

American Frames: 1980's and Beyond

by Anne Vazquez

As the 1980's began, frame design continued its journey that coincided with both the art and décor of the time. Memorable styles of this decade were either the sleek, shiny looks of lacquered finishes, or the powder blue and mauve colors which those with a penchant for something more "country" preferred.

It was also a time of experimentation, with many putting a new spin on existing frame designs. For instance, Jed Bark, owner of Bark Frameworks in New York City, had been working heavily within a spare Modernist mode since he began his business in the mid-60's. During the 80's, he explored new concepts in frame design, including welded metals, mixed media, and complex surface treatments.

Resurgence of Antique Frames

However, as the styles that could only be called 80's were a mainstream look on American walls, an appreciation for antique American frames came to the forefront for many in the framing world. What had been removed from artwork and stowed away in attics and basements, or worse yet, tossed out completely, began to gain more attention.

Playing an important role in the movement was Eli Wilner, who in the late 70's and early 80's went around literally taking antique American frames out of the garbage. In his book, "Antique American Frames," Wilner writes, "I was among the small minority who cared very deeply about vintage American frames. Most people were happy to give them away."

Suzanne Smeaton, gallery director at Eli Wilner&Co., Inc. in New York City, attributes several factors to the renewed interest in American period frames during the 80's. For a number of years prior, a common belief was that it was better to purchase a new frame for a piece of art, rather than repair a damaged one. "With frames where compo had sustained damage, it was often easier to put a new reproduction on a piece of art," says Smeaton. "In most instances, the knowledge of restoration was just not there."

Meanwhile, American paintings began to increase in value in the late 1970's. Historically, European paintings held the lion's share of the interest of art collectors, but that began to change as was evidenced by several notable sales of American artwork as the 70's ended and the 80's began.

In her essay that appears in "The Gilded Edge," edited by Eli Wilner, Lisa Koenigsberg writes, "Study of the frame and efforts to locate period frames have

also been stimulated by changes in the market for American paintings, which began to gather steam, according to one commentator, with the McDonough sale in 1978 and the sale the following year of Frederic Edwin Church's *Icebergs*, the 1985 sale of Rembrandt Peale's *Rubens Peale with a Geranium*, and finally with the December 1996 sale of John Singer Sargent's *Cashmere*."

More recently, in May 2001, Framefinders, Inc. in New York City, held an auction of American picture frames. The prices fetched are indicative of the recognition for American frames. The strongest lot, for instance, was a Stanford White frame which sold for \$27,600.

Koenigsberg also notes the role that museums have played in fostering the importance of historically correct framing, specifically American frames. "Museums have contributed mightily to the emphasis placed in historically appropriate framing," she writes. "For example, in 1988, the Metropolitan Museum of Art began an inventory of its American frame collection, and in 1990 mounted an exhibition of frames from the collection. Other institutions taking part in such efforts include the Detroit Institute of Arts and the National Museum of American Art, an institution that has been involved in reframing significant works in its collection, among them, three monumental canvases by Thomas Moran."

William B. Adair, a contributing writer to *PFM*, has also played a significant role in raising awareness of American frames. In 1983, he mounted the "The Frame in

America" exhibition which featured the frame as a work of art in itself. In 1995, he mounted and oversaw the exhibition again.

Reward of the Framer

As the 90's began, a common trend was the desire to be surrounded with elements from nature, such as wood, foliage, and stone. Popular frame designs reflected this change and experimentation with multiple colors and textures also rose to the forefront.

Meanwhile, the burst of attention that American frames had received during the 80's helped to create not only a more educated art collector, but a more informed consumer of framing on all levels. Preservation framing components, for example, began to be

offered (and purchased) by consumers in many frame shops. While some may have been skeptical of framers' motives for selling these features, eventually the realization of the benefits caught on.

More recently, frame designs with handcrafted motifs, such as water gilded or hand burnished designs have become more popular.

However, elaborate styles aren't the only frames in demand today. With the wide variety of décor in favor with consumers, a look of

simple quality is popular as well.

Through the years, American frames have played many roles in relation to the art it surround—bit part, leading role, non-existent, and equal partner. Sometimes, it has even gone solo, in exhibitions like the ones headed by Adair.

And while American period frames have steadily gained notice, frame design has also been affected by the latest technology. In 2000, Ceiva Logic Inc. in West Hollywood, California, released a digital picture frame.

The 8"x10" wooden frame, with an image space measuring 5"x7", enables the owner to display digital photos. The frame can also

be set up to run a slide show of up to 10 images. It plugs into an electrical outlet and phone line. Digital photos are either downloaded from a digital camera or sent over the Internet.

After its

initial introduction, Ceiva also enabled consumers to add personal messages or borders to the photos. Images of fine art can also be downloaded from the company's website.

All in all, the increasing awareness has been beneficial to framers catering to all levels of consumers. Recognition of framing has risen exponentially in America, especially in the last century, and we can only hope the appreciation continues to grow. ■



The digital photo frame has brought the frame itself into the 21st century.