

# 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.*



An inventory of approximately 3500 antique frames and a lifetime of experience are combined with skill and understanding by Jakob Guttman—whether he is framing a modern painting or a period piece.



*Author's note: For those readers unfamiliar with this month's interviewee, Mr. Jakob Guttman is one of our industry's treasure—a gentleman that is far too humble to admit the contributions he has made to the picture framing trade in America. I didn't realize until much later that Mr. Guttman (he insists on being called Jakob, although those who know and respect him still address him formally) is not inclined to grant interviews. It was a privilege to speak with him and I am proud to bring you this discussion.*

**MG** Would you tell me a little of your history in picture framing?

**JG** I've been in picture framing all my life; [my experience] goes back nearly 60 years. My father, may he rest in peace, was in the antique business. So I more or less grew up in antiques and with an appreciation of art.

When did I specialize in picture frames? It was an opportunity given to me after the war. After I came out of the British Army, I worked in London with one of the best picture framers in the world, F. A. Pollack. He taught me the essence of picture frames. I started learning it from the beginning-up, as an apprentice. I later became manager of the firm.

**MG** That's where you became proficient in the craft.

**JG** I did the gilding, I did the carving, I did all the procedures in picture framing. When I came to this country in 1950, I got married and established myself here in New York. I had quite a lot of contacts with art dealers in the United States who said to me that I would have a brilliant future [if I came to] America. I have never regretted coming because it really gave me a wonderful life.

Now, regarding picture frames. It has been a neglected subject for many, many, many years. Museum directors and curators didn't pay much attention to it. It was an orphan. When you would go

through various museums, many years ago, you would find a 17th century Dutch painting framed in an English frame or in a 19th century plaster frame. Really, people didn't know.

So when I came along—with some others—we tried to educate curators. I must say that many of them are [now] better educated and are looking to reunite genuine frames with genuine pictures. Now, when I talk about "genuine frames" I mean antique frames—I don't mean reproduction frames, even though there are many people here (among them, Abe Munn Picture Frames) who make a wonderful product in reproductions and reducing antique frames.

**MG** You have a long history with Abe Munn Picture Frames, as I understand.

**JG** I became associated with Abe Munn, the founder, many years ago. I gave him antique originals to copy and we built-up the business together. We had a wonderful relationship.

**MG** Together you helped to advance framemaking in America.

**JG** I helped, yes. American framemaking came into its own during the 1940's and 1950's. Before that, I would consider it primitive. However, I must say that the one person responsible for a re-vitalization of framemaking in America was Bob Kulicke. He was an artist with understanding of frames and design and craftsmanship.

**MG** So your opinion is that, American frame craftsmanship, prior to the 1940's and 1950's, was simply inferior?

**JG** For antiques and antique reproductions, yes. When I was in London, Americans ordered frames from us. That's why they asked me to come here.

**MG** And you proceeded to foster an awareness of the craft.

**JG** First people have to become aware that this is an art object. Today, we, here in America, can produce a reproduction carved frame in a very, very short time. In Europe, it takes three or four months. [Now] we have European art dealers coming here for frames.

And because of American "know-how", we can quickly turn out elaborate frames that pass for antiques. I told this story to Jake [Munn of Abe Munn Picture Frames]: when I was in London, one of his frames was sold as an

antique. When I saw this, I let the buyer know that, if he wanted, I could get him all he needed.

**MG** When did you begin selling reproductions?

**JG** Around 1955, when Picasso pictures came onto the market, people thought, "Picasso is a Spanish painter—let's find a Spanish frame". As it happened, it looked very well. We sought out antique frames to put on Picasso pictures.

However, you couldn't satisfy the [growing] demand for antique frames, so we began to make reproductions. But as I was saying, the antique frames themselves were [also] neglected. They [the art community] didn't pay much attention to [them]. Also, it was a matter of taste. I remember, after the war in the late 1940's, [that] Dutch frames, for instance, were taken off of genuine Dutch pictures because they were out of fashion. They would put all sorts of frames around them [instead]. I was present, as a matter of fact, when we burned some of them.

