

A Survey of Frame History

Part V: Empire Frames

by Diane Day, CPF

Emerging at the end of the French Revolution, the Directoire style blended into the Empire style at the beginning of the 19th century in France. Both styles were severe in their Neoclassicism (Figure 1) and leaned heavily on the Etruscan style, an austere form of Classicism introduced in the 1780s. The Classical designs found at Herculaneum and Pompeii were reflected in the sharp frame decorations of this period. Single bands of Classical motifs, such as acanthus leaves and palmettes, were applied to frames (Figures 2 a, b, c).

The French Revolution brought many changes to the art of framemaking. Across the English Channel, the Scottish-born architect Robert Adam reintroduced composition ornamentation, which had been developed by the Italians two centuries before. Reverse moulds were carved in boxwood for use in casting composition ornaments (Figure 3). Because boxwood is a closegrained wood, it allows for precise casting of detailed “compo” ornaments, which results in a higher quality product. Adam initially used this technique for interior architectural elements, but it soon spread around the world. Similar styles and production methods spread throughout Europe because the fine detailing needed to produce many of the decorations would have been extremely costly to hand carve.

Compo is basically a combination of water, rosin, linseed oil, hide glue and whiting. Hide glue is first placed in water and allowed to stand overnight. This glue and water mixture is then cooked until well blended. In a separate pot, rosin is melted in linseed until well blended. The two mixtures are then combined with a little whiting and then added to the

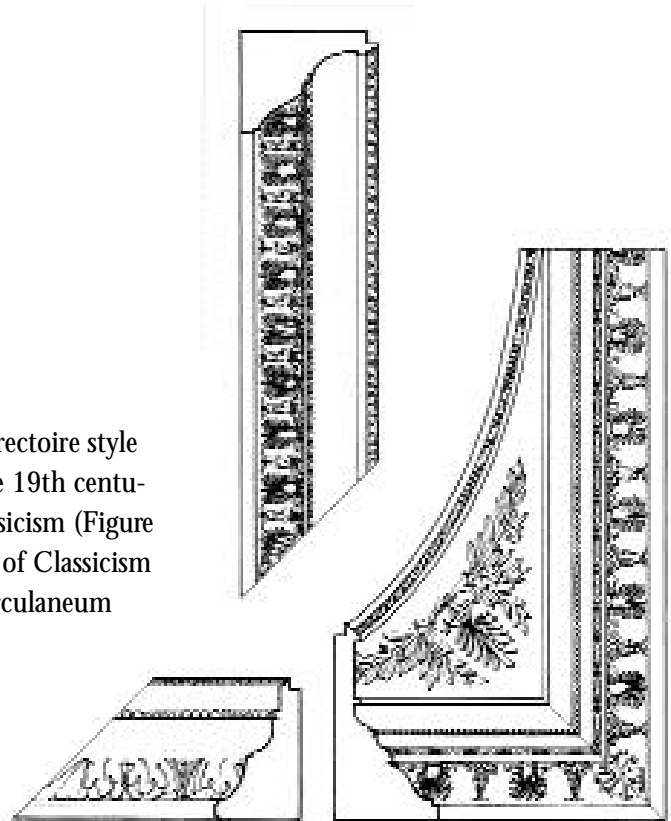


Figure 1: (top) Directoire frame with palmettes, 1300 x 950 x 180 mm, one of a pair, originals for Jacques-Louis David's *Pierre Sériziat and Mme Pierre Sériziat and One of Her Sons*, exhibited Salon 1795 (Paris, Musée du Louvre); (left) Empire frame with acanthus leaves, 410 x 720 x 90 mm, original for Pierre-Henri Valenciennes's *Landscape Towards Mt. Athos*, 1796 (Chicago, Illinois, Art Institute of Chicago); (right) Empire frame with oval sight and palmette spandrels, 1480 x 1220 mm, original for Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Mlle Caroline Rivière*, exhibited Salon 1806 (Paris, Musée du Louvre). From *A History of European Picture Frames* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.

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Figure 2a (left): French Empire frame with oval sight, the ogee section decorated with moulded anthemion and the spandrels with palmette-linked olive branches on Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's (1780-1867), *Portrait of Mme Rivière*, 1806, oil on canvas, 117 x 82 cm. (Paris, Musée du Louvre); Figure 2b (right): German Empire-style ogee frame with anthemion moulding, and detail, original for Johann Friedrich Overbeck (1789-1869), *Mary and Elizabeth with Jesus and John the Baptist*, 1825, oil on canvas, 146.4 x 115.0 cm (Munich, Alte Pinakothek). From *Frameworks* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.

rest of the whiting and mixed until the compound can be kneaded by hand. The end result is similar to pastry dough. The compo is rolled out, allowed to cook and cut into shapes.

Due to the lack of funds and the desire to distance himself from the monarchies of France's past, Napoleon effectively brought the luxury market to an end. He abolished the guild system in 1791, and encouraged the mass production of frames by limiting the hand-carved frame market. Napoleon directed framemakers to apply composition decorations to frames instead of hand-carving the ornamentation. With the dissemination of pattern books and

