

A Survey of Frame History

Part VI: 19th Century

by Diane Day, CPF

Eclectic framing evolved in the 19th century. Prior to the 1800s, picture frames shared design characteristics with architecture and furniture of the same time period; each period had its own style and previous designs were seldom brought into the mix. But not in the 19th century. Instead, the motto of Victorian eclecticism was “the more patterns, the better,” and frame styles reflected this taste. Frame designs from many stylistic periods were being produced, and, as a result, paintings from one period were often placed in frames with designs from another. (Figure 1).

With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, many carvers and framers were forced to find other employment. The majority of frames were no longer labor-intensive works of art but mass produced in factories by skilled, yet inartistic, production workers. These frames were often poorly made with little care taken in their construction. This resulted in bad joints, poor finishes and poor quality decoration. The framer’s art tended to degenerate into a sad state. However, frames still made in workshops by fine craftsmen had great care lavished on them, resulting in high-quality frames. These craftsmen understood the relationship between art and its surroundings. They knew the true decorative function of the frame and took pride in their workmanship.

As the 19th century advanced, wealth

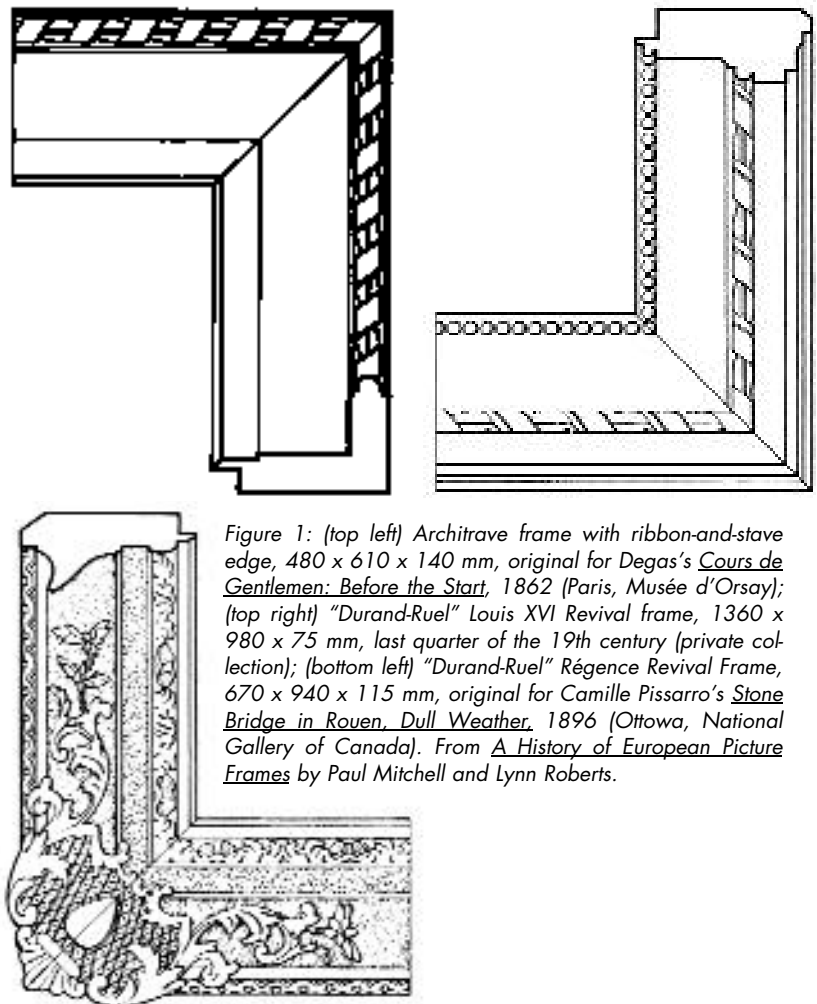


Figure 1: (top left) Architrave frame with ribbon-and-stave edge, 480 x 610 x 140 mm, original for Degas’s *Cours de Gentlemen: Before the Start*, 1862 (Paris, Musée d’Orsay); (top right) “Durand-Ruel” Louis XVI Revival frame, 1360 x 980 x 75 mm, last quarter of the 19th century (private collection); (bottom left) “Durand-Ruel” Régence Revival Frame, 670 x 940 x 115 mm, original for Camille Pissarro’s *Stone Bridge in Rouen, Dull Weather*, 1896 (Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada). From *A History of European Picture Frames* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.

