

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.

A Goldleaf Framemaker's replication of an Irving Couse frame that was originally designed and carved in 1919 by L. Vigdor for Couse.



This month's interview, Mr. Marty Horowitz, is well-known those who have been both educated and entertained in his gilding and finishing classes. For those who haven't had the pleasure of meeting Marty, just know that Marty is... well, he's Marty. There's no one like him in the industry and there probably isn't room for another. Still, his large persona can't mask an extensive knowledge of, and reverence for, the frame-making craft.

MG You want to talk about frames from the Southwest and American Impressionist periods. Being in Santa Fe, I thought that you would have chosen something from the French Louis periods.

MH Very funny. But now that you mention it, some American Impressionist styles, like the Irving Couse design, come from the Louis XIV period. They were surface carved [i.e. low-relief carved] as opposed to being expounded upon [i.e. high-relief carved] like the Louis XIV frames. Why? It's because in the early 1900's, before today's technology, all they had to go by were poor pictures of French frames. So the American Impressionists were really the bastards of the frame industry.

MG Oh, that's nice.

MH No, really! If you look at any

of the carvings of American Impressionist frames and look at a European design, you'll see the connection. You look the carving in the corner of a Spanish frame, for instance, draw it badly and, poof!, now it's become an American Impressionist carved frame. The first person who pointed that out to me was Bob Kulicke. And the son-of-a-gun was right. Look at the Couse frame and tell me that you don't see Louis XIV in there.

MG Did these Southwest designs then influence other, later designs?

MH Yeah, as the movement got all the way West, you had something come out called the "California Impressionist" frame that developed. Maybe it's the sea air, but these frames were all orange. Look at those "plein-air" frames: they've got this wash finish that's more

orange-ey than red. A lot of lemon gold, white gold; sweet, mushy stuff. That's why I say: You've got American Impressionist frames (from the East Coast to Chicago), then you've got California Impressionist (with more swoops to the carving—more exaggerated) and then you've got your Southwest frames (with obvious Indian designs).

MG Give me a quick history of frames from the Southwest.

MH Most of the action happened in Taos with the Taos Society of Artists. It's about an hour and a half from here. And when you think about what the conditions were like up there in 1915—no roads, the altitude—you really had to want to be there. And who goes up there? Some wacko artists—that's who. Of course, they went there because of the light. Up there

you've got clarity you can't find anywhere else. Clear as a bell. And these artists that were up there needed frames. They couldn't pick up the phone, call New York City, and have a frame UPS-ed. So what did they do? They made their own frames or they designed them for a local guy to do. Burt Phillips had his arrow-corner frames; Irving Couse had his carved-bird frames—they were frames like that. Most all of them had a particular look that they liked.

MG Do you see many of the original frames?

MH Sure. And sometimes we'll go find an original Taos frame to go onto an original Taos School painting. Now that's fun. But the truth of the matter is this: just because it's an original doesn't mean it's a good frame. It may not be what's best for the painting. I'll tell some clients, "You have to keep that frame with the painting, but you don't have to show that frame with the painting. Take the painting to a good frame shop (and there are a few across the country) and have it framed correctly—in a beautifully hand-carved, gold-leafed frame, correct for the period."

MG Not with a re-creation of the original finish?

MH In gold. Subdued, if need be for the painting, but gold. Why should it have to be gold paint, or metal leaf that's turned to dark green? You shouldn't have to look at your hundred-thousand dollar painting in a frame that's dark green, especially when that's not what the artist intended. Let's go

back to Irving Couse for a moment. A lot of his frames were done in bronze powder. He might have done two tones, a gold color and maybe a greenish color. Today [the materials have aged and] they're all brown or they're all dark green. There's no gold left in the frame. So, yes—we could replicate that. But I choose not to.

MG So you just tell the client to the stick the old frame in a closet?

MH Sure. That way it's always available. If it's a good frame and it's just the patina that's shot, we can always re-gild it.

MG I'm seeing a trend in the industry toward refinishing "in the original finish." It's using the same techniques and materials as the original—to freshen the look—regardless of whether anyone likes the finish.

MH Don't get me wrong. I will do what the client wants. If the original was metal leaf and they want it in metal leaf? Well, then I'll do it in metal leaf. But because I'm a gilder, I will always want to do it in 22K gold—then knock that finish way back [to suit the painting]. Remember why they [the Taos School artists] finished their frames in metal leaf: because they didn't know how to gild, that's why. They didn't know how to make bole. They didn't know how to make the right kind of gesso. They didn't know any of that stuff. They knew how to carve up a frame, take a little schlag-leaf, schmear the frame with a little glue—and call it gilded. Why did they use metal leaf? Why bronze powder? Because they were poor.

They didn't have the money. They didn't have the ability and they weren't in a city where they could get at it.

MG But eventually they had access to better frames coming from the East Coast.

MH Sure. A little later they had frames coming out of Chicago, from shops like the Newcomb-Macklin Company. But often they wouldn't, or couldn't, shell out the money for gold on these frames. They probably just couldn't afford it. But it's all relative. I just saw a \$175,000 [Ernest] Blumenschein that was originally sold for \$125. Are you going to put a \$175,000 Blumenschein in a metal leaf frame? Of course not! You might have put the \$125 version in one, though. But I dare say that I don't know a painter—no matter how little they sell their art for—that wouldn't rather have their painting in a gold frame. Metal leaf only came from necessity, not because it was beautiful.

MG But there are accounts where artists, working in the East—where they had access to real gold—started experimenting with metal leaf for its tonality. They seemed specifically drawn to metal leaf for its own qualities.

MH They should have left it as an experiment. That finish isn't going to last. Unfortunately there is no way to preserve it; it turns color.

MH We look to the finest framemaking companies of the industry to make frames that are true to the period. Frames with fine detail (like punchwork and sgraffito) that you can see every

time. But when other companies get one or two steps away from the original—what do you end up with? A lot of nothing. But it's cheap. It's the same reason the Taos School founders were working in gold paint. What were they trying to do, for God's sake? They were trying to make it look like a gold frame. It looked and felt like gold, but it wasn't. That's why I'll do it in gold—gold is closer to their

original intent, and it's the real thing.

MG So if they had been able to, they would have used gold?

MH Yes. They had to use metal leaf to replicate gold, but we don't have to. Today we've got framemakers that have it and know how to use it.

MG And know how to patinate it?

MH They certainly should. But there has always been a lot of blind

framemakers. When I've got a job in here, I try to get "into the painting" with the finish. I try to catch the gold first and then "patina-to-period." Look, you've got to remember that this is history-via-Marty. This isn't written down anywhere. It's what I think—and what I do—in my shop. That's my story. Zay Gezundt! Live and be well. ■



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