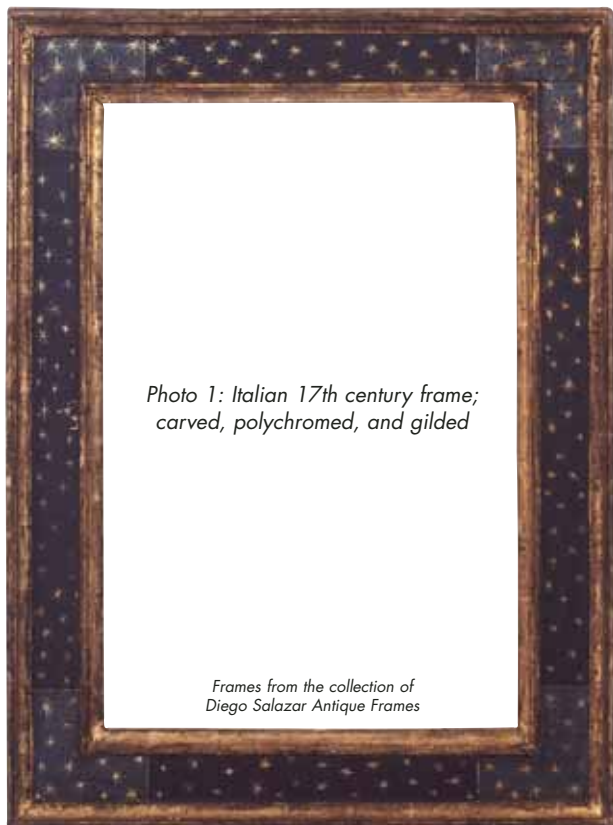


Italian and Spanish 17th Century Frames

Italian and Spