

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.

The transitional Louis XVI frame on Joseph Siffred Duplessis' 1778 portrait of Benjamin Franklin is considered great because of its original craftsmanship. The damage and distress it has received over the years have not dulled the true colors of the gilding and the re-cutting is an excellent example of work from that period. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Friedsam Collection, bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931. Photograph ©1981 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.)



Giovanni Bucchi, master gilder and restorer/conservator of frames and gilded objects, and owner of Ennio Restorations in New York City, talks about what makes a frame great.

MG: I understand that your business is based, largely, on furniture restoration. Is framing restoration just an extension of that business?

GB: Exactly. The methodology is identical. But in period framing you may find a small number of procedures that are different. Some of the differences are in ground preparation, special re-cutting treatment, and in the use of tools on trophy and miniature frames.

MG: When you speak of "the gilder" or "the gilding process," you are including all work after the wood was carved, not only the steps beginning with laying of the leaf.

GB: Yes. Great gilding starts with a great carving. The gilding process begins with the gesso ground application. In period objects it is applied selectively using different techniques depending upon the intricacy of the carving. A knowledge of these techniques is of

utmost importance because it is one of the elements that allows us to recognize a period gilded ground from a reproduction or restoration. Gesso application techniques vary depending on the period and country of origin. The method used in gesso application remained close to the original form until the last quarter of the 18th century.

The next step for the gilder is re-cutting the gesso, which is by far the most crucial element in the analysis of a period piece. It is the gilder's signature; it is the showcase for his skill. The essence of re-cutting is that one stroke that can be repeated but never taken away. Next is ground color preparation which has a wide number of variations, the scope of which is ultimately to achieve the final gilded surface.

The final process of the gilder is the leafing. Originally, in a gilder's workshop there was a

person exclusively assigned to the leafing process. This was not only to provide efficiency in methods, but also to assure consistency (with regard to what should be worked on first, and how and where the burnish scheme would be applied).

The dimension of the leaf, and its metal composition, is another defining element of authenticity. Once again, as in gesso re-cutting, we have different leafing techniques based upon the intricacy of the ground and the period and country in which the piece was created.

MG: And when it comes to frames?

GB: I love every frame, but I have to tell you how I see frames: most of them are nothing more than an aggregate of profiles, from the simplest box frame to the most richly ornate one. If you analyze a frame, [you will see that often] one side will be repeated three times. The exception to this rule is represented

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by sculpted frames, where we find high relief and asymmetry. The latter kind, such as a trophy frame, is a good example.

MG: But what about when you are “getting to know” the frame?

GB: When initially “getting to know” the frame—looking at the frame for the first time—I try not to be concerned with stylistic considerations. I need to recognize the overall impact of the frame, its outline, and its color. Now, to understand the right color for a frame, you must spend time looking at good ones. I intend to make a list of the 10 most beautiful frames in New York. This is an ongoing project of mine.

MG: A great idea. Can you tell me any that are on the list?

GB: I’ll mention three. The first frame, housed at the Metropolitan [Museum of Art in New York City], holds the portrait of Claes Duyst van Voorhoot, by Frans Hals. This frame is French and is a classic example of Regence style. The re-cutting is a sublime example of finesse and elegance. If you look close, on the side of the frame you will find a three-centimeter deep cove that has been water gilded and burnished. Now, take a precise look at the overlapping and you must conclude that it was a great gilder.

There is another frame that is significant at the Met, and it is a superb example that speaks to the superior quality of water gilding. This is the frame that surrounds the panel by Marco Del Buono, made in 1472. The title for the panel is “The Story of Esther.” Take your

time and look upon the burnished surface, and make your conclusion. You are looking at a 500-year-old gilded ground. After this you may want to run to the English gallery and look at the console table, attributed to Mattias Locke, built in 1740. Look at the difference of the oil gilding conditions after less than 300 years, and compare the two.

Lastly there is another frame at the Met, a Louis XVI transition that holds the portrait of Benjamin Franklin, located on the first floor in the European Paintings gallery. There is damage and distress [on the frame], but the overall hues are true, and the re-cutting is a classic example of this period. Look at the overlapping and the deposit of grime. (See photo on page 120).

MG: I find that my eye has been attuned to see the workmanship of the frame, plus the effects of time. Do you look for that also, or do you try to see through to the original condition?

GB: You have to see both. A frame presented to you as original must show some logical deposit of grime and soil. The opposite sides should create what I call “night” and “day.” The bottom of the frame (regardless of the shape of profile) should be the recipient of the largest deposits of dirt and grime. The day (i.e. the top) should give a good sense of the original condition. And you should see a gradual movement (down each vertical side) from day to night.

This method [of observation] will give the best evidence that a frame was restored on a flat bench. You will have no night or day and

no movement between the two. Everything is evenly applied over the entire surface. I ask my students to locate a place with no distress, no ground breakage (gesso or bole fractures), no deposits. It is the hardest thing to find and replicate; it is gold with nothing on it. Even an antique frame, which has been heavily damaged, will offer you some rest.

The best way to look at frames is to not use a systematic method, but to be agile with your understanding of the criteria that gives patina. Consider the technique used in the beginning, the environmental conditions where this frame was located, and where it was made. Each frame has a different life. You need to know the function and historical location of the work. For example, 16th century votive images—with small frames that were meant to be handled—have a characteristic patination given by the handling itself.

You have to be careful because the variables are many. A work may have been restored in the 18th century, making examination difficult. You need to know what you should see. There should be some sense of “order” based on your understanding of the original.

The best thing for a neophyte to do is to not get immersed in the soup of stylistic information. You’ll get lost. It’s better to begin teaching the eyes not to search out specific details, but to see what is present in the frame. Because in the end, you only see what you have come to know, and what you know to look for. And that is the pleasure of it. ■



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