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began to trickle down through society, creating a large new middle class. With more money to spend, these individuals wanted decorations to fill their homes, thus the demand for ready-made, inexpensive picture frames increased. Unfortunately, many people did not know enough about the history of frames to make informed frame selections. This lack of knowledge resulted in a low standard of taste with paintings being placed in frames that today seem gaudy and inappropriate. Paintings often became an excuse to purchase or display an elaborate frame. (Ornate frames had always been, in part, a way to show off the owner's wealth.) The styles were eclectic, drawing on all periods from Gothic to Rococo; the Victorian era had arrived (Figures 2a and b).

As a result of new trade between the West and Japan in the 1860s, frames began exhibiting Japanese influences. Movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau movements (Figures 3a and b), also affected frame design. These styles, the antithesis of elaborate and ornate designs, which emphasized simplicity of design and craftsmanship and brought about the use of copper as a neutral frame finish. Unlike the gilded frames, copper maintained its softness even in gas or electric lighting.

In the late 1800s, some artists rebelled against the practice of putting works of art in whatever frame style was popular. They realized that frames were no longer serving the needs of paintings and began promoting the idea that there was a strong bond between the frame and the artwork that should not be broken. The role of the frame is to serve as a transition between the painting and its surroundings while at the same time, enhancing the artwork. The most successful frame was one that didn't call attention to itself.

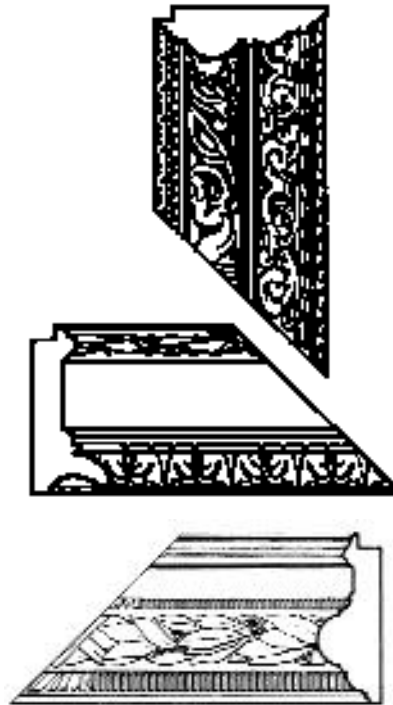


Figure 2a: (top) Renaissance Revival frame with pierced foliate/swan's-head torus, 1830 x 1092 x 170 mm, original for Edward Burne-Jone's *Beguiling of Merlin*, 1873-7 (Port Sunlight, Lady Lever Art Gallery); (center) "Watts" pattern Italian cassetta with inner husk and butt-jointed flat, 648 x 521 x 160 mm, original for G.F. Watts's *William Morris*, 1870 (London, National Portrait Gallery); (bottom) Neo-classical frame with laurel leaves and fluting, 635 x 457 x 140 mm, original for Frederic Leighton's *Vestal*, 1883 (London, Leighton House Art Gallery and Museum). From *A History of European Picture Frames* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.



Figures 2b: Louis XIV Revival C-scrolled frame, 1127 x 2007 x 280 mm, original for J.M.W. Turner's *St. Benedetto, Looking Towards Fusina*, exhibited 1843 (London, Tate Gallery). From *A History of European Picture Frames* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.

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This movement produced the first rapid change in frame design. The gilded finish, which had dominated through the centuries, was rejected by many artists, including Degas, Pissarro and Seurat. It was replaced with neutral finishes such as white or pastels which would not disturb the colors in their art. Impressionist painters often sent their works to dealers in frames of their own choosing, but many times, dealers would refit paintings in popular elaborate frames so that they would sell. Many artists designed or even made their own frames. In America, Stanford White, best known as an architect, made frames for artists like Thomas Wilmer Dewing and Abbott Thayer. There were a variety of popular frame designs preferred by artists, including the reed pattern, which was favored by the Impressionists and became a trademark of Whistler's framed artwork (Figures 4a and b).