**MG** They were burned?

**JG** I'm sorry to say. And today they are a rarity. Museums are looking for them. Unfortunately, there aren't many antique Dutch frames from the 17th century. It's become very hard to find many antique frames.

**MG** How do you find antique frames, and when did finding them become more difficult?

**JG** Years ago, I used to travel all over Europe buying antique frames. I still do, but not so much. We would buy them at auction and send them over here. But when a commodity like a painting or frame is put up at auction, it

becomes expensive. In the 1950's, French Impressionist paintings came on the market and became very popular. Good collectors were not satisfied with the little "garbage frame," or what I like to call a "one-hour framing job". So they looked for antique frames. That's when the antique framing business really took off and frames became harder to find. Collectors wanted French frames, which were not really of the period of the pictures. The paintings were 20th Century and they would go back to 18th Century frames. They found that they looked well together—looked beautiful.

**MG** Your choice of an important moment in frame history is, in fact, when antique frames began to be paired with contemporary art.

**JG** First of all, not every antique frame is capable of being put onto a modern picture. You can't put a Jackson Pollack in a Louis XV frame, but you can put a Jackson Pollack in a nice, old, black Spanish frame. I am not always in favor of these austere, little strips of wood being put onto a new picture. It doesn't always suit it.

**MG** What is your rationale of selecting a frame for a contemporary work?

**JG** You have to have an understanding of what goes with what. I wouldn't match up an El Greco with a Louis XV frame—that's out of the question. When it comes to very modern pictures—[Adolph] Gottlieb, [Willem] De Kooning or Jackson Pollack—you can't put it into a very elaborate frame. It's like somebody going to a cocktail party in a nightgown. The frame is a dress. The dress has to be worn for the occasion.

**MG** When you feel that “the occasion” steers you away from the antique, what do you do?

**JG** I have, in my lifetime, designed many modern frames. I use the picture’s geometry (or composition) to design something plain, without carving. But it’s often easy to find an antique frame to compliment a modern picture.

**MG** When working with antique frames, you often need to re-size them. Would you say that if the final, adjusted, product is an accurate representation of the original antique’s detail and condition, then its value is maintained?

**JG** Here the craftsmanship of a framemaker is very important. You have to enlarge it: cut it and add to it, and make it look as if nothing has been done. But once you cut a frame it’s no longer in its original state. So if I buy a frame, I put it as an argument: I say that it has been depreciated [laughing].

**MG** If I were the buyer, I guess I would say that too.

**JG** If I sell it, I tell the person that it serves their purpose: “It’s a marriage between your picture and your frame.” If you match your work to the original work, it’s just restoration.

**MG** But there are those who view it as a loss.

**JG** Many people believe that the value of the frame has been depreciated when you do this. I disagree. I feel that if an antique looks good on a picture and has been adjusted properly, it serves the purpose. Of course when I sell a frame that fits the painting perfectly (without needing re-sizing), I have great enjoyment with it. It’s a wonderful thing that happens very rarely.

**MG** How much of the original antique needs to be present, in order for you to still consider it antique?

**JG** I would say 75%, although you should never completely re-finish the antique portions. You should make the new work match the old.

**MG** What criteria do you use when selecting a frame for a period painting?

**JG** I select frames differently for the dealer than for the collector. The dealer wants to sell the picture for the highest price. He wants to present it in such a way that it knocks the client off his chair. Therefore, I would do it big—I wouldn’t use the word “bombastic”, but big, important.

For collectors, I try to frame the art more aesthetically. The simplest [example] is inserts [liners]. Inserts are sometimes required, but nine out of 10 times they aren’t. Inserts are (I maintain) to make the picture bigger. Make the picture bigger—another ten thousand bucks.

