much more important to have wheels that aren't constantly breaking spokes or going out of true every time you hit a bump. That front wheel is still pretty light, since the rim is a top-shelf Mavic OpenPro and I have since put a Vittoria Corsa tire on it. The spokes are double-butt 15-16-15 race spokes, which are very hard to find these days.

These bikes of mine aren't really racers, they are glorified day tourers, though you wouldn't think of putting racks on them. They are for those who, like me, want their distance bikes to say "I was a racer 30 years ago, but at least my rider is still thin and looks reasonably good in his woolies". In addition to that, my bikes say, "I am an art-bike, built by someone who knows about color coordination and aesthetics. You will never see color fades, stripes, swirls, dots, or marbling here. You won't see mint-green with pink or orange with lime. Nor will you see dull-gray carbon".

And now for something completely different:



That's another underpriced frame I found on Ebay and built up. The seller threw in the wheels for free, though I had to add the nice Schwalbe whitewalls. It needed less retouching, and I was lucky since Testors makes a red exactly that color. I built this one as a city bike or commuter, with the upright handlebars and shifters mounted on the stem. It is otherwise mostly original, except for the rear derailleur, which I consider an upgrade. It needed a long cage to take the large gear in the back, to make it rideable here. Most Campy snobs consider that Gran Turismo derailleur to be a joke, since it is very heavy, but it looks great on an art bike, since the chrome is very good, and weight is not a concern here. They say it doesn't shift well, but that hasn't been my experience. All the ones I have installed have worked great. I also upgraded the pulleys, using red alloy to go with the color scheme. I encourage you to zoom in.

Here it is from the back, where you can see what I did with the fenders and so on:



Those are Puch fenders, but I removed the Puch tail light and replaced it with an old Soubitez light from the 1960s, which is far more interesting. The Caen badge above it is just for decoration. As you see, the old aluminum water bottle also adds a lot to the look, and it has the matching Motobecane emblem. The seat is a buttery soft Lycett from the 1950s, Lycett being what Brooks was before Brooks. The bike also has a vintage French bell. I import a lot of these parts from Ebay France, since shipping from Europe is often just as cheap as domestic. Often cheaper. Don't ask me why, maybe it is subsidized somehow. We know shipping from China is subsidized, so I guess shipping from Europe is also.

Here's another French bike, even older:





That's a 1958 Peugeot, with the old backwards-looking "P" in Peugeot. All French period parts, including the suicide front derailleur and the Lefol hammered fenders. I call that a picnic bike, due to the wicker basket and French wine bottles. Even the flag is period French. I cut and installed the leather mudflaps myself, of course. Also note the period bell, mounted the French way on the side of the stem; the old Simplex rear derailleur, with only three gears in the back; the tool boxes mounted under the basket; and the wine corks as handlebar ends.

Do you want to see the before pic?



That's what it looked like before restoration. As you see, I threw away almost everything except the frame and started over. What caught my eye at Ebay France was the original decals, which are amazingly good. The headbadge was also good, and there were no dents or bends. So I knew I could make something of it, with enough work. Here's a similar one I restored more recently:



That's from 1956, with an even older single cottered crank from the 1940s. The chainguard is especially beautiful, I think. Also note the white pedals, also from the 40s or early 50s. And the cream-white tires, which add a lot to the look. I now have an Ideale saddle on it, but that Brooks actually looks better.



There's another old Peugeot from the late 60s, with cantilever brakes and tons of bling, including three forward lights. The two lower ones are just dummy lights, for decoration. That's another picnic bike, as you see, and the chainguard is probably again the high point. The fenders are from the 50s, but I couldn't resist. They are just too beautiful. This frame is special because it has a built in fork-lock, with a old key. When I bought it the lock and key were lost, but I eventually found replacements.



We now go back even further. That's a mid-fifties Columbia Newsboy Special, with mostly original

paint and decals and lots of added bling, including a speedometer. Not that you need one: that thing is slower than molasses, weighing about 50 pounds. The high points there are the white tires and the cream saddle, which I restored and re-upholstered myself. I sold that to a friend for far less than it is worth when I left Taos, because I needed the money for my move.



