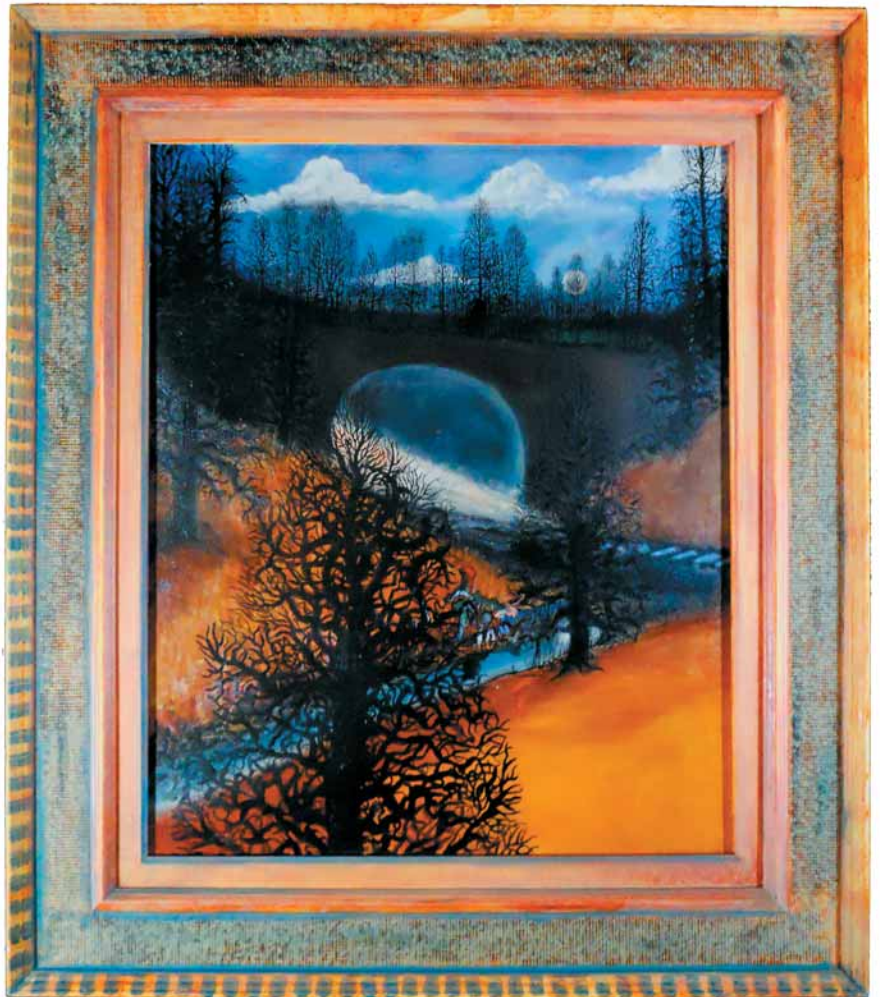


The Painted Frame

By William B. Adair

A simple
artist-painted
frame accentuates
an old painting,
displaying a
perfect partnership
of art and
frame



A painted frame was used to surround an old work called "The Tunnel" to explore how such a frame could establish a harmonic relationship between frame and painting.

There are three separate functions of the frame: protective, aesthetic, and decorative. The frame's purpose is to be well constructed so that it may physically protect a painting from damage. Aesthetically, the frame must accentuate the virtues of the painting. And decoratively, the object must be placed properly within the context of the room's architecture and furnishings.

When all of these aspects are considered, the results--theoretically--will be successful. The relationship of the

frame to the painting not only is a significant indicator of form and style from each period, but this symbiotic alliance also reveals the artist's attempt to orchestrate the perception of the observer. The frame organizes the viewer's world out of a sea of visual chaos so that the purpose of the artist's vision can be fully realized.

In the later part of the nineteenth century James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) was among the first American painters to react to the Victorian penchant for

as a Work of Art

superfluous design and ornamentation. His frames were simple by nature and were often toned and painted to blend with the subtle color schemes used in his paintings. Whistler wrote to a collector in 1873, "I wish this to be clearly stated in Paris; that I am the inventor of all this kind of decoration in color in the frames, that I may not have a lot of clever little Frenchmen trespassing on my ground. Many have painted on their frames, but never with real purpose or knowledge, in short, never in this way or anything at all like it."

It seems that Degas was also painting on frames and no one knows for sure who was first, but Whistler did spend a lot of time on his frames. Later in his career, he further simplified his frames by omitting painted decoration, yet the molding was always comprised of a dramatic series of three interlocking profiles of classical reeding, setting the trend for the modernist aesthetic in the 20th century.

Establishing a harmonic relationship of frame and painting was a means for an artist to be set apart from others in the pack. The approach was also a means of controlling how works would be presented to qualified patrons who understood the importance of the right frame for a painting. Whistler's influence was felt by many American painters, who developed their own keen aesthetic sensibilities. Other American artists, such as William Glackens (1870-1938), said, "Every artist suffers from a chronic lack of suitable frames."

In the study of frames, understanding what you see can be a difficult task, especially when the materials and techniques used are arcane and often shrouded in mystery. It is a rare thing, even for experts, to contemplate the origins a frame without some confusion. This is partially due to the many different techniques employed in frame making and a lack of information on the subject. Fabrication techniques can provide important clues about the history and origins of a frame and interpreting



An orange translucent glaze made by adding Orosol dye to Gilder's Clay was applied to the sight edge of the frame and the liner to echo tones in the painting.



