

A Survey of Frame History

Part IV: Louis XV and Louis XVI Frames

by Diane Day, CPF

In the last years of the reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715) personal tastes were again changing. Design was moving away from the heaviness of the Baroque decoration to that of a lighter style. Frames were slower to change in style than other things, and as always, new designs were produced concurrently with previous ones. In the early 18th century the Louis XIV styles blended into the Regency frame style (c.1715-1723) which placed greater emphasis in the corners and centers (figure 1). The organic decorations in the corners and centers often overlapped the panel and flowed into the sight edge. The full Regency style was opulent as well as delicate, with the order and linearity of this period giving way to the swirling delicacy of the Rococo.

The Rococo style evolved as a reaction against the High Baroque and flourished in the 1730's. In this period the heavy Louis XIV organic forms were refined into

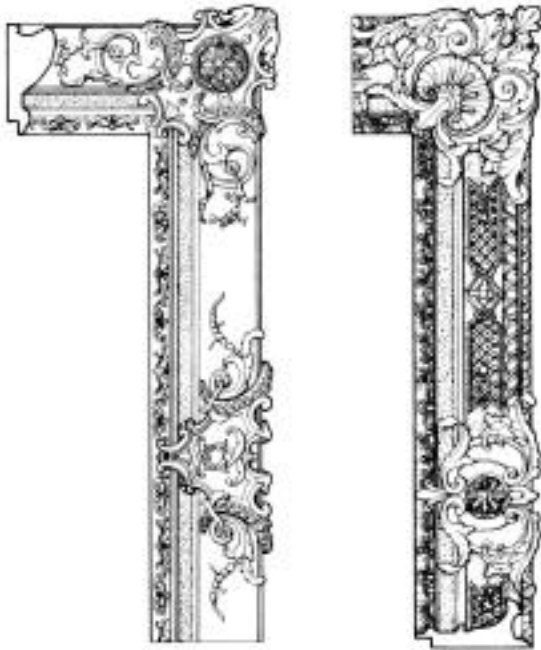


Figure 1: (Left) Regency convex frame, foliate cartouches with gadrooned clasps and plain repose. (Right) Regency frame with foliate shell cartouches, gadrooned astragal and strapwork diapered repose. From *A History of European Picture Frames* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.

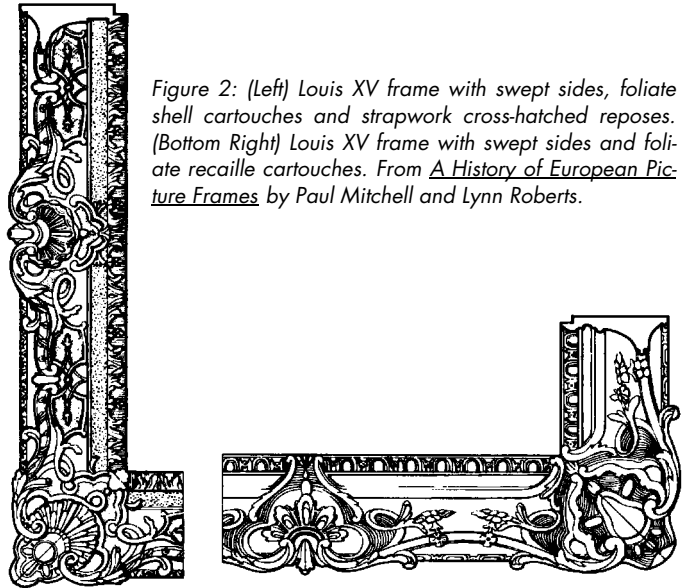


Figure 2: (Left) Louis XV frame with swept sides, foliate shell cartouches and strapwork cross-hatched repose. (Bottom Right) Louis XV frame with swept sides and foliate recaille cartouches. From *A History of European Picture Frames* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.



Figure 2: French Louis XV swept frame, probably original for Louis-Michel Van Loo's (1707-1771) "Marquis Edouard-Jean de Luker" (1726-1806), 1756, oil on canvas, 63 x 51 cm, Orléans, Musée des Beaux-Arts. From *Frameworks* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.

delicate, sinuous and flamboyant decorations. A prime example is the Louis XV frame style named after this monarch who reigned from 1723-1774. The most important elements in Rococo design were elegance, grace, charm and curving naturalistic decoration. Louis XV frames have all of this and more (figure 2).