Next is that one, even older. That is a 1940s skiptooth Shelby Hiawatha, which I completely repainted myself, including the baby blue rims. So I can repaint myself, I just don't like to. I don't like to sand and spray, since it isn't healthy. And I don't have a space for it. I just do it outside. And yes, I do use a respirator. Painting it wasn't easy, since those points on the frame had to be taped off and handpainted. And again, I had to completely restore/re-upholster the saddle. You can find these saddles on Ebay occasionally, but they are generally in horrible shape. If they still have a seat cover, it will be rock hard with no padding. I add padding as well as new leather. That torpedo headlight is original and battery powered, and I painted it to match.



That's another one I restored and sold in Taos. It was in pretty nice shape when I got it, but it was just a frame hanging in someone's garage, so I had to find all the other parts. It is a three-speed and I put that small front chainring on it just for the hills of Taos. And yes, the head lamp and generator do work. The seat is way up to fit me.



That's a large size Raleigh Competition GS from the early 70s. Raleigh had beautiful paint and decals in those years, with the chrome "socks" front and rear. I put the black Modolo brakes on it to match the color scheme, and the white tires and fenders for the same reason. The rest of the gruppo is Campy. That seat is another old Lycett, perfectly broken in.



Notice the brake lever position there, which I call "Siegfried". It has a Gotterdammerung feel to it looking down from the riding position, like horns. You will say it isn't very efficient, requiring your

hands to jump off the grips, but of course it isn't any worse than drop bars, which require the same thing. I personally think it looks fetching on handlebars like that, and notice that it gets the cables out your way. And you can use these beautiful Modolo drop levers on riser bars, sans hoods.



That's another Peugeot picnic bike, from about 1970. I eventually found an Ideale saddle for that, making it all period. Note the triple crank in front. It is also rare to see fenders with 27" wheels. They fit very tight, since the bike was not made for fenders. It was built as a racer, but compared to the Italian racers from that period I am showing you, it wasn't much of a bike. Looks great as an upscale picnic bike though. That is the first one I restored, back in about 2016.



That's a rare English Maclean in a very small size, 49 I think. The paint and decals are original and pristine, though this is early 1960s (as you can tell by the lamp boss on the fork). I upgraded the rear derailleur to Campy Nuovo Gran Sport, since I love those. One of the best derailleurs ever made, so crisp and tight. The whitewalls add a lot to this look. It is just a 5-speed, but the large cog on the back makes it rideable even with minor hills.



That's another Raleigh GS, even fancier. I designed that as a commuter bike for some rich guy like a lawyer who wanted to look like the cat's meow even while showing off his green side. I don't know



anyone like that so I just ride it myself, to the grocery store. Not something you want to leave very long in a bike rack, though, not even with a U-lock. Someone will start stripping parts off it. Note the rare Campy three-arm crank, the ribbed and corked water bottle, the hammered fenders, the Silca/Campy framefit pump, the Brooks springer saddle, the Michelin whitewalls, and the gorgeous leather saddlebags.



That's a 60's Motoconfort that I built up here in Cali. I look for these old frames with good paint and decals, since you have to build around that. Some of these decals you can't get anymore, especially since the only decal maker in the US, Velocals, went under. I now get my decals from Serbia, as I said. It is either that or Ukraine or Australia. Notice the antique Motobecane cotttered crank, which is a couple of decades older than the bike: a huge artistic upgrade. It was beastly difficult to fit that to the frame, since it required just the right axle and bearings. I also upgraded the freewheel so it can be ridden in hills. It has a 32T in the back, which requires a long-cage derailleur. So I tossed the crap French Simplex derailleur and replaced it with this Shimano. In my opinion these bikes have to be rideable or they are worthless. They are art bikes but they aren't museum pieces. Those white tires are also Japanese and are the best in the world. The fact they aren't French means nothing to me as an artist. I want these to be period as much as possible, but exceptions are made.



