

Style Snapshot

A look at a frame and its characteristics and history

Editor's Note: William Adair kicks off this series, which will take a look at an interesting frame each month.

What style frame is this? The top frame is a "Grinling Gibbons" style, though not believed to be an actual Gibbons creation. Gibbons, an Englishman who lived during the 17th century, was skilled in carving naturalistic forms. His talent earned him royal commissions.

The top frame (the inside measures 32" square) was purchased by my client's father in the 1950's near London. He said that it appeared "black," so it was stripped down to the wood, resulting in the bleached wood effect. It revealed that the wood (white pine) had originally been gessoed and finished with a silver leaf. The silver was then coated with an orange-colored "gamboge and Dragonsblood" varnish to make the frame appear gold. Over time the varnish deteriorated, exposing the silver which tarnished and turned black upon being exposed to air.

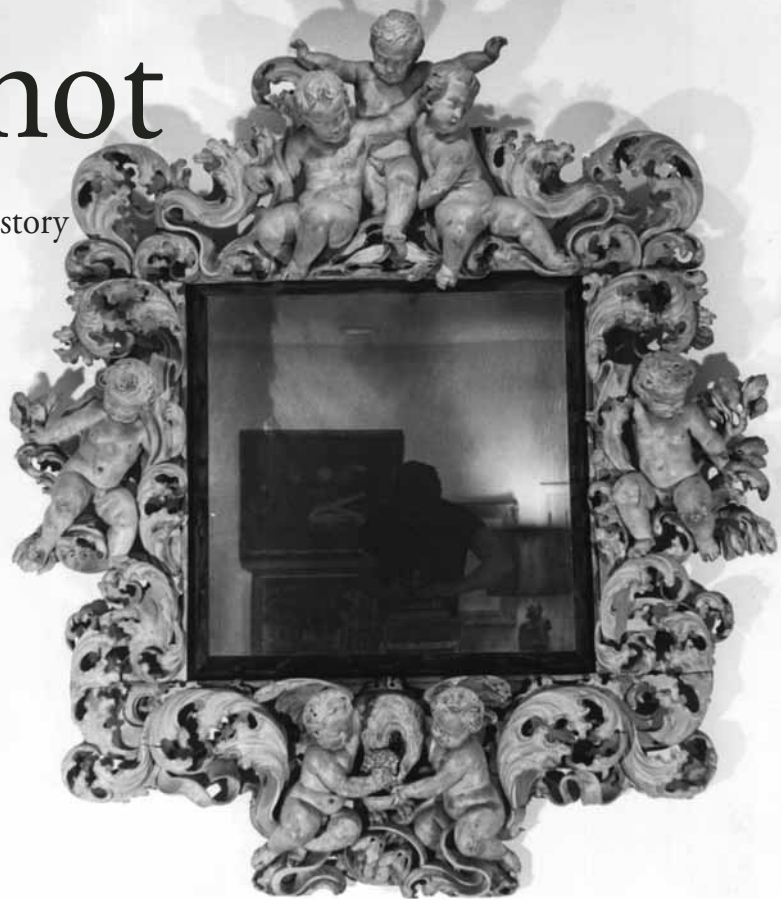
What time period is it from? Possibly the 17th century. The use of the technique described above was common for late 17th and early 18th century continental frames.

What are the defining/common characteristics of this style? Mostly use of exaggerated foliage coupled with puti (cherubs), fruit, and animal forms.

What design departures might be seen on frames of this style? The variations are enormous, but the top frame features some departures. Compare it to the frame seen at right (documented to be an actual Gibbons piece), with extraordinary detail and lightness of form. Also, the top frame has only puti and acanthus leaf with no other iconographic symbols. No other naturalistic foliage (wheat, tendrils, grass, etc.), associated with Gibbons' other known works. Also, the mirror frame is not made of lime wood as the documented frame is, but of pine.

What type of artwork would this frame most likely house in its time? Portraits or extensions of architectural paneling.

What furnishing/interior styles accompanied these style frames in their time? Large paneled rooms with similar carving on the trim usually surrounding the fireplace. ■



William B. Adair received his B.F.A. in Studio Art from the University of Maryland, and worked for 10 years at the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery as a museum conservator specializing in the treatment of picture frames. In 1982 he formed his own company, Gold Leaf Studios, for making frames and conservation of gilded antiques. He founded the International Institute for Frame Study, a non-profit archive dedicated to collecting and disseminating information on the history of frames.