

Frames of Reference:

by Tracy Gill

“Have you ever considered in the early history of painting, how important also is the history of the frame maker? It is a matter, I assure you, needing the very best consideration. For the frame was made before the picture. The painted window is much, but the aperture it fills was thought of before it.”—John Ruskin, circa 1872

In January 2000, the Wesleyan University Center for the Arts issued an intriguing press release touting “the first exhibition to explore the frame as it has evolved from physical object to conceptual subject.” This was to be a “unique group exhibition that explores both frames and postmodern notions of framing. Integrating 16th- to 20th-century European and American frames from the collection of Gill & Lagodich Fine Period Frames with contemporary works of art,” the exhibition

promised to offer “a compelling history of traditional period frames, a look at how contemporary artists have utilized the frame and, most importantly, what their juxtaposition reveals about the history, culture, and politics of framing.”

As framers, we are trained to see a border around most works of art. If it’s not there then we instinctively want to put one there. But what happens when our day-to-day reality is disrupted by contemporary artists who challenge our familiar notions of art and, consequently, the tradition of framing as we know it? What happens when we are faced with a postmodern work of art, in which the frame becomes the subject and the artist has decided that an added object to surround it is unnecessary?



Photo 1: The outer frame shown here is a 16th-century Italian tabernacle frame; pietra dura inlays, marble columns, polychromed wood; from the collection of Gill & Lagodich Fine Period Frames, New York. Inside this impressive frame is a work from Allan McCollum entitled Plaster Surrogates, 1982/83, enamel on cast Hydrostone (detail).

When Wesleyan University’s curator of exhibitions, Nina Felshin, first approached us with the idea for the Frames of Reference exhibition, we considered that the very definition of postmodern art might be anathema to our own devout religion of proper period framing. We have curated exhibitions of empty frames and lectured numerous times on specific periods in frame history, but we had yet to loan our antique frames to an exhibition in which the artwork would be primarily conceptual and in some cases would require no frames at all. Felshin’s vision was to integrate period frames and postmodern artwork, hanging them salon-style, filling entire walls in a condensed format from floor to ceiling, rather than separating the contemporary from the traditional. The idea seemed timely for the new millennium.

It was our job to select 100 frames of varying sizes that could hold their own. Our final selections span four hundred years of frame history—from the first portable frame to the last significant design—the earliest being the 16th-century Italian tabernacle frame with marble columns and pietra dura inlay (see Photo 1); the latter being the circa 1970 Kulicke Plexiglas box frame.

Postmodern Art

How does postmodern art relate to the history of framing? Exhibition curator Felshin explains, “Beginning in the late

From Object to Subject



Photo 2: Frank Moore, *Free for All*, 1997-98; oil on canvas with electronic surveillance system with red pine frame and mixed media. Surrounding Period frames, clockwise from lower left: 19th-century Italian painting frame; gilded hand-carved wood with pastiglia. Two c. 1850s Italian *quantiera* painting frames; gilded hand-carved wood. 17th-century Spanish painting frame, gilded and red-polychrome on hand-carved wood. 17th-century Spanish painting frame; silver-leafed hand-carved wood. 18th-century Russian painting frame; gilded hand-carved wood. c. 1915 American Arts and Crafts painting frame; gilded hand-carved wood; hand-carved signature on verso: Carrig-Rohane, 1915, #1597. 19th-century British Pre-Raphaelite frame; gilded hand-carved oak; arched opening; Edinburgh maker's label on verso.

1960s, changes began to occur in the art world that reflected changes in the 'real world'. These changes represented an attempt to challenge, explore, or blur the boundaries and hierarchies traditionally defining culture as represented by those in power... Conceptual art, which was preeminent in the late 1960s and early 1970s posited the view that the meaning of a work of art resides not in the autonomous object, but in its contextual framework. This idea that the

physical, institutional, social, or conceptual context of a work—its framework— is integral to its meaning influenced many subsequent developments in the 1970s and paved the way for postmodernism... This subjective notion contrasts sharply with the frame's traditional use as a functional object that is primarily protective, decorative, and a device which actually or symbolically separates the work of art from its context and/or the 'real world'."

