

Style Snapshot

A look at a frame, its characteristics, and history

by Mark Guthrie, CPF

What type of frame is this? This is an example of a “molded,” “formed,” or, “cast” frame. It’s made not by carving wood, but by pouring a liquid into a rubber mold (containing a negative relief of the product). Currently, the liquid most often used is a form of resin or plastic, but many other products have been used—including gesso, plaster, and even papier-mâché. The poured material is allowed to harden (or “cure”). The product is then “de-molded” (removed) and ready to be given the desired surface treatment. Sometimes, the finished product is adhered to a wood backing for stability. This process allows more budget-minded consumers the enjoyment of, what normally would be, an expensive-to-produce frame design.

Where is it from? This frame in particular may have been created in the U.S., in Mexico, in Europe, or even the Far East. However, the technology for making these types of frames has become widespread.

What time period is it from? The frame seen here most likely dates from the 1950’s onward. However, the process of creating repeated output from a negative mold dates back to the ancients. A curious note in framing history is that there was a lawsuit brought during the 18th century in France to prohibit this technique. It was thought to be a type of forgery.

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(Top) This frame is most likely from the 1950s or onward. (Bottom) Looking at the backside, another way to identify a molded frame is a rounded corner on the rabbet.



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What are the defining/common characteristics of this type of frame? Perhaps it is best to compare a molded and a wood carved frame by looking at several factors:

Weight—Not always an accurate determining factor, but these frames are often excessively lighter or heavier than their all-wood counterparts.

Sharpness of Detail—Usually, the molded surface has an acute “edge” to the ornamental detail. There is a sense of “crispness” of design. Sometimes, it can look sharper than an actual carved wood frame. However, if the rubber mold becomes worn, an excessive “muddy” quality will be present.

Lack of “Undercut” Activity—In a carved wood frame, there are often areas where the carver has created a 3-dimensional, sculpted quality to the detail (i.e. a leaf may make an exaggerated fold over the frame’s outer edge and still contain the veins and stem on its underside). Cast products are rarely able to contain this nuance because the formed product would become “locked” in the rubber mold due to the more elaborate curves.

Lack of “Piercings”—Piercings are openings within a frame’s design. For instance, if there is a looping vine, there may be open space between its tendrils. With a cast product, any holes must be opened after the frame is demolded. Generally, the object of the process is cost-

control. So, while some openings may be created post-casting, it’s not often the case.

Presence of the “Draft”—A fact of life, when making these frames, is that the cured item must be removed from the rubber mold and the mold re-used. To facilitate these requirements, much of the detail on a cast frame will be contoured for easy de-molding. This is most evident on larger, raised, ornamental areas—the ornament will not be easy to grip because the underlying structure tapers slightly as it joins the body of the frame.

Additional comments: This process has been with us for some time and the technique has matured enough for us to consider that it has a place in framing history. After all, the marketplace has determined that cast frames serve a need—providing a less expensive version of hand carved frames.

An interesting outcome to the 18th century lawsuit in France is that the court decided that these cast products, “ouvrages de composition,” were legal products but must be labeled accordingly so that consumers knew what they were buying. With the widespread availability of molded frames (and frame components) on the market, those words of wisdom seem just as applicable today. ■