

A Survey of Frame History

Part I: Panel Painting

by Diane Day, CPF

The development of frame design is tied to that of architectural design. Frames evolved with architectural taste, and through history more attention was paid to making frames fit into an architectural setting than to creating frames to complement the paintings they surrounded.

Framing borders existed in art long before the picture frame. The Egyptians and Greeks, among others, used borders on pottery and in wallpaintings to divide scenes and ornamentation into sections. Eventually, art objects such as Classical Greek mosaics became important in their own right and the framing devices took on another function.

From early Christian days in Europe, painting, combined with architecture and sculpture, was part of an overall decorating plan for the church, with framing devices used to separate or enclose the various elements. Frames or borders, illustrated in surviving illuminated manuscripts and around ivory-panel carvings, provide some indication of the types of framing devices that may have been used in the Middle Ages.

Ivory panel carvings are examples of art objects which were surrounded by an architectural frame or border to protect them as well as to bring attention to the carving and add depth.



Figure 1. Tuscan Madonna and Child from the Middle Ages. From *The Art and History of Frames* by H. Heydenryk.



Figure 2. Simone Martini's Christ Discovered in the Temple. From *A History of European Picture Frames*, by Jacob Simon.

The first carved wooden frames appeared on small panel paintings in the Twelfth and Thirteenth centuries. Like carved ivory panels, and in the tradition of Byzantine icon painting, framed panel paintings were made from one piece. The area to be painted was carved out, leaving a raised framing border around the outside edge, like a tray (figure 1). The whole piece was then gessoed and gilded. Painting the image on the flat panel was the last thing to be done. As the size of these paintings increased, so did the cost and time needed to produce them.

Free-standing panel painting only appears to have been common in the Twelfth century. With the spread of moveable, independent painted units (mostly altarpieces), a need for better framing methods became apparent. Since it was too costly and time consuming to continue producing the panel and frame from one piece of wood, a more efficient method was eventually developed which used mitered moulding strips. These strips were attached to a flat wooden panel which produced a similar result to the carved panel, but were more cost effective.

This type of frame is known as an engaged frame (figure 2). The early ones were made of simple wood-

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en moulding strips attached to the outside edge of a wooden panel. Gilding and painting took place once the unit was complete.

An item such as a large altarpiece was made from several pieces of wood glued together. This unit was then glued and nailed to a framing unit. These frames served as decoration as well as structural supports. Altarpieces constructed in this manner began to split (in time) because, due to the glue and nails, the wood was restricted from freely expanding and contracting with changes in temperature and humidity. Eventually thinner framing units were developed which could flex with the wooden panels when there were changes in temperature and humidity.

Another innovation was the use of dowels. In the large complex altarpieces each field was a separate wooden panel attached to the one next to it with wooden dowels instead of with nails and glue. This allowed the various parts of an altarpiece to expand and contract at their own rate without major restrictions, which could result in splitting. The joints between panels were often covered over by thin decorative columns (figure 3). As the frame evolved in importance these simple mouldings became more and more elaborate. The frame and painting were totally integrated with one another and inseparable.



Figure 3. Taddeo di Bartolo's *Virgin and Child*, 1411. From *A History of European Picture Frames*.



Figure 4. Corneille de Lyon's *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1540. From *A History of European Picture Frames*.

In Medieval times, altarpieces were made by teams of carvers, gilders and painters. As a rule, carvers/framemakers were unknown craftsmen who belonged to workshops. Each craftsman had his own specialty and several people might be involved in the making of a single frame. During this period, painters generally had little input into the total design. As the position of artists and frames gradually improved, framing design was left more and more in the hands of artists. By the Renaissance, there was little difference in status between artists and framemakers. Successful sculptors and architects were taking commissions for frame designs. Artists of the stature of Leonardo da Vinci were known to have gilded frames.

There are many surviving frames from the Fourteenth and Fifteenth centuries and most of them are modeled after architectural forms. Forms taken from Gothic architecture were used until the Renaissance (c. 1450-100), then the frame changed from the silhouette of a cathedral to that of a classical temple. The tabernacle frame, a condensed form of altarpiece, is a classic example (figure 4). ■

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