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So, is postmodern art by definition antithetical to frames as we know them? Postmodern artists sometimes use the traditional frame as a symbol of the art Establishment—something to be manipulated, disdained, ignored, enclosed, internalized, disassembled, reconfigured, or even eliminated. Many of these artists use the image or concept of the frame to invite the viewer to compare and contrast certain cultural differences. This is a whole new way for a traditional framer to look at frames. (We are used to treating frames as aesthetic objects external to the art and we don't often take the time to stand back and think about their meaning.) It is also interesting that a physical object, a frame, has deep philosophical meanings in different languages that permit artists to manipulate its many levels of meaning along with its physical reality. In English, for example, a person can be "framed" as well as a painting. The former may be entrapped, the latter enhanced.

Parallels Between Frame History and Postmodern Art

Today the frame has evolved to the point where the physical object alone, hanging empty, can connote all the meaning of art that the viewer's imagination can put into it. Indeed several of the artists represented in *Frames of Reference* use empty frames as metaphor and groupings of empty frames are transformed into sculpture. Hans Haacke's *Nothing to Declare*, 1992, consists of a group of empty wooden picture frames wired together and hanging from the ceiling, on the floor below an old bottle drier lies on its side. Felshin explains, "In a sense Haacke's work is about absence—about what is not there. The frames evoke the absence of paintings, the bottle drier, the absence of wine bottles. In both instances it suggests that these two objects, both of which are intended to contain something, can serve as art works in their own right. He is 'framing' this notion and the frames point to this conceptually."

In one beautiful and subtle mixed media work by Jeanne Silverthorne, *The Studio Stripped Bare: Life's Work*, 1997, black rubber casts of frames are placed on the floor in distorted positions (see Photo 3). At first glance they appear to be melted together, spilling over from the artist's worktable. Other miniature frames, some as small as postage stamps, are arranged on a miniaturized table that



Photo 3: (Foreground) Jeanne Silverthorne, *The Studio Stripped Bare: Life's Work*, 1997, mixed media. Background period frames, left to right: 20th-century American Arts and Crafts painting frame; gilded hand-carved wood; signature on verso: HARER. 17th-century Dutch painting frame; ebonized carved wood. c. 1860s American Hudson River School landscape frame; gilded applied composition ornament over wood; label on verso: Doll & Richards Art Gallery & Fine Art Rooms, Boston. 18th-century Italian Florentine painting frame; gilded hand-carved wood. c. 1910 American Taos-style standing-portrait frame gilded, hand-carved wood; Frederick Loeser, Brooklyn, NY maker.

sits atop the larger arrangement; a task lamp hangs above. Felshin tells us that "Silverthorne has done a series of works about the 'negative' space in her studio. She looks at the space around the work and what occupies that space. Empty frames, a light fixture, a worktable. The physical frame of reference for her work becomes the work of art."

Although the meanings and symbolism are vastly different, postmodern art in many ways relates back to the earliest framing devices. Millenniums before frames became the movable and removable objects we are used to seeing today, they appeared as borders integral to images. Decorative borders appeared as early as 2000 B.C. in Egyptian tomb paintings. In Pompeii and ancient Greece, fresco-painted or mosaic-tiled borders also echoed the shapes of the walls or layout of a room's interior, allowing

the room itself to become a frame. One could even argue that the Greek Parthenon was built as a frame for the goddess Athena. ‘Architecture as frame’ is just one traditional concept appropriated by postmodern artists.

Perhaps the exhibit’s most outstanding example of this was Alfredo Jaar’s *Epilogue*, 1998 (see Photo 4). As visitors entered a darkened room, the white light of a huge video projection slowly appeared on the back wall. As we looked into the light, the timeworn face of an 88-year-old Rwandan refugee, Caritas, slowly came into focus. So, you may ask, what does a video projection have to do with frames? In this case, the architecture of the room was meant to be the frame for the image. The gallery is built of solid limestone blocks, an authoritarian, modernist structure used by Jaar to symbolize the disjunction between First World and Third World cultures. The effect in person is quite powerful.

Movable frames appeared as early as the 13th century, but it was in Renaissance Italy, in the 14th and 15th centuries, that frame designs began to evolve as separate entities from the picture (though they remained clearly integrated with their surroundings). Framed religious paintings were built into altarpieces and ornamented with architectural elements that echoed the exteriors of the great cathedrals.

As the role of the artist began to change, the art of frame making likewise evolved. The Italian Renaissance saw the rise of the artist-patrons: wealthy noblemen (such as the Medici family) who commissioned allegorical, devotional and portrait paintings. Frames were no longer all of one piece with the painting. Trained in many artistic disciplines, including gilding, sculpture and architecture, it would not have been unusual for a painter to create his own gilded or painted frames. Fra Filippo Lippi, Botticelli, Lorenzo Lotto, and Della Robbia all designed frames for their own works.

The early Italian tabernacle frame in the Frames of Reference exhibit dates from that time of the first portable frames. Interestingly, although the tabernacle style may have religious connotations, our frame (seen in Photo 1) was more likely created for a portrait of a nobleman and is therefore really is one of the earliest examples of the portable frame as a decorative object. Studies of similar tabernacles in various museums indicate that this style frame was made in France or Italy around 1560.



Alfredo Jaar, *Epilogue*, 1998; video projection.

In the photo, that historical tabernacle frame is paired with a view into a postmodern art installation created 400 years later: Allan McCollum’s *Plaster Surrogates*, 1982/83, enamel on cast Hydrostone. Offering both comparison to, and contrast with, the traditional concepts of art and frame, McCollum’s arrangement of painting surrogates—generalized physical depictions of framed paintings—invite the viewer to contemplate the cultural context of how paintings and works of art are generally viewed. The viewer is unable to separate the art and frame as one would when faced with the traditional art-gallery-pairing of paintings and frames as separate entities. In the Wesleyan exhibit, curator Felshin chose to further invite comparison and contrast by hanging a similar McCollum installation, *Thirty Plaster Surrogates*, 1982/91, below a salon-style installation of twenty gilded period frames. Both McCollum’s “Surrogates” and the period frames were arranged in closely grouped rows as a further reference to 19th-century salon-style art academy exhibitions. The juxtaposition of empty period frames above a similar grouping of “surrogate” paintings invites further contemplation of how art is viewed.

Louise Lawler also uses photographs to convey concepts that are not immediately apparent. According to Felshin, Lawler’s photographs of objects in private homes and museums “explore the context/framework of the art, (how it is displayed and what objects/furniture are in its vicinity), suggesting that the context of a work of art is just as important in shaping the meaning of the work as what is contained within the rectangle of the photograph.

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She often incorporates architectural detail that emphasizes the issue of ‘framing.’ In *Fragment/Frame/Text: “Zurbarán,”* 1984, Lawler’s cibachrome view of the edge of a famous painting and its frame was itself unframed. The precious object (i.e. frame) is contained within the photographic image instead of surrounding it.

On another wall in *Frames of Reference*, handcarved European frames provide an elegant historical contrast to a startlingly different oil painting of an American eagle in flight (see Photo 2). The painting’s integral red wood frame (complete with bark) looks like it had been peeled right off a tree. The significance of Frank Moore’s *Free for All*, 1997-98, is explained by Felshin, “The eagle with human hands is grasping for technological devices, some of which are emitting signals. The title refers to the competition among global powers (U.S. and Japan primarily) to control the various new technologies. The rustic frame refers to the American myth of the frontier and the struggle between technology and the natural environment. Embedded in the frame is a complete surveillance system—hooked up to a camera (behind the eye of the eagle), a monitor, and audio-video recording devices. Moore is framing the struggle suggested above, bringing the viewer’s attention to this conflict.”

The Evolving Relation of Art and Frame

In the 19th century, new technology and economic growth spurred the production of new types of art and frames throughout the Western world. We think of frames and art as readily available, but it is really only in the last hundred years or so that this has become true. It wasn’t until after the Civil War in this country that mass-produced art and photographs (which came about with the inventions of color lithography and portrait-studio photography), created the need for quantities of manufactured Eastlake and Aesthetic print frames. Examples of manufactured frames were shown in the exhibit.

Meanwhile, European artists of the late 19th century were busy experimenting with original frame profile

designs and tonality. French artists Degas and Seurat were painting or stippling frames and mats to harmonize with their paintings; American expatriate James McNeill Whistler was busy designing frames in varying colors of gold to complement his subtle tonalist works.

In the 20th century, the relationship of art and frame evolved further. Cubists Braque and Picasso used empty period frames as inspiration, sometimes altering their patinas or incorporating the profile shapes into their art works.

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In America, although manufactured frames continued to evolve, there was a brief return to the tradition of the artist-craftsman. Through the first quarter of the 20th century, some American artists considered the frame as a work of art; many commissioned or hand-carved and gilded their own frames. Frame designs were often influenced by early Spanish, Italian and Dutch frames.

