

Max Kuehne Frames

by William B. Adair



Photo 1: Reproduction of a Max Kuehne frame by Gold Leaf Studios, Washington, D.C. The frame has a cassetta moulding, covered with oxidized silver leaf, a sgraffito floral and diamond patter, and blue watercolor toner. It houses oil painting "Chocolate and Strawberries," c. 2000 by James Plumb of Easton, Maryland.

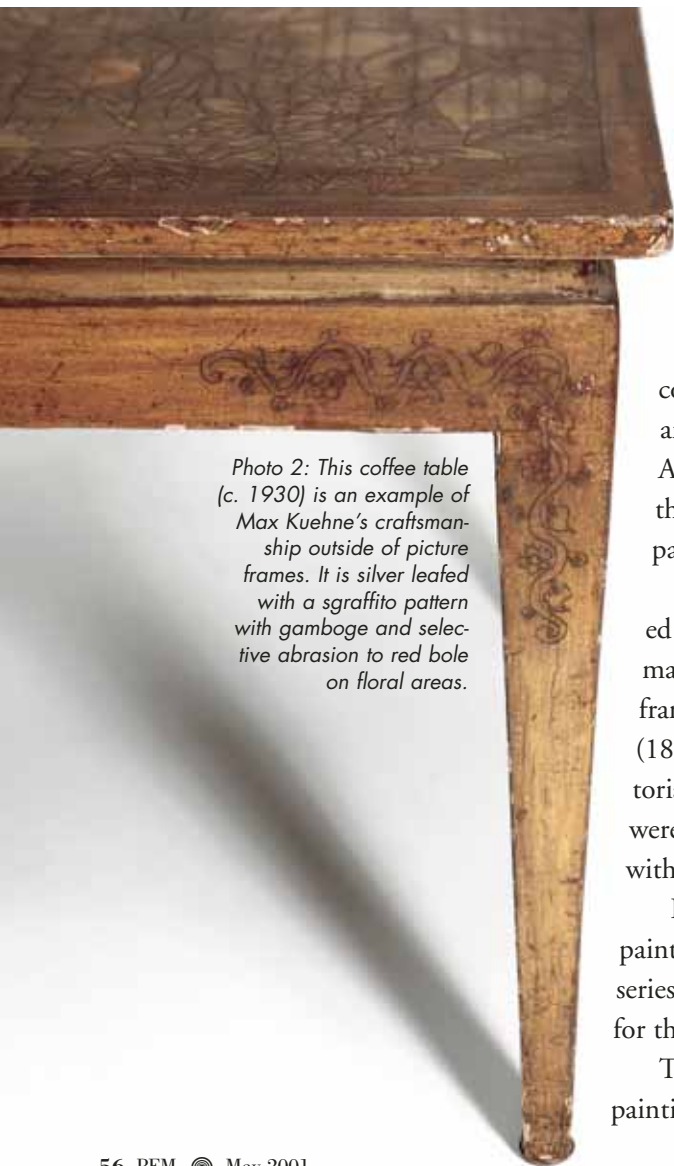


Photo 2: This coffee table (c. 1930) is an example of Max Kuehne's craftsmanship outside of picture frames. It is silver leafed with a sgraffito pattern with gamboge and selective abrasion to red bole on floral areas.

Most artists are concerned with the choice of frames surrounding their paintings. They know selecting the proper frame can make or break a painting. The color, shape, texture, and luminosity of a frame, when carefully balanced with the artwork, will show the painting to its best advantage. Artist and craftsman Max Kuehne (1880-1968) was acutely aware of this fundamental concept and considered each frame integral to the painting.¹

Early in the 19th century, Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827) stated that "... a good picture deserves a good frame, and a bad picture may sometimes preserve its place longer by having a handsome frame...."² In the later part of the century, James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) was among the first American painters to react to the Victorian penchant for superfluous design and ornamentation. His frames were simple by comparison and were often toned and painted to blend with the subtle tonalist color schemes used in his paintings.³

Later in his career, Whistler further simplified his frames by omitting painted decoration, yet the molding was always comprised of a dramatic series of three interlocking profiles of classical reeding, setting the trend for the modernist aesthetic in the 20th century.

This propensity towards a harmonic relationship of the frame with painting was a means for an artist to set him or herself apart from others.

The approach was also a means to control how work would be presented to those qualified patrons who understood the importance of the right frame for a painting.

Whistler's influence was felt by many American painters, such as Kuehne, who developed his own keen aesthetic sensibility, based on a study of antiques. He transformed these ideas into his own individualistic and charming style.