**MG** So, the current use of liners is just a carry-over from the influence of art dealers?

**JG** Yes, because early pictures never used inserts. Now, I’m not talking about watercolors. That’s a different matter. I’m talking about oil paintings. For the collector, I try to steer him away from inserts. But when selecting a frame, the history of the frame must match the history of the painting. When I go to museums and I see an 18th century frame around a 16th century picture—that’s wrong. You have to match the frame to the time of the creation of the painting.

**MG** And with your inventory [of approximately 3500 frames], I would imagine that you can accommodate most any situation.

**JG** I had an experience once, many years ago, where an art dealer called me and told me that he had a painting that needed a frame. I looked at the picture. I measured it. I knew what kind of frame I had in mind and I found a frame that fit it exactly. Not only did it fit exactly—it had a label on the back, which was torn in half. Part of the label was still on the picture and the other half was on my frame. I had found the original frame. You ask, “How can this happen?” Look at my frames—where are the pictures? The answer is this: In Europe during the wars, people took out the pictures and discarded the frames. That’s how some frame that I bought in London ended up in New York—matched together with a picture—after centuries of being apart. It’s detective work. And it gives me pleasure.

**MG** An amazing story. Can you tell me about any of the museums that you have counseled?

**JG** Well, the Louvre has, for many years, been trying to return to the proper frames. Some of the original frames were sold on the market, or have disappeared, or have been used for something else. Napoleon is to blame for [what was done in] the Louvre. He was a militaristic man. Everything had to be line-per-line. So he re-framed every picture in the style that was then in fashion.

**MG** I’m glad you mentioned grand-scale re-framings. I, personally find it interesting that in Italy, the Salvatore Rosa (or Carlo

Maratta) frame was considered at one time to be “proper presentation,” and that it seems to remain the “frame of choice” for multiple-painting settings.

**JG** Salvatore Rosa was a painter after which this frame is named; he may have been designer or the first person to use the design. But it’s a very nice frame, it’s not so elaborate. It can easily be used for many pictures, including modern paintings.

But what I find interesting is how they have adopted it in England. They are not really Salvatore Rosa frames—they have an Italian-English feeling. This is due to the fact that Englishmen always traveled to the south, to Italy. They copied the design, giving it their own characteristics. The Salvatore Rosa frame has inside, a hollow. So, the English put some design in the hollow. And because of this reduction, we call it an English Salvatore Rosa frame or English Maratta.

**MG** It seems to me that English frames are simply re-interpretations of designs that originated elsewhere. Did the English contribute

any real innovations to frame design?

**JG** Not that I can think of, although I suppose you could say that [Thomas] Chippendale designed a nice frame. He designed a style that was influenced by the French frames. Not as sophisticated, but nice. Remember, [the English] traded with many countries. This allowed them to bring back different designs. You find the same in America. Craftsman, here, made frames that were actually French or Italian designs.

**MG** When talking about the Salvatore Rosa frame, I got the impression that you had some distinct views about artist designed frames.

**JG** I have clients that bring me beautiful, framed pictures and say, “This is the original frame the artist did.” That always gets my back up. The artist was a poor guy—he probably found whatever he could to present the picture. He made himself something out of four pieces of wood. Some of them have quite nice ideas, [James McNeill] Whistler, [John] Marin, and all the others.

Now I’m not knocking it at all, but when they come to me with an original frame, which is sometimes an atrocity, they seem to think that it belongs to the art—which is crazy. I always try to talk them out of it. My policy is this: No artist knows how to frame his own picture.

**MG** Are there any artists you can name that did have a feel for framing?

**JG** Not many. I mentioned John Marin; his is a pleasing design. But not all frames named after artists were designed by the artists. Take Bracque frames for instance. It’s a modern frame. Why is it called a Bracque frame? Probably some art dealer in Paris decided that it looked best on [Georges] Bracque paintings. I have named frames myself after some art dealers.

Those frames would be used regularly by the gallery. But to say that artists designed frames? I would say that eighty percent couldn’t do it.

**MG** Thank you for taking this time to share your thoughts and experiences. And thank you for your contributions to the craft.

**JG** My pleasure. ■



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](mailto:emguthrie@yahoo.com).