

Close-framed Photographs

By Timothy Holton

Several years ago I found myself becoming enchanted by a framing approach typical of the early twentieth century, an approach that went completely against the standards I'd learned when I began framing in the seventies and eighties. The frames were beautiful in themselves: broad, quarter-sawn oak moldings, fairly plain but often with very interesting elements like beads, reeding, ovolos, and coves, which were sometimes combined in very thoughtful, artistic ways.

It wasn't uncommon to see such frames on oil paintings, but most often and notably I'd see them on prints and photographs. On the original pieces, they were frequently used close to the photograph just as they were on paintings. That is, no mat separated the frame from the art. The effect was pleasingly simple, yet substantial. Framing photographs and prints close in wide dark wood moldings went against the modern habit of matting nearly every work on paper, often for perfectly good conservation reasons. And yet whenever I saw it done on the right picture and with everything about the frame in harmony with the picture, I found the effect absolutely unbeatable. I began to explore this approach, especially for photos, and how it might be revived using today's archival standards.



This original photogravure of Edward Curtis's "Chief Garfield" was close-framed, with 3" margins all around the image hidden. This oak frame used stop chamfers to soften the sight edge. Samples of other quarter-sawn oak frames used for close framing are also shown.

Lessons from the Arts and Crafts Movement

Period Guidance

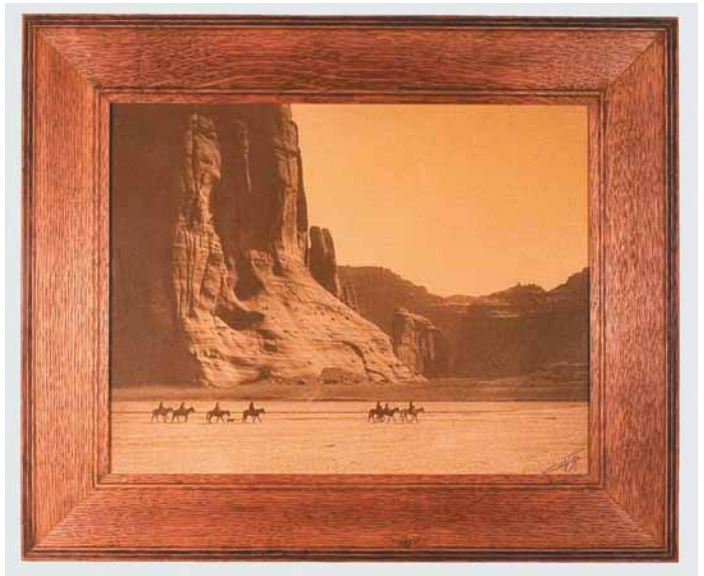
A 1906 manual for professional picture framers instructed that “Frames for...photographs...are now principally made of [black and brown stained] oaks all finished in the dead [flat], and used in most cases close up to the picture without mats. The frames are used broad, yet very thin through, and the ornaments, if any, consist of delicate tracery of small classical designs, the same color as the frame.”

House Beautiful advised in 1902, “Large photographs...may be framed in broad flat oak or gold moldings, without any mat or margin. The width of the frame makes up for the mat.”

A 1912 article in *The School Arts Magazine* suggested that framing close was so popular as to be in danger of overuse: “Some decorators go so far as to say, ‘Mat no picture,’ but it is to a certain extent a matter of taste, and there are cases where an exception seems wise.” The writer offered some exceptions, such as “a small picture which is like a jewel and requires a setting. A picture with a great deal of action seems sometimes to require a mat.” The framers’ manual adds, “Every framer knows that close framing is only effective where the subject is large enough and bold enough in outline to bear such severe treatment.”

The Arts and Crafts Movement Unity Ideal

The basis for this approach is the Arts and Crafts Movement’s overriding concern for the unity of the arts. The leading reformers, such as John Ruskin and William Morris, held that throughout time, where allowed to thrive without tyrannical conditions—including the miserable industrialized conditions of their own day—all the arts,



An original Curtis photo, “Canyon de Chelly,” was framed by the photographer around 1910 without matting in the Arts and Crafts style of the time.



A recent photogravure of “Canyon de Chelly” by Mountain Hawk was close-framed using a compound or stacked frame. A flat frame with beading on the sight edge was used with ovolo cap moulding.



from the most utilitarian handcrafts to the most refined and purely spiritual paintings and sculptures, had been practiced together and had worked in harmony. With architecture as the mother of the arts, everything from metalsmithing to pictures—the first pictures being murals—had been in service, and subordinate to buildings. Unity, it was argued, is absolutely critical to the vitality of the arts. Furthermore, the unity of the arts was inseparable from the unity of art and life, the arts being practiced by the whole people in every aspect of their lives. As Gustav Stickley, the leading promoter of Arts and Crafts ideas in America, put it, art is not “something apart



Close framing also works on small photographs. This smaller portrait of a Judge Hammond from the 1920s was framed with a 2" cushion moulding with a bead at the outside edge and a fine bead on the sight edge.



This original photogravure is another image that is believed to have been framed by Curtis.

from common and everyday existence, but rather...the very means of realizing life.”

Unity, Pictures, and the Architecture of the Frame

Frames held a fascinating—and today, a greatly underappreciated—place in the Arts and Crafts mission to restore unity to the arts. They are, in fact, truly emblematic of Arts and Crafts beliefs regarding both the connectedness of the arts—no two arts are more intimately related than pictures and their frames—and the place of art. That is, when framing pictures we address in the most concrete and immediate ways our ideas about the position and role of art in relation to life.

Neo-classical nineteenth-century frames projected an understanding that art was largely for show. Their designs were often carried to absurdity, with great masses of debased ornament intended as nothing more than signifiers of status and prestige or as packaging to seduce a prospective buyer. Such a “vault of gold,” as Ruskin called it, was covered with overblown and showy ornament and projected the idea of art as a trophy to be shown off, not as a natural and edifying light enhancing daily life. And yet, as Walter Crane put it, “The frame, which separates a

picture from its surroundings, also helps to unite it again to its original home.” Judiciously displayed, a picture could restore the original place of paintings in concert with architecture. It was an accent and focal point, certainly, but not to be decoratively unrelated and demanding all the attention.

Lessons of the Movement

By the early twentieth century the movement's ideals had become widely accepted, and humbler, more self-effacing frame styles had taken over. “With the figured wall paper, gaudy carpets, festooned curtains, and fussy upholstered furniture have gone the ornate frames with diagonal cross-pieces at the corner, whips and horseshoes, dog's heads, and mariner's compass decorating a portion of the frame and presumably giving the keynote to the picture” began the 1913 School Arts article. “In all cases it is essential...to aim for unity of design in the complete object.”

Today, while every designer at least gives a nod to unity as key to good design, an attitude remains that pictures are something apart and untouchable, and that influences framing design. Often through sheer intimidation, framers play it safe and unnecessarily separate picture and frame with a wide liner or mat.

The Arts and Crafts Movement returns today's framers to an essential understanding about pictures, which is crucial to good framing. Among its lessons are:

- Pictures don't depend on isolation for our enjoyment and edification but can be made more enjoyable by the adjacent art of frames used to seamlessly to sustain the spirit of the art.
- Framing can be used either to isolate a picture from a

room and the life in it or can be used to connect the picture to that life, allowing it to contribute to the scheme of a room and giving it a meaningful role in the everyday activities of the home.

- The unity of pictures with architecture, represented by the frame, is not only possible but also natural.
- Framing for the home, for pictures to be lived with, is very different from framing for galleries and museums.

Framing Photographs Close: Some Examples

I don't know of more striking period examples of photographs framed close than those of Edward Curtis. Both period examples shown here are believed to have been framed by Curtis himself in the type of wide quartersawn oak profile he preferred. When customers bring us Curtis photogravures (actual photographs by him are much rarer), the pieces typically have margins too wide to allow close framing. In these cases we create the effect of framing close by using a wide, lap-joined flat over the glass and mat (the hidden mat is used just to separate glass and print) to hide the margin, surrounding that with a suitable mitered frame in a profile 1½" or so wide.

When we discovered the beautiful new Curtis photogravures being produced by Paul Unks of Mountain Hawk Prints, who gave us permission to trim the margins, we saw an opportunity to revive Curtis's preferred method of framing close. The broad profiles we mill allow room to cut the rabbet an inch or more wide to accommodate a hidden, slightly narrower "gasket" mat. Because the frame is still fairly close to the paper, we seal the rabbet with aluminum frame sealing tape.

The two Mountain Hawk examples, "Vanishing Race" and "Canyon de Chelly," show the contrast between framing all the way to the image versus revealing a narrow strip of the margin, including the text just outside and below the image. Even when we frame all the way to the image, the paper is trimmed outside the plate mark to preserve the text. This margin is hidden under the rabbet. Especially if an artist has signed the paper in the margin, the choice of showing the margin and text is, of course, questionable. But I feel strongly that the disadvantage of hiding any text has to be weighed against that of leaving a stark white margin (especially jarring if the image is dark) and breaking the unified effect of the picture comfortably nestled into a pleasing frame.

The question of revealing text forced us to confront the intriguing difference between how people view pic-



This Mountain Hawk photogravure of Curtis's "Vanishing Race" was framed with some of the margin showing to display text in the bottom margin. The visible margin, however, creates a much different effect from close framing, and makes the image stand apart from the frame.



To buffer the print from the glass, a hidden or "gasket" mat was used, with the bevel reversed. The rabbet is cut wide to accommodate a slightly narrower mat and is sealed with frame sealing tape.

tures today compared to 100 years ago. Today we're much more inclined to treat photos as documentary objects enhanced by the information provided by the text. They become Art with a capital A or art in the abstract ("an Edward Curtis!") instead of being particular images of Native American life and experiencing them for their inherent beauty and interest.

The tendency of this period, with its concern for unity, was to not show the text and margin. As the 1906 framers' manual noted, "This not showing the printed title of a picture has become so universal of late, because (to

use the customer's way of expressing it) 'it's not the style to label any more.'" I like this idea, where appropriate, not because it represents the period but because it allows a more direct experience of the picture itself while preserving the unity of picture and frame. Showing even a narrow margin would create a break in the unity of a well-framed piece.

Framing close is usually used to achieve a "mural feeling," so it is most successful on pieces that are substantial enough that they approach the kind of architectural presence of an actual mural. But if displayed appropriately, smaller photographs such as a portrait can be suitably framed close.

Since the principles behind framing close are timeless, contemporary photographs can also be framed close, as is the image by Joseph Holmes. In this case we used lightly stained walnut. While the tight grain of the wood suits the smooth finish of the picture, the complementary carved recess panel echoes the rough texture of the tree bark.

The key to success here is the design and crafting of the frame itself. Because it's right on the picture, the frame will be scrutinized much more closely. So it must be a real piece of craftsmanship. The profile should have a wide expanse uninterrupted by beading or other elements to give the picture "breathing space" (without the isolating effect of a mat). It should be made of beautiful wood (my first choice is usually oak), shaped in a profile sympathetic to the picture, soundly joined, finished to a harmonious color and shade, and given a low luster. All of this is done while preserving a tactile sense of the wood. With all these aspects done right, the frame quietly celebrates the picture and reflects the frame maker's care for it.



Close framing isn't limited to vintage photography. This contemporary image by Joseph Holmes was surrounded by a light walnut frame with a carved, recessed panel that echoes the tree bark in the image. The margin was left showing because it contains the photographer's signature.

Above all, a photo framed close should be part of a larger scheme shaped by an eye for unity, nothing made to compete for attention, but all working (to borrow William Morris's phrase) "for Beauty's sake, and not for show." ■



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