Kuehne's Life & Work

A major influence on Kuehne's design work most likely came from his numerous trips to Europe that commenced in 1910. A primary source of inspiration may be from embossed leather work, so prevalent in the richly embellished interiors in Spain where he lived for several years.⁴ Kuehne went one level further than Whistler did, for he not only designed his own frames, but carved and gilded them as well.

He purchased antique frames, rugs, and other furnishings, absorbing their finely embellished patterns as inspiration for his frames and furniture designs. (See the Spanish 17th century frame in Photo 3.) He developed a personal style that is clearly recognizable: First, he typically used a "cassetta" profile with a special gesso cutting technique⁵ that had an incised or engraved flower and diamond shape, a lotus flower and circle, and some-



Photo 3: Circa 17th Century Spanish frame. This frame was purchased by Max Kuehne during a trip to Spain. The rich patina of age and incised sgraffito designs in the panel served as an inspiration for the artist's own creations. (Collection of the artist's son, Richard Kuehne)



Photo 4: Gilding materials with cassetta moulding made by Kuehne.

times just a plain flower.

In other frames, he would carve a "hazzle" or zig-zag pattern on the outer rim and a slightly irregular carving on the inner edge. The usual material used was silver leaf which was toned or oxidized with various colors to create, in his own words, a "tawny" gold effect with an exquisite antique patina.

Kuehne's frame work possesses a recognizable style different from other artist craftsman, in particular Charles Prendergast, whose work has been wrongly confused with Kuehne's. Kuehne's hand was precise and methodical whereas Prendergast's was more loose and lyrical.

Kuehne and Prendergast both survived the Depression as working artists where many others had failed, partly because of their skills in gilding craftsmanship and frame making. Kuehne possessed a highly refined aesthetic sense of subtle patinas and sophisticated design. Having learned and mastered the craft of carving and water gilding, Kuehne, like Prendergast, created panels, screens, mirrors, furniture

and other decorative objects.

All of these beautifully enriched objects were made with the traditional techniques and styles handed down from the Renaissance. Although his designs are based on traditional motifs, also deriving inspiration from Persian miniatures, his style is distinctive yet still very much a

part of the Arts and Crafts aesthetic.⁶

He made frames for many museums including the Whitney Museum, The Barnes Foundation, The Hispanic Society, and other artist friends such as Rockwell Kent, Charles Prendergast, and William Glackens, among others. Glacken's comment, "Every artist suffers from a chronic lack of suitable frames,"⁷ certainly must have rung true for such a prolific and industrious artist as Kuehne. In fact, he was so good that when Charles Prendergast had more work than he could handle, he would sub-contract the work to Kuehne.

The Kuehne Style

Kuehne's frames are much sought after today as works of art in their own right and can be found in museums around the country such as the Chicago Art Institute and the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester, New York, as well as many other public and private collections.⁸

The most distinguishing characteristic of a Kuehne frame is the incised or sgraffito floral designs that are scratched through the leaf, exposing the white gesso and creating a white border around the designs, similar to the panel techniques of Charles Prendergast. He used various gilding materi-



Photo 5: This Max Kuehne cassetta frame is hand-carved piece, gesso, red bole, incised and oxidized silver leaf with gamboge. This classic Italian cassetta frame is perhaps one of Kuehne's most successful frame designs. The sgraffito on the panel of the frame was drawn freehand on the surface. The silver is abraded to expose the bole, and a thin, white glaze is scumbled into the crevices. This is one of the few frames that he signed with his initials, MK. (Collection of the artist's son, Richard Kuehne)



Photo 6: Original Kuehne frame, c. 1930 (William Adair Collection)

als to achieve these looks (see Photo 4). To produce this effect, he used a specially tooled and filed nail, mounted into a handle. It provided a contrast to the darkened and scumbled tones of the frame's surface without overpowering the painting.

He typically used silver leaf and would oxidize the burnished and matte silver surface with a sulphur compound that turned the metal instantly into a subtle spectrum of iridescent pinks, greens, and blues on a gun-metal grey background, punctuated with an occasional flash of silver. He would then selectively rub the leaf away to expose the under color of the bole which was typically a brick red color.

Kuehne also painted the sides of his frames with the same red bole but almost never applied leaf to these areas. The entire surface was then sealed with a lacquer or shellac. Next, a light stipple of white gesso was applied to selected areas so as to stick in some random parts of the incised wood carving along both the inner edge and the outer rim.

