

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. Beginning this month, 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.

This American print frame, circa 1870-80, shows eclectic design antecedents on its 3 3/4" profile: a Neoclassical egg and dark back edge combined with an asymmetrical frieze of Scottish thistle, Medieval diaper pattern, and a stylized basket weave. The surface is tricolor burnished Roman gilt applied ornament over wood with a red velvet liner.



Tracy Gill and Simeon Lagodich, owners of Gill & Lagodich Fine Period Frames, NYC, discuss American Aesthetic Period Photo and Print Frames

MG The defining moment in frame history that you've chosen to discuss is 19th Century photo frames.

TG Actually, frames in America that became available for photographs and prints during the Aesthetic Period after the Civil War.

MG Give us a little background to set the stage.

TG After the Civil War, factories sprung up. There was a rising middle-class. People began to be able to decorate their houses. It wasn't just the privileged class that could afford to put art on their wall; therefore, there was a new need for frames. Photography [was] invented around the 1840's, but it became prolific here after the Civil War. Photo studios were everywhere.

MG What kind of frames did they chose?

TG Photographers would order moulding-type frames, such as the Eastlake-style. They would order the parts separately: the liner, the incised-ebonized part, then the gilded compo outer edge. They would [also] make their own combinations. Most every photo studio had its own set of components, so it's very rare that you find the same design twice. Sometimes we'll find pairs, like if the husband or wife had their portraits shot. I should also say that we're talking about ebonized walnut, walnut with ebonized striping, gilded striping.

MG How would the photographers know what to order?

TG It was done through catalogs with images of completed frames

and the parts. But very few of these catalogs survived. There really were many different designs.

MG Which of these frame designs are you drawn to?

TG The frames that interest me the most are the eclectic, Aesthetic ones. They have asymmetric ornaments [that are] usually Roman Gilded in different colors. They borrowed motifs from Owen Jones's Grammar of Ornament, from lots of cultures, without necessarily understanding the meaning of the motifs. I have one Aesthetic frame that has an Arabic saying right off the Alhambra. Something like, "The Spirit of God is in this". I really doubt they knew what it meant. I think they just liked the design.

MG Could you define "Roman Gilding"?

TG It is, basically, burnished bronze powder. Bronze powder comes in myriad colors. [When]

suspended in animal-glue it can be burnished. There are frames that were Roman Gilded because, at the time they were made, they were meant to look like cast metal or cast bronze. I think a lot of frames would imitate Medieval or Renaissance metalwork. They were a lot brighter when they were made but, because bronze powder is fugitive, they have tarnished.

Many turn black. We have some really beautiful ones that are almost black-bronze colored.

MG I'll bet that not everyone thinks they're beautiful.

TG People are always asking you to re-gild [bronze gilded frames]. They think they're ugly. We're one of the few that actually re-create Roman Gilded finishes. It is toxic, but it's a really beautiful patina on the right type of frame. It also ties in with metal-leaf frames, like early Stanford White frames. We have one here that has its original metal-leaf finish; the original Le Brocq label proudly proclaims, "Metal Gilding." It was meant to look like cast bronze, but now it's gotten dark. Most of time, you'll find these finishes over-painted or re-gilded, and it's a shame.

MG I understand that the framemakers of that time were able to achieve a coloration with metal that they couldn't seem to get with gold.

TG It's the same with the silver leaf on print frames. A lot of dealers will call it lemon gold. It's not; it's silver leaf. You can tell because gold doesn't tarnish. Silver is hydrosopic, so when moisture gets through the shellac or lacquer coating, it tarnishes and you get black specs in the scratches of silver leaf frames. I think it's beau-

tiful like that.

MG Were these methods used, mainly, in the interest of expense?

TG That's probably partly true, but I think it's really an aesthetic decision—pardon the pun. I just found a quotation from an article on New York houses from the 1890's. It talked about tasteful interiors having silver-gilded frames to harmonize with the muted tonalities of other things in the house, which was a new thing. And I love the way they decorated the panels. They would use acid-etched patterns, faux painting. They would even paint within the incising.

MG I've always found the variety of incised patterns of the Eastlake frames to be fascinating.

TG We've found that the incising on these frames is often regional. For example, some that we found from Pennsylvania have a Pennsylvania Dutch motif.

MG What did these Eastlakes go for, in their day?

TG The prices, to the photographer, are listed in the catalogs. There are only about three catalogs known to be in existence. This 1882 catalog has prices like eight dollars a dozen and twenty-four dollars a dozen.

MG How would you define, and identify, these photo and print frames from the Aesthetic period?

TG I would say they're original, even though they are derivative—if that makes sense. You'll often see asymmetry. They'll have something like a vertical ornament, like cattails, looking back to the Pre-Raphaelite Movement or the British Arts and Crafts Movement. But with no understanding of it. They're just taking motifs and

combining them any way they choose. It's like free drawing, somewhat in the way of Prendergast's frames. They all look hand drawn, as if he was drawing them while he was carving them. They're not perfect. Even if he's doing a frame that has a continuous design, the rosettes are never the same on each side.

MG But there seems to be a great deal more precision to these photo frames.

TG Well, they are factory-made. You can see that they're made in lengths, then chopped. There's no corner resolution. There were frames molded as a single unit that had resolved corners. This allowed for their mass-production. But, overall, these frames were not about hand-applied, free form designs—like painting frames were.

MG So it could be said that these frames were for the "everyman"?

TG Undoubtedly. They were made for cheap prints, chromo-lithographs, and photographs. I don't think that someone like J.P. Morgan would have had a cheap chromo of children praying or kittens in little houses.

MG Not your "high-art".

TG There were reproductions done of high-art. [Albert] Bierstadt's "Sunset at Yosemite;" [Frederic] Church's "Niagara Falls". People would go see the paintings and buy a poster—like you would today.

MG And the frames would have interesting designs that might, or might not, relate to the subject?

TG More often not. They took motifs from everywhere. You might have an Oscar Wilde sunflower next to an Egyptian

anthemion and a Neo-Grecque element next to a screw-head. One of my favorites is a frame with a band of exposed screw-heads.

SL From the Machine Age.

TG I think it's Roman Gilded with four different colors. It's wild.

SL In this period, there was a lot of harmonizing, as opposed to the kind of clutter that went on in Victorian interiors. These designs are somewhat related to fabrics, related to patterns, textures, and colors that were in interiors everywhere because of industrial production.

MG It seems that, if the individual design elements were considered good, then combined they must be great.

SL Then they must be even better. Sure.

TG It had a lot to do with interiors. The article I mentioned earlier also talked about the poor, average housewife who wanted to decorate her house. She would buy things from the department store, and without having been to the country where these things were from, she lacked understanding. The Japanese fan, with the Chinese screen, with Moorish frame, with the Eastlake chair—it was too much. So, somewhere around the 1880's to 1890's, [a] move toward harmonizing started to take place. You had this Age of Eclecticism (as I call it), then the Gilded Age in the 1880's. Department stores were then carrying reproductions of famous oil paintings in big, ugly Barbizon frames that were made just to dress up a painting. By the 1890's, you have the Stanford Whites, the [James MacNeill] Whistlers, [Edgar] Degas frames, the simpler mouldings. And you

usually don't think about it, but when you really consider what went on before, these people should have a place of honor for their vision.

Simeon Lagodich and Tracy Gill discuss Roman Gilding

SL I want to talk about Roman Gilding.

MG Please do.

SL Roman Gilding (and metal-leafing, for that matter) was used on fine frames as a rejection of gold, a rejection of the Gilded Age. It was as revolutionary, in its own way, as the Arts and Crafts frames were. It grows out of Stanford White and, the framemaker Le Brocq, for instance.

TG [to Simeon Lagodich] You're into the 1890's. I've been talking about photo frames and print frames of the 1860's and 1870's.

SL Those frames were done for both color and expense. But the idea of moving away from gold was happening on a very high level at the same time.

MG Weren't they asking for trouble? Gold has better longevity.

SL You're right. It wasn't stable. It darkens over time. So, many a wonderful frame that used to have a great surface, that was properly coordinated, perfectly tuned with brass powder, is gone. Whistlers are the most common for Roman Gilding. And it wasn't about saving money. If they're spending a fortune in carving and they apply this type of finish, it was for a reason. And due to the fact that the frames don't survive in the right color, they are being systematically re-gilt by everyone. It's like a whole chapter of our history

that's disappearing.

TG We don't have color photos from the period.

SL It's a disappearing world. I had this conversation with Larry Shar [of Julius Lowy] and some others. They all say the same thing. They re-gild them. They put them in gold. We're doing a project now for The Metropolitan Art Museum. The original was probably Roman Gilded, but we're using gold and treating it in such a way that it appears Roman Gilded, so it won't tarnish in the future.

MG You're giving it a longer life span.

TG But it's a frame we're carving—a replica. We don't know what the original patina looked like. We only have a black and white photo from 1909.

MG Since the frame was attuned with the painting, wouldn't the painting give you some cues regarding tonality?

TG It's not that simple, and you have to be careful. You could easily see many surface treatments being used; lemon gold, for example.

SL The Arts and Crafts frames did often tend to be bright and lemony. Where afterward you had what I like to call the Social Realists. [George Wesley] Bellows' frames come to mind; [ones] where you start having those dark, coppery colors. I really like those frames. They're sort of an acquired taste. It does a real disservice to the gritty, street-wise paintings of the Ashcan Period when they're put into gilded frames. It's sort of like dockworkers wearing dresses.

TG Or if you put a Picasso in a modern frame, it does a disservice [to the painting]. But if you put it into an early Spanish frame, like

[Picasso] would have chosen, it makes his painting look more modern.

SL It creates friction.

MG How difficult is it to present the notion of Roman Gilding to clients?

SL You always have this problem. We say to a museum, “We have the frame, but it’s Roman Gilded”.

TG Our policy is to propose things “as-is.” We don’t restore something until someone chooses to, unless it’s been over-painted.

We leave dings in. We like people to see what they are buying, in the original condition. It’s up to them to decide what they want done.

MG Since we don’t have an accurate example of what the original metal-leafed or Roman Gilded frame really looked like, how much respect can we give to the original surface treatment? It’s an ephemeral art form—and it’s over.

TG You do your best. We recently restored a Stanford White frame for The Art Institute of Chicago

that was metal-leafed. It had been over-painted with a flesh-colored casein with a green showing through. They couldn’t tell, even under microscopic analysis, if the green was a reaction of the oil size with the metal-leaf (as you often see with oil paintings on copper) or if it was a tonality that the frame designer had intended. We ended up bringing it back to a metal-leaf as we imagined it might look at the time. It looks like cast bronze now.

MG I still have a hard time letting go of the idea that metal-leaf and bronze powder finishes are an inferior version of gold.

SL I like to think of it as an alternative to gold. To some turn-of-the-century artists, gold didn’t work with their aesthetic. When I do my own research, I go to the museum. And when I see a frame that has a metal-leaf or Roman Gilded finish where there is enough left to imagine the original coloration—the package is sensational. And

when I see the identical frame after re-gilding, it’s lost the entire focus. The intent of the artist, the intent of the framemaker—just thrown away. We saw a recently-restored frame from the 1890’s that was bright. Brilliant bright. It just wouldn’t have happened. It would have been toned and controlled, not “coming-out-at-you” framing. For paintings that are, what I call “Whistlerian,” barely there, nocturnal things that you almost have to wait for them to appear...big gold frames are horrible. You see them at great museums at the highest level. I don’t think it takes an enormous amount of sophistication to avoid this, you just have to be clued-in to it. When you are, you begin to see that it just fits. It feels right.

MG As esoteric as all this seems to be—it is fun stuff to talk about.

SL I get a high from it.

MG Me to... We’re “frame-geeks”, aren’t we?

SL And proud of it.



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