This next one is the one I sold to a reader last year. Most people think motorcycles when they think Triumph, but they made bicycles before they made motorcycles. Triumphs are more common in England, but in the US they are very rare. Especially ones in this kind of shape. It again has the Campy rear derailleur upgrade, which vastly improves the shifting. Other things to notice: the chainguard, which again makes this bike. And notice the rear brake caliper, with the angled pads. This bike didn't come with a rear brake, which I find astonishing. If you jam on a front brake by itself you can flip the bike. So I rigged this brake, using the longest reach caliper I could find. That allowed a reach around the fender, but then it was a bit too long. That was solved by angling the pads. On these kinds of bikes, I prefer the crates to the baskets. The crates are for those guys who think the baskets are too fem.

It also has the rearview mirror, the bell, the working headlight and generator, and the steel bottle with cork. I hear the buyer lowered the seat but otherwise kept it like this. His local bike shop oohed and aahed I am told, and liked the chainguard most of all. I believe I sent it with a Brooks saddle instead of that Lepper.



That's not a project bike, that is my old Torpado I have had since 1987. It has been very good to me over the years. The only change I made when I moved here was the rear derailleur, which needed that long cage to allow a 30T on the back. You don't see many Campy Super Records with that long cage. Everything else is original equipment, including that Flight saddle. The chrome on the frame is nearly flawless after 37 years, and you can be sure I have never left her out in the rain for a second.



She has recently been joined by that 1984 Ciocc, which I snagged at a steep discount on Ebay and built up. It has Modolo professional brakes and a Campy triple crank. The gear cluster is period, being a 7-

speed Sachs freewheel with a 26T top gear. The Super Record seatpost would normally be out of my price range, even though it is 40 years old, but it was an odd size so no one else bid on it. I got it for almost nothing because it wasn't 27.2mm. I then paid a couple of bucks for a shim, and problem solved. I guess the Campy snobs can't countenance a shim. That is how I build these things up for a fraction of their value.



Next is that original Schwinn Black Phantom I restored while in Taos. Again it has that skiptooth chainring, and a very rare original saddle.



Next we have another Schwinn, a Tiger from about 1960.



I put new leather and padding on the seat and repainted the rack, upgrading it to that nice stripe. Also added the front light and the snazzy whitewalls, which dress up all these period bikes.



Finally, we have that 1978 Guerciotti, which I am still working on. That is the frame I got for \$95 on Ebay France. Lots of paint nicks, which I have filled, and bad chrome, which I have mitigated to the best of my ability. The chrome is still dull, but it is not flaking or rusted. The chrome wasn't cleaned for about 40 years, so the dirt eventually etched it. But nothing worse than that. My brother handed down his old Dura Ace aero seatpost, which I repolished. The rear derailleur is an old Campy Rally long cage, that I bought without any cage on Ebay. I then added the cage, saving a bundle. That allows me to have the big cogs in the back, but I can't have anything above a 7-speed since the derailleur won't move that far. So I am building up a new rear wheel using a Shimano Uniglide. That is pre-Hyperglide. That bike also has an Omas superlight headset, very rare, far lighter than Campy. That bike actually weighs less than the Gios, Ciocc, or Torpado, and that is one reason why. Another reason is the Michelin Pro3 tire on the front, which is lighter than Vittoria. I bought it for the red sidewalls and bargain price and it won't last very long on these roads. The titanium saddle also helps for weight. And the Campy Rally derailleur is actually lighter than the far newer Campy triple I have on the two others. That makes no sense, but that's Campy for you.

My brother doesn't like those corked steel water bottles on these racers, telling me they are 50s, not 70s, which is true. They also aren't as light as plastic. But I just like them. I don't like drinking out of plastic and I can decal these any way I like. I have sold some of them on Ebay, it being a nice Eroica item no one else is producing. There are a few overpriced aluminum ones you can get from Europe, but you don't want to be drinking out of aluminum either. Steel is better.