

Time Frame

compiled by Mark Guthrie

This union membership poster hangs over the time clock at Yuenger Wood Moulding in Chicago. When originally posted up, the name of the company was William Yuenger Manufacturing.



Photo courtesy of Yuenger Wood Moulding, Co.

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.

For this month's column, I spoke with Paul MacFarland, CPE, GCF about his views on the evolution of education in the picture framing industry. Paul has been involved in fine art framing since 1977, having worked as a frame carver and gilder, retail frame shop owner, production manager for a moulding manufacturer, and national sales manager for a distributor. In 1992, he founded Art Preservation Resources to provide product testing, consulting, and training for industry manufacturers, publishers, and distributors. He is an instructor at various education venues in the industry.

MG I know that, as with our usual talks, we'll eventually be discussing our views on "the state of the industry." But, the topic you've chosen as "an important moment in frame history" deals with education, right?

PM Well, to start with. It's on the forefront of my mind. One of the things that has interested me over the last 20 years of training framers, and working with vendors on training their personnel, has been the history of this process. How did it all develop? It's actually an interesting process. Originally, you would train by apprenticeship.

MG "Originally" meaning...?

PM I guess we would have to say, from the Renaissance. This method continued unabated... until, somewhere during the first half of the 20th century, apprenticeship began

to fall away. The educational process changed.

MG Mechanization compartmentalized the work—and therefore the education?

PM It would seem. But I think there's more to it than that. Here's an example: Not too long ago, I was at the Yuenger Wood Moulding in South Chicago. It's, essentially, a working museum—early-20th century equipment that is still being used. But, on the wall was an old recruiting poster from the local Union of Picture Framers. They were part of the AFL [American Federation of Labor], before it became the AFL-CIO in 1955.

This poster is the only solid evidence I've seen that speaks to the training that went on, prior to World War II. At least in the Chicago area, there were framers

being trained through a union apprenticeship.

MG It shows that someone took the training pretty seriously.

PM And enough to unionize the process. But basically, after World War II, if someone wanted to become a framer, they went to work for somebody. Gathering skills on the job. There didn't seem to be any formal apprenticeship or training of any kind—until the 1970's. That's when Paul Frederick opened the Picture Framing Academy, in San Francisco. He set out to train framers with a specified curriculum. I went through the course. Also, around that time, Piedmont Moulding developed a traveling education series. I think that they just got into a van and traveled around to local distributors offering training seminars to the area framers. Now, the subject matter was pretty elementary by today's standards—but it worked. A shop owner could send an employee to a class and the employee would bring something back that had value—resulting in an increased net to the shop.

(continued on page 111)

(continued from page 112)

MG I think you touched on the most important point—there was an apparent value.

PM Exactly. It wasn't just "crafty" tricks that were fun. You could point to an increase in revenue from the training. Since then, the process has evolved from these small seminars to an entirely new level. Today, most of the major vendors sponsor some form of training. There are the programs at trade shows and there are permanent training centers as well.

MG And the training is more comprehensive.

PM Much more. These classes are developing retailers and framers, but they're also dealing with the history of "where things came from."

Overall, we're seeing a much broader and deeper range of subject matter. I see all this as the answer to: "What's going to sustain our industry?"

You know, I've also noticed that one of the many things making our industry very unique is the type of individual that's in it. In the old days, if you wanted to be a framer, you "apprenticed-out." You worked in a shop for some time and worked your way up. Maybe you would eventually take over the shop or open your own shop. But in the 1960's (and even more so in the 1970's with the advent of chops—which made it easier to start a new shop), the people coming into the industry were a different group. This group I call the "refugees."

MG I'm sure you mean that in the nicest way.

PM It's just a fact. During those

years, when I would conduct training sessions I began to notice that many of the folks coming into picture framing had come from someplace else. It was a second or third career for many of them. They viewed it as easier, or less stressful, than the careers they came from.

MG Well, of course. You never see a stressed-out framer.

PM Yeah, right. But you would see people like nurses or schoolteachers coming in. Those are definitely higher stress careers. And when these people came to this industry, they brought their baggage them.

MG So, framing was their hideout.

PM Their refuge. We're still largely a "refugee industry," although I get the impression that it's becoming less the case.

MG I know that you make it your business to stay on top of all the latest product developments. How would you assess the state of things in that area?

PM I'd say we're doing very well. One of the major developments we've witnessed over the past 15 to 20 years is that we now have a standard supply of materials. They're readily available and they are specifically made for us—the framing industry. Before, we were borrowing and adapting products from other industries. Now, of course, what goes hand-in-hand with this is the proper application of those products.

The folks at FACTS [Fine Art Care and Treatment Standards] have worked extremely hard to establish the "rules," to compile some guide-

lines. The trainers that I know work according to FACTS [guidelines] quite a bit. This goes a long way toward getting the average frame shop to operate with standardized practices.

So with the increased concentration on unifying the training and the fact that we have available products, we're seeing sort of a Renaissance in framing. And what I feel adds greatly to this, is a heightened interest and regard for the old stuff. There's an ever-increasing availability of text on period frames and on the rich history of framing. All of this has a serious impact on people (framers), both in the way they do business and the way they see art. I predict that in the next few years, we'll see a re-emergence of "period."

MG You're on-the-record with that one.

PM Think about it. We're still, somewhat, in that period that Bob Kulicke calls "eclecticism"—framers putting design components together because they look pretty or because the customer likes it. I think we'll see more framers saying, "This type of art should have this period of frame and these proportions." These principles were all established long ago by people who understood classic proportion. Mat size. Frame size. Even patina and surface texture. We got away from it, but I see a renewed interest. I think it's all pretty exciting. The old ways with the new products, along with a better understanding of how things should be done. ■



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.