Artists did put paintings in period frames, but only ones that were historically appropriate. The tabernacle frame was favored by the pre-Raphaelite painters and helped bring about a revival of Renaissance frame design near the end of the century (Figure 5). Faux marble, another Renaissance finish, remained popular through the 19th century.

Improvements in lighting likely led to the decreased popularity of gilded frames toward the end of the 19th century. Until this period, paintings were viewed primarily by candlelight. The majority of frames were gilded for good reason: gilded frames seen in flickering candlelight form strong focal points. In addition to gilded finishes, polychrome finishes also were used to create a dramatic effect when displayed by can-

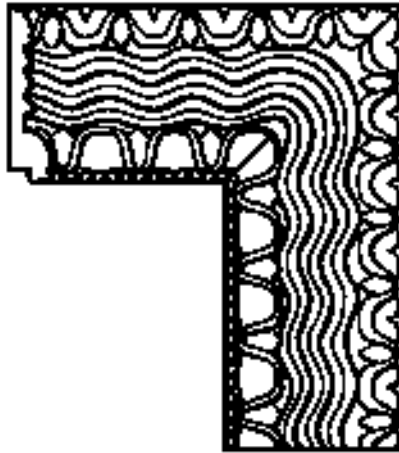


Figure 3a: Artist's frame with broad wave moulding, 375 x 320 x 125 mm, original for Franz von Stuck's *Head of a Young Girl*, c. 1906 (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister. From *A History of European Picture Frames* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.

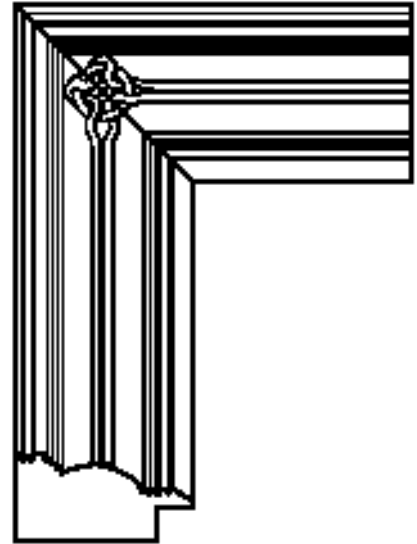


Figure 3b: Art Nouveau frame with Celtic knots at corners by Menzies & Son, Glasgow, 1330 x 1018 x 225 mm, original for D.Y. Cameron's *Nightfall, Luxor*, c. 1909-10 (Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery). From *A History of European Picture Frames* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.



Figure 4a: Artist designed reeded frame painted with scale pattern, 2134 x 1092 x 153 mm, original of 1875 for James McNeill Whistler's *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*, 1862 (Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art). From *A History of European Picture Frames* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.

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Figure 4b: Reeded frame with imbricated pattern painted on the frieze, designed and probably painted by the artist for James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*, 1862, oil on canvas, 214.7 x 108 cm (Washington, DC, The National Gallery of Art). From *Frameworks* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.



Figure 5: *Alexander Stewart Wetherill*, by Alfred Q. Collins (American). The young boy was Stanford White's nephew and it is known that the famous architect commissioned the painting and designed the frame in the 1890's (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art). From *Frameworks* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.

delight. Lighting needs also influenced designs of ebony frames made in northern Europe; these frames worked well in both reflected light and candlelight, but like copper, also were subtle enough to be used in electric and gas lighting. Many of the comparatively dull frame finishes in the latter part of the century can be explained to the improvement in light technology. Gas light became available circa 1870 with the light bulb following behind in 1884. With these new sources for brighter light, the previous lighting concerns were no longer had to be a consideration. Under electric lighting a brightly gilded frame could overpower the artwork. However, in the United

States, there remained a great interest in the gilded frame until the 1920s.

The 19th century is unlike any other period in the history of frames. Instead of one style pervading the century, any design was fair game. This eclectic style carried over into the 20th century where frames still often surround the “wrong” artwork or where frames are chosen for their ornamentation instead of their stylistic origins. There are now a wide range of choices from previous centuries to choose from. This opportunity gives us many sources to draw on when considering what constitutes a successful union of art and frame. ■