

Time Frame

compiled by Mark Guthrie

Editor's Note: The history of the picture frame and the craft of framing is as diverse as it is long. Each issue, PFM will explore that history as we feature a prominent person in our industry and their discussions with Mark Guthrie about the period styles, artistic movements, innovations, and frames they find most significant. Topics will run the gamut in terms of era or impact, and it is our hope that "Time Frame" will broaden the understanding of the role of fine frames in history.



Bark Frameworks created this frame—a new design based on the traditional cassetta profile—to house Jozef Rippl-Ronai's "Women with Three Girls" at The Brooklyn Museum of Art.

Jed Bark, frame designer and president of Bark Frameworks, New York, discusses the roots of important design changes in frame history.

MG: Since you interact with curators regularly, I want to get your impressions regarding how the museum hierarchy is coming to grips with framing as an independent entity.

JB: There are islands of interest. Few museums in America have frame conservators—specialists devoted solely to frames: The National Gallery, in Washington, and The Art Institute, in Chicago. At the Metropolitan Museum, in New York, there are several very knowledgeable people—but no one there specializes solely in frames. The National Portrait Gallery, in London, may have more than one frame conservator and the Rijksmuseum, in Amsterdam has one. There may be more, at other museums, but those are the ones I can recall right now.

MG: Are these positions subordinate to other departments (such as Decorative Arts), or are they independent?

JB: To the best of my knowledge, they have considerable autonomy.

MG: That's encouraging.

JB: I do see a growing curatorial interest. It'll be interesting to see how it develops. I know a curator who took Giovanni Bucchi's gilding workshop recently. Now, that's pretty

striking. What I think this means, is that as curators and art historians become fascinated by frame history (and what I call "frame theory"), we'll see other disciplines become involved. There already have been sociologists and philosophers who have made observations on the function of a frame; much more insightful observation than the obvious—"draws the eye into the art," "acts as a transition between the world of illusion and the world of reality."

MG: I want to get back to your specialty—frame design. As opposed to frame designers of the past, today, you have at your disposal a countless selection of profiles. You can use them simply because available lighting is much better than it was early in the 20th Century, and before.

JB: People make a lot of that (and it's entirely valid), but also there is daylight, and there has always been daylight! People didn't look at pictures exclusively by candlelight. But clearly, the effect of changes in interior lighting technology, during the late 19th-early 20th Century, was important. It happened at the

time Impressionists were holding their independent exhibitions. There was an occasion, in 1879, when a lighting company offered to light the exhibition. It's not clear if they did. If not, then the gallery would only have been open during the day. There are those who say that painted frames may have been a response to the invention of electric lighting. I don't think so, since the Impressionists were using white frames in the late 1870's.

But when you mentioned profiles, it reminded me of your original question—"What is my choice for an important moment in framing history?" I actually have several. First, I consider this to be an important development: The creation of 17th Century Dutch mouldings. They seem to be conceptually independent. The derivation of their vocabulary is unknown or, at least, unclear. When I look at the book, "Prijst de Lijst," I see the profiles and ask, "Where did these come from?" Some of them are cassetta-like. But they're very different from Italian cassetta frames. They're probably not derived from Italian profiles. They seem to

have developed from a unique stream in Dutch culture. Do they come from maritime architecture? Are they Islamic? There is Islamic influence on Dutch culture from the eighty years or so, when the Spanish occupied Holland. Who knows?

MG: Just so I understand, when you talk about these mouldings—are you talking about the overall profiles? Or are you talking about the vocabulary of decorative elements (ripples, basket weaves and other geometrics)? Or both?

JB: The ornaments, the decorative elements, aren't Dutch. My guess is that the ornaments are Islamic in origin. You see them regularly used in the Tyrol, the rest of Germany, Northern Italy, and Austria. These elements were ubiquitous throughout Northern Europe. They didn't originate in Holland. I recall that George Bisacca at the Met suggested to me that they came from Genoa. And if they came from Genoa—they may have come from the Eastern Mediterranean. There's a book (I can't remember the name offhand) on 16th Century Flemish altarpiece frames. The mouldings are, still in the 16th century, Medieval-looking. But when I look at these 17th century Dutch mouldings, they seem almost modern. The forms are inventive, they don't exhibit the restrained order of the earlier mouldings from Flanders.

MG: I had assumed that, since these frames were crafted by cabinetmakers, the shapes came from that nomenclature. Am I off-base?

JB: I've seen a number of those Dutch cabinets, but I haven't done a formal inventory, by any means. I don't think they have a lot in common with the frames. No-one seems to know how these wonderful mouldings came to be made and that's why this subject deserves to be pursued. Another "important

moment in framing history" I wanted to bring up is: the flight of the Huguenots from France. In 17th Century France, under Louis XIV, the regime became more and more oppressive toward Protestants. With the revocation of the Edict of Nantes [a decree from Henry IV, allowing them limited civil and religious rights], in 1685, there was a flood of Huguenots exiting France. Many of these were carvers and gilders, and many of them fled to England, to Holland, to Germany and to Scandinavia. This initiated the proliferation of the French style into the rest of Europe during the 18th Century. That is an interesting event. It had wide repercussions throughout the continent—and particularly for our field. I think that the liveliness of frame design in England, well into the 20th Century, might be traced to this moment. In England there has long been an energetic dialog between period reproduction and the contemporary point of view in frame design. Right up to the present, artists and frame designers in England have been aware of traditional frame design—but working within it in a very free way.

MG: It makes me think of frame designs from the Pre-Raphaelite Movement.

JB: When you look at the impact that the Pre-Raphaelites had on frame design, you see that they were influenced by social reformers to reject "industrialized" moulding—compo-ornamented moulding—and to seek the decorative impact of, say, gold on oak and ornaments of their own invention. Designs that often resonated, in some way, with the subject of the picture. In America, this impulse manifested itself through the artist-designed frame movement. And, in some ways, it still goes on here.

MG: And currently, there are artists that come to you, specifically, to collaborate on frames for their work?

JB: Not to the extent that you might expect. Rarely have artists asked us to develop a frame that is remarkably different from what we are already doing—to develop a "signature frame" for them, or their work. Generally, the designs stem from something we already have developed. It's a rare event for an artist to come in and say, "I'd like you guys to make a moulding like this."

MG: I was hoping you would say that it happens every day.

JB: All of the four or five people in our company that design frames are also artists. And our creative drives seem to always be running; experimenting, creating new frame designs. So, more often than not, we are asked to use a design (or a variation of a design) that we have already created. I recall an artist who brought in work for framing some years ago. In her work she had been experimenting with copper foil on paper. I had been thinking about metal clad frames, and I suggested to her that we try this technique, and it worked.

MG: That sounds collaborative to me.

JB: I suppose. But, usually, as in this case, we bring the design to the artist—rather than the opposite.

The last important moment that I wanted to bring up is: the Impressionist movement. I've been thinking a lot about this recently. These artists, particularly Degas, were willing to make a complete break with the frames that they had inherited; a more complete break than the Pre-Raphaelites or [James McNeill] Whistler. They designed straight-sided frames. No organic ornament at all. No flowers. No leaves. No flutes. No gold—actually, they were ambivalent about gold as they grew

older. They went back and forth about it. For many of them, it was white frames, gray frames, blue frames, red frames, and even purple frames. They were determined that the presentation of the work serves the work. Now, that is a big moment and an important break with the exhibition tradition (the Salon) that they had inherited. It wasn't that they were trying to create a complete work of art as, I think you might say, Whistler was doing. They were choosing every element to serve the experience of viewing their work. And the pieces weren't jammed together [at their exhibitions]. They experimented with methods of display—pastels with pastels, paintings with paintings, an artist's works grouped together. The space between the pictures was a consideration, and the color of the walls; not from a designer's standpoint, but from an artist's standpoint. What color of the wall will best serve the work? A very important moment. To this day, this thinking affects how we display art.

MG: Can you put this moment on a timeline?

JB: It wasn't so much true in 1874, when they had their first exhibition. I think it was a fully developed concept by 1882.

MG: They were even rebelling against Whistler and his notion that the frame could be a component of the surrounding interior.

JB: The Impressionists weren't concerned with how their work would fit into a bourgeois interior. But at that moment, in France, there was a resurgence of interest in 17th and 18th Century design. The

potential collectors of Impressionist paintings often had Baroque and Rococo interiors. These painted frames were a problem for the dealers. They were afraid that they couldn't sell the art—so they prohibited painted frames, and insisted that gold frames be used, and that they be ornamental. There were some “compromise frames” developed at this time, such as the Camondo frame (made for the collector Isaac de Camondo). It was a *passee partout* frame, with a wide, stepped panel, and with an outside rail. And on the rail, there was a ribbon and stave ornament. It's commonly believed that Degas was involved in the design, although so far there's no real proof. But it's clearly a compromise between the artist's need for an austere frame and the highly ornamented interiors of the day. By and large, the Impressionists were not known to compromise in this fashion. Those frames were to serve the pictures, not the room.

MG: I want to close by focusing a little on you and your business. Your company doesn't deal in antiques, or antique reproductions. You design new frames.

JB: Yes. We are frame designers. Our clients come to us specifically because of what we do and because of what we don't do. We don't make historical reproductions. They want an innovation that, while it may refer to history, is an independent concept. We start with a blank slate. Sometimes we may end up very close to designs of the past, and sometimes very far from anything seen before.

MG: In all of your time designing frames, have you been presented with a situation where the only logical choice is a previously incarnated design? A work that tells you that the right frame already exists.

JB: Occasionally. Recently, a woman brought in some Italian Renaissance drawings. I told her, “This isn't what we do.” I said that there are a lot of frames out there that are suitable, but we don't have any of them. She understood, but she wanted us to work with her. So, doing something similar to what we do for the Lehman Collection at The Metropolitan Museum, we took an existing design and “tweaked” it. It was a modified Louis XVI drawing frame—an 18th Century-influenced modern frame on 16th Century drawings. It was a solution she was happy with, and it wasn't obtrusive. But sometimes I will open a book and tell clients, “See? This is a frame that goes with your artwork.” I'll refer them to the dealers that have those frames.

We're primarily interested in framing works from the Impressionist period—forward.

MG: Last question. And I'm speaking to the designer in you. Of the extensive exposure you've had to frames and frame styles, is there one design that you consider to be done “right?” The shape, the profile, the ornamentation—everything is in balance and you feel that “this design can't be improved upon.”

JB: I guess two. The 17th Century Dutch straight-sided frames—ageless. And the cassetta—It's a pure design that gives the option for innumerable modifications.



Mark Guthrie, CPF is a 25-year veteran of the framing industry and owner of ÆDICULA in San Francisco, CA. He provides consultation services to industry manufacturers and retailers, and has served as V.P. of Sales for Abe Munn Picture Frames in New York City. His background also includes management of multi-store operations and ownership of Guthrie's Picture Framing in Houston, TX. He can be reached at emguthrie@yahoo.com.