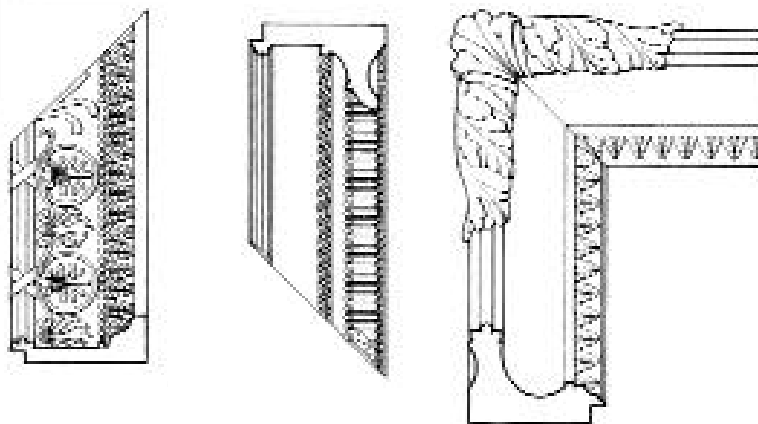


Figure 2c: (left) Adam-style frame with moulded anthemion and palmettes, 1016 x 1619 x 114 mm. Probably original for George Stubb's *Mares and Fools in a River Landscape*, c. 1760-70 (London, Tate Gallery); (center) 'Romney' pattern frame with straight knulled rail 2400 x 1480 x 133 mm, original for George Romney's *Sir Robert Gunning*, 1779-95 (Montreal, Museum of Fine Arts); (right) Regency deep scotia frame with corner leaves and leaf-tip sight, 488 x 598 x 89 mm, probably original for John Constable's *Valley of the Stour (Dedham from Gun Hill)*, c. 1805-9 (London, Victoria and Albert Museum). From *A History of European Picture Frames* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.

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mass-production methods, the Empire frame quickly spread across Europe.

Since Napoleon had to keep costs down and because of the great demand for Empire frames, mass production was the best solution. While a much smaller number of carvers were needed, gilders were still in demand. The same types of gilded frames, only in smaller sizes, were used for a great number of prints that were being produced. Napoleon had most of the frames in the Louvre replaced with Empire frames even though this rigid style clashed with many of the paintings. Unfortunately, this attitude created by Napoleon prevailed into the 19th century.

The carving of luxurious frames flourished under Louis XIV, XV and XVI, but under Napoleon, carvers and framemakers suffered greatly as a result of the almost exclusive use of composition ornament. When poverty and restraint struck in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the status of framemakers fell, along with that of other skilled craftsmen who made luxury goods. Wards, as well as the Industrial Revolution, changed peoples' habits. There was no longer a great demand for hand-carved frames, thus the status of the carvers was considerably reduced. The status of artists, however, had risen from one of mere artisan in the Middle Ages, to one of creative force. Artists were even becoming rich and famous by the end of the 19th century, but skilled craftsmen had no real place in a world of mass-produced frames. ■

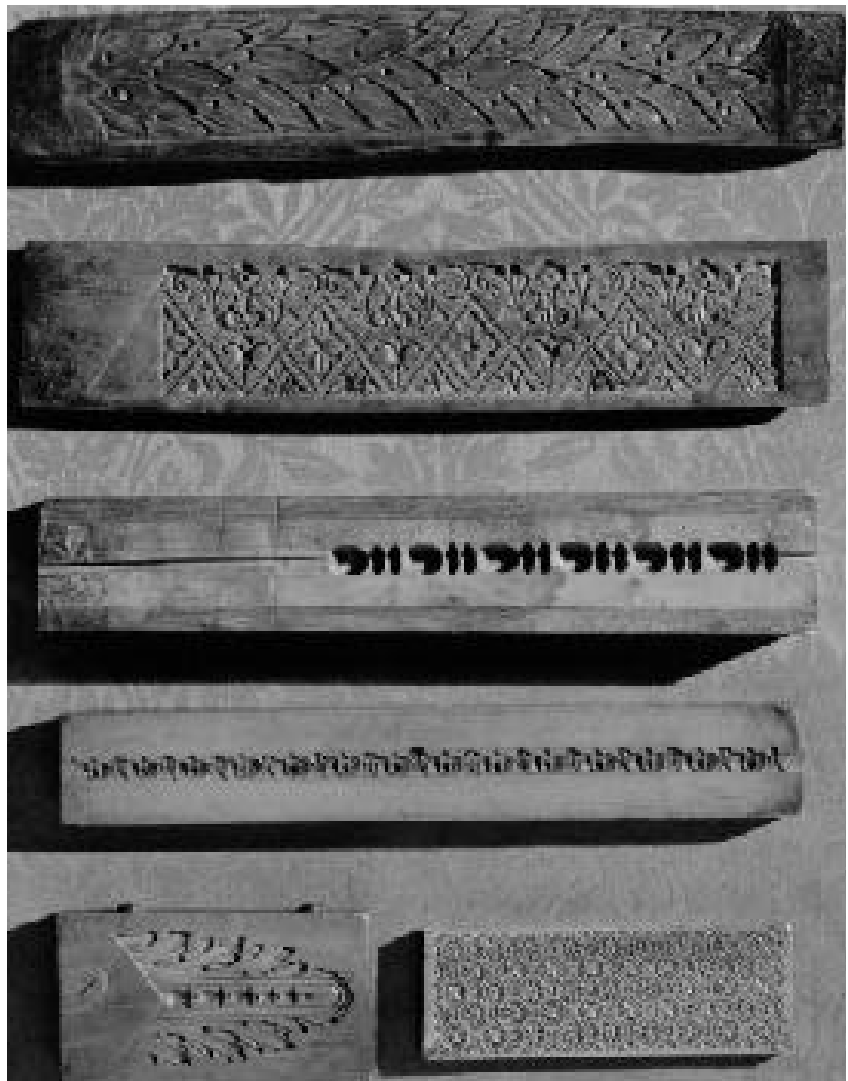


Figure 3: British relief-carved boxwood moulds for pressing ornaments in composition, 19th century, private collection. From *Frameworks* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.

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