Sadly, the return of American craftsmanship was short-lived. Much of this had to do with the advent of modernism and the reconsideration of the frame’s purpose by 20th-century artists here and in Europe. In 1906, at the birth of modernism, Gertrude Stein wrote, “...the framing of life, the need that a picture exist in its

frame, remain in its frame was over. A picture remaining in its frame was a thing that had always existed and now pictures commenced to want to leave their frames ...”

By the 1930s, in Europe and in America the traditional frame was disappearing. First there was a rejection of gilding, and painted finishes became popular. For centuries, gilding on frames had been used, in many cases to enrich the art, in some to help reflect light back onto a painting, to exalt the status of the Church or a wealthy private patron, and finally because gold was seen as a neutral color. Now gold was seen as a representation of staid art academy control and a style of painting that modernist painters sought to subvert.

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We selected seven American modernist frames from the Gill & Lagodich collection to showcase innovative profile designs such as carved ruffles or stepped mouldings. Mostly artist-made in the 1920s to 1940s, the wonderful colors of their original painted finishes range from a rusty brick red over orange to layers of subtle pastels to a neutral gray with painted corner details.

By the 1960s, the traditional frame lost importance. In America, there was little interest in framing period works of art in period frames, and for the next few decades many museum curators seemed more interested in removing historical frames than in restoring them. The culmination of this trend of non-framing, to my mind, was the invention of the Kulicke Plexiglas box frame. In the history of frames, the Plexi box seems to be the purest example of form following function. While it is most definitely a frame designed to physically protect the artwork, it does not create a disturbing border that might interfere with the image. When I was growing up in the 1970s, my mother used Kulicke's clear box frames for everything from childhood drawings to family photos to her own paintings and wood cuts. It is fascinating to me now to think of them as historical objects—some would say Pop Art.

In the last decades of the 20th century, the period frame was finally reaffirmed in the eyes of museum curators at the same time artists were reconsidering it as a conceptual entity. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, period frames are a very hot subject. Every month there seems to be another article published describing the “new trend” of matching the correct period frame to the correct period painting. Many museums and collectors are getting into the act, and certainly, in our client roster, many fine arts dealers would not consider offering their best 18th, 19th or early 20th-century paintings without a surround of equal stature.

In the year 2000, frames appear in many contexts (other than paintings) that are important to our contemporary culture. The architecture of a theater framing a movie screen is a concept that harks back to the Renaissance, when wall-sized altars surrounded epic religious paintings. Even the theater curtains that open and close on a scene remind us of the fabric coverings on 16th-cen-

tury Dutch and English paintings. Think of computers and televisions, with ever changing electronic images surrounded by plastic borders, and the integral borders on clocks, traffic signs and billboards, to name a few.

Happily for us, as framers, the “frame as object” is not actually disappearing. The long history of art has allowed for different interpretations of framing to develop and exist contemporaneously. As Felshin points out, “although the chronology of the works in the Frames of Reference exhibit (both traditional frames and contemporary art works) suggests an evolutionary approach to the exhibition's conceptual underpinnings—that subjectivity has replaced objectivity—in fact, these different notions of frames and framing co-exist and, in fact, frame as object is far more prevalent than frame as subject.”

Contemplating the Frames of Reference exhibit, noting how the art and frames were integrated in hanging and in concept, we had an inkling that perhaps the history of frames has come full circle. It has also reached a pinnacle of attention that has not been seen since the great pre-Renaissance altarpieces. What object or subject today evokes more discussion and invites more interpretations than the frame (both empty and filled)? ‘The Frame’ has almost become the new multi-cultural icon, inviting both rejection and worship in myriad contexts. We hope that Frames of Reference: From Object to Subject will be just the first of many exhibitions that invite comparison between the historical and the contemporary. ■

TRACY GILL is co-owner of Gill & Lagodich Fine Period Frames & Restoration, New York City. Together, she and her partner, Simeon Lagodich, have devoted over twenty years to collecting, studying, restoring, selling and curating period frames. Their Web site (www.gill-lagodich.com) is being developed with the primary aim of education on period styles and frame applications.

FRAMES OF REFERENCE: FROM OBJECT TO SUBJECT was on view from January 29th through March 5th, 2000, at the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery in Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut. Gill & Lagodich Fine Period Frames, NYC loaned 100 European and American period frames. Participating artists were Renee Cox, Kathy Grove, Alfredo Jaar, Hans Haacke, Louise Lawler, Allan McCollum, Frank Moore, Jeanne Silverthorne, and Carrie Mae Weems. Nina Felshin was the exhibition curator.