They have deeper profiles compared to Louis XIV frames and have stronger, more pronounced corner ornamentation which is balanced by empty spaces of plain moulding. The framemakers used sand on panels, carved open work, pierced decorations, and recutting of gesso to create sharper detailing. Frames became lighter and “gayer” during this time. The top edge of frames began to swell and swirl in undulating forms which hardly touched each other. The basic characteristics of the full Rococo style consist of S and C-scrolls, swept rails, asymmetrical contours and cartouches. This era was a high watermark for carving, gilding and recutting of gesso.

The Baroque and Rococo were styles of interior design as well as of art; thus there was a continuity of style between frames, furniture and wall decorations. Architectural decoration as well as frames were expensive. The more decoration, the greater the cost. There was not only a charge for the moulding, but also for each added design element. Each decoration, such as a corner or

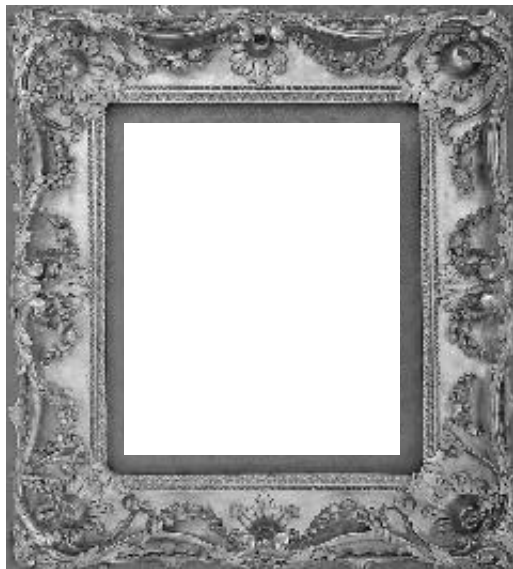


Figure 3: French swept frame transitional in style between Louis XV and Louis XVI, with acanthus carouches linked by floral garlands, leaf-and-bead, attributed to Pierre-François Millet (maître 1767), sight size 53.5 x 45 cm, width 13.5 cm, private collection. From *Frameworks* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.

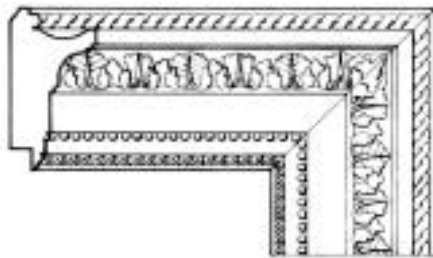


Figure 4: Louis XVI entablature frame with acanthus leaves and guilloche back. From *A History of European Picture Frames* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.

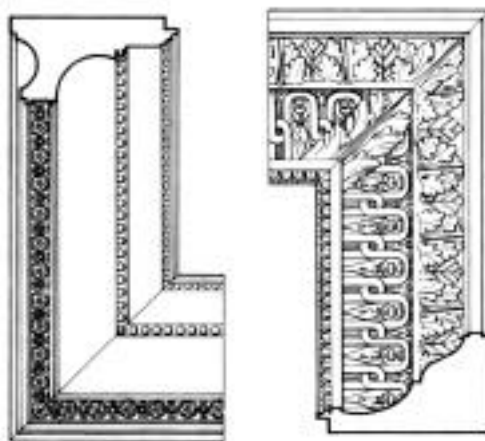


Figure 5: (Left) Scotia frame with flowered interlace in composition. (Right) Cabled scotia frame with acanthus ogee. From *A History of European Picture Frames* by Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts.

center, added to the price of the total frame. The price for a frame could approach the price for the painting which went into it.

The 1700's also brought a renewed interest in the ancient world with the excavations in the mid-18th century of Herculaneum and Pompeii. The fascination with the ancient world was both expressed and reinforced by a style of painting called Neoclassicism which began in Italy and quickly spread to other regions. The excesses of the Rococo style gave way in the second half of the 18th century to restrained geometric frame designs. The blending of the Rococo and the Neoclassical produced transitional styles in the 1760's and 1770's which used Rococo elements like the cartouche along with Classical ornamentation such as acanthus leaves (figure 3).

Neoclassical frame styles are referred to as Louis XVI frames, even though the style was developed well before he came to power in 1774. Neoclassical frames are primarily of two types. The first is a flat profile like an architrave or entablature moulding (figure 4), and the second has a concave profile (figure 5). Louis XVI frames, for the most part, have geometric silhouettes, and are thinner and have a lighter look than their predecessors. Mouldings are straight and simple with decorations derived from Classical architecture: elements like beading and sharply defined foliage. The typical Neoclassical frame does not have any focal embellishments, but does have splendid decoration all around the perimeter. ■

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