Yellow ochre clay was then brushed on the rest of the frame and swirled with the paper towel to create a grain-like texture. Self-adhesive drywall grid tape was applied to the cassetta panel in preparation for creating added textures.



A layer of black bole was then brushed over the tape covering the panel.



When the tape was peeled off, a grid-like pattern of the black bole remained on the panel.



A thin wash of Naples yellow clay was then brushed, spattered, and feathered over the entire surface and ragged with a towel to soften the contrast between the black and the yellow and orange tones.



Light blue bole was then brushed and spattered on to fill the crevices of the clay grid to give it the appearance of old railroad trestle wood. This was sponged off in selected areas to create a random, natural look.

this physical evidence is the first step in knowing the long and complicated history of frames. This insight can help a connoisseur develop a keener instinct about a work of art. In some cases it leads to the tougher questions of whether or not a painting is properly framed.

A Humble Painted Frame

Learning to make a frame that incorporates a painted finish so that it does not overpower but rather complements a painting is perhaps the ultimate challenge. I offer an example of how I tackled the rather ubiquitous subject of framing my own work. This particular painting, called “The Tunnel,” had languished in my studio for many years as an example of the painting style that I had used to interpret real life experiences in the 1960s. This work took shape after my car broke down near a train track in the middle of nowhere. I had little to do but to start sketching my surroundings while I waited for help. The trains that roared through the tunnel became the focus of my artistic sensibility at that moment in time.

The formal elements of color, texture, luminosity, scale, and proportion were all taken into consideration when I started making a frame, which I decided would be painted. The frame could have been gilded, but I wanted to see how far I could go with just a simple painted frame. I also wanted to see how a painted frame could be used to establish that harmonic relationship between frame and painting.

The project began by choosing a 4” cassetta moulding with a 1” liner, which seemed to be the right size for a 25”x30” canvas. The first step was to gesso the moulding a brilliant white and let it dry. Then it was sanded smooth to make it ready to be matched to the canvas it would surround.

A good point of departure was to echo the prevailing color in the background of the painting by applying a kind of gamboge/dragonsblood/orange translucent glaze coat to the sight edge of the frame made by adding a strong Orosol dye to Gilder's Clay. Gilder's Clay is a great medium to use on a frame in case the results don't turn out the way you would like. You can always gold leaf the frame right on top of that bole if you don't like the resulting clay color, which makes a really great back-up plan.

With a paper towel in my left hand, I then painted yellow ochre clay on the rest of the frame while quickly

swirling the clay with the paper towel in a circle while it was still wet to create an additional, grain-like level of texture. This was part of an overall plan of creating a multi-colored, multi-textured surface similar to the painting, which used some of the same ideas during its creation. All coats were allowed to dry before going on to the next step.

The sense of experimentation also led to the fun discovery of using drywall grid tape to help add more texture to the cassetta panel. This tape had a self-adhesive side that allowed it to be applied securely to a surface simply by patting it with your fingers. Black clay was applied on top of this tape in a stippling motion using a very dry brush to help keep it from dripping. Once that was dry, the tape was gently peeled back and removed, leaving a textured grid pattern reminiscent of the leafless trees in the painting.

A light Naples yellow wash was then spattered and feathered over the entire surface and while still damp, it was ragged with a towel. This softened the harsh contrast between the black and the brighter yellow and orange background.

The final touch of light blue bole was then brushed and spattered on to sit into the crevices of the clay grid like old, mellow railroad trestle-type wood that may have a little chemical blue-green corrosion left over from sitting near copper wires and such in the hot sun for 40 years. It was sponged off in selected areas to create a random, natural look.

After this work was done, I set it aside and looked at it off and on for several days as I went about my other projects. Later, the frame seemed to call out to me, "Do something more; don't just stand there and look at me!" Finally, I decided that the finishing touch would be to brush on blue bole stripes on just the left side of the outer rim of the moulding to pay homage to the strong diagonal shadow and movement of the train through the tunnel. The idea was that it would create an effect reminiscent of a portrait painter who insists that the eyes of the sitter follow him around the room. The power of suggestion can be strong enough to get someone to believe that the eyes really do move in a portrait. In the same



The final step was painted stripes of light blue bole on part of the outside edge to provide a visual counterpoint to the motion of the train in the image.

way, the contrasting blue and orange stripes tend to vibrate the eye towards the left while the train in the painting moves from left to right.

Matisse said artists should not speak about their works but should let their works speak for themselves. If a painting has a voice, he said, it will communicate on its own. My purpose in creating this frame was to create a frame that would complement the painting in a way that would amplify the poetic beauty of a long-ago experience that resulted from a burning artistic sensibility and a broken down VW (which turned out to have a loose wire that I finally had to fix myself). My goal was to craft a humble painted frame that would make a viewer look at the painting and feel the movement of the train through that long black tunnel all those years ago. ■



William B. Adair received his B.F.A. in Studio Art from the University of Maryland in 1972. For the next 10 years he worked for the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery as a museum conservator specializing in the treatment of picture frames. In 1982 he formed Gold Leaf Studios to make frames and conserve gilded antiques. His clients have included the U.S. Department of State and the National Park Service. He is the founder of the International Institute for Frame Study, a non-profit archive dedicated to collecting and disseminating information on the history of frames. He can be reached via e-mail at bill@goldleafstudios.com.