In some of his frames, Kuehne would paint selective areas with a gamboge and dragonsblood tinted shellac to visually turn the silver into gold.⁹ Although most artisans of the time signed the back of their frames, it was

not typical for Kuehne to do so. In some instances, however, an MK initial has been found (see Photo 5).

When studying frames, understanding what you see is a difficult task, especially when the materials and techniques that are used in making them are arcane and often shrouded in mystery. It is a rare thing, even for experts, to contemplate a frame without some confusion. This is partially due to the many different tech-

Kuehne's frames are
much sought after today
as works of art in their
own right.

niques employed in frame making and lack of information on the subject.

Fabrication techniques can provide important clues about the history and origins of a frame and interpreting this physical evidence is the first step to understanding the long and complicated history of frames. Obtaining this insight will help the connoisseur develop a keener instinct about a work of art. Understanding the basic methods and materials, such as the type of wood, common methods of corner construction, identification of various composition materials, determining the kind of gesso and bole, and a variety of other gilding techniques, can greatly enhance the advantage of a collector and art historian. ■

Endnotes

1) *International Studio*, 1926, Max Kuehne's Furniture in Gesso, By Horace Wesley Ott, p. 71-75 Kuehne experimented with various frame finishing techniques until he arrived at a style that would not overpower his paintings.

2) Charles Willson Peale to Alfred William Grayson, March 7, 1805, P-S, F; IIA/33 D11-13 in Lillian B. Miller, ed. *The Collected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*. A Micro fiche Edition (Millwood, NY, 1980). I expect you will want a frame for it, as I suppose you cannot get them made in Kentucky in good workmanship. Prices of frames are various, in proportion to the quantity of gilding.... 10 dollars may be the price of a tolerable handsome frame. You can order one even cheaper, but a good picture deserves a good frame, and a bad picture may sometimes preserve its place longer by having a handsome frame....

I am grateful to Lillian Miller, former editor of the Smithsonian's Peale Papers, for pointing this out to me.

3) Whistler wrote to a collector on January 18, 1873, "I

wish this to be clearly stated in Paris; that I am the inventor of all this kind of decoration in color in the frames, that I may not have a lot of clever little Frenchmen trespassing on my ground... many have painted on their frames, but never with real purpose or knowledge, in short, never in this way or anything at all like it.

I am grateful to Nigel Thorp of the Hungarian Library's Whistler Papers for pointing out this information to me.

4) Max Kuehne, by A.E. Gallatin, E.P. Dutton & Co, New York. p. 6. "During 1914 Kuehne visited Spain for the first time, and he immediately fell under her spell. Here he remained three years.... He lived there long enough to absorb a great deal of Spanish atmosphere.

5) *Sgraffito*: With some Italian methods, the surface of the gilded frame is often painted over with a colored egg tempera technique called "sgraffito." The paint is then scratched off with a wooden stylus, creating intricate linear designs that reveal a thin line of the underlying gold. In Kuehne's style of sgraffito, he omits the tempera layer, and scratches directly through the silver leaf with a metal tool to expose the gesso, thus creating a white line around the floral design.

6) American Impressionist artists often commissioned artisans such as Frederick Harer, Bernard Badura, and Francis Coll to design and make frames. Harer was an artist and craftsman who created innovative and distinguished frames that were often adapted from Spanish and Italian patterns. His designs are basic free hand expressions that appear powerful and, at the same time, delicate.

Harer's father was a cabinet maker and encouraged his son to attend the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. He traveled to Europe and upon his return in 1929, began making frames in his Uhlerstown studio called "Red Cliff Studio," possibly after the famous Boston atelier, the Carrig-Rohane Shop, later bought by Vose Galleries.

Harer remarked to a reporter of the *New Hope Magazine* in 1933: "All my designs are based on fundamental truths that I hope will survive this period and all others, as the primitives have done.... I have spent as much as three months perfecting one piece..... there are a lot of people who appreciate individualism because its beauty will increase with time...."

7) William Glackens and the Ashcan Group by Ira Glackens, Crown Publishers Inc., New York, 1957. p.65

8) Max Kuehne Frames have been seen on the following paintings by the author: 1) Rochester Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, N.Y. Madonna and Child, Italian (Byzantine) 14th Century, Gift of Mrs James Sibley Watson and Mr Elmer Adler, 22.39, Chicago Art Institute Dancer Adjusting Her Bodice, c. 1889 Edgar Degas, Anonymous Loan, 23.9.1989

9) Silver leaf, white gold, and aluminum leaf are covered with an orange tinted shellac called "similoro." It is a mixture of gamboge and dragonsblood (two organic pigments) that imparts a distinctive cool gold effect.