

# Style Snapshot

A look at a frame, its characteristics, and history

by Peter Werkhoven

**What style frame is this?** The Cabinetmaker's Frame, also known as the Dutch 17th century Ripple Moulding frame.

**Where is it from?** Ironically, this style appears not to have originated in Holland at all, but rather in southern Germany. It soon spread to Austria, Italy, Spain and most notably, Flanders (Belgium). It was these Flemish craftsmen who brought the style to Amsterdam. It is most likely called "Dutch" because it is a variation of the Dutch Ebony (or Ebonized) Frame, which is closely associated with Old Master paintings from the Netherlands.

**What time period is it from?** Ripple moulding frames were produced throughout the Dutch Ebony frame period, which lasted roughly from 1600 until 1750. After 1700, however, all ebony and ebonized frames were gradually falling out of fashion, being replaced with French styles.

**Who was instrumental in developing this style of frame?** This frame evolved from the work of German furniture designers who had developed a machine to cut a repetitive pattern in wood, to create a decorative border on cabinets and other types of furniture. Use of this innovation, which was faster and cheaper than hand carving, was quickly applied to both architectural paneling and to picture framing.

**What are the defining/common characteristics of this style?** This is a comparatively restrained style, usually dark brown or black in color. The ripple moulding creates a rhythmic light reflection, which acts as a subdued but effective transition from the edge of the art canvas to the room setting.

It was made from exotic woods, primarily ebony, and later also "ebonized" fruitwood such as pear, which had a similar fine grain, and would be stained dark and polished to mimic ebony.

**What design departures might be seen on some frames of this style?** More prevalent than the use of ripple moulding in Holland—if the frames incorporated ornament at all—were other forms of decoration such as tortoise

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*Photo 1: Seen here is a 17th century Dutch reverse ogee profile with four tight ripple elements. Profile is 3<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" wide; Ebony veneer.*

courtesy of AEDICULE Fine Framemaking



*Photo 2: Shown here is a 17th century Dutch reverse ogee and flat panel design, with three different ripple patterns. Profile is 4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" wide; gilt with 23.5 karat gold and Carpatian Elm veneer.*

courtesy of AEDICULE Fine Framemaking



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shell, ivory and mother-of-pearl inlay, silver stringing, and sight edge gilding (see Photo 2).

In Germany, Austria, and Flanders, where ripple mouldings were more extensively used, ornate forms were developed—the veneer being worked into elaborate combined wave, ripple, and basket weave patterns, sometimes with eared corners.

**What furnishing/interior styles accompanied these style frames in their time?** All ebony and ebonized frames of this period, regardless of the additional decoration they bore, were uniquely suited to both the interiors and to the social structure of Northern Europe, particularly Holland.

The moderate but dreary climate and narrow, deep houses necessitated large windows and white walls in order to create sufficient interior light. In this setting, dark wood frames provided an attractive balance. The exotic materials used for these frames were being

shipped in from the Dutch colonies, and the understated luxury of these materials allowed the middle classes to exhibit their wealth in a manner that suited the sober Protestant culture.

**What type of artwork would this frame most likely house?** This time period is known as the Golden Age in Dutch history, and during this period portraits, both with single and group subjects, were extremely popular. This is the type of painting most commonly associated with this frame, although it is not unusual to find them housing landscapes, still lifes, and mirrors.

**Additional comments and/or anecdotes:** Constantijn Huygens, a Dutch statesman, poet, and friend of Rembrandt, wrote in 1652: “... an Ebony frame can enrich a poor canvas. And make it look or sell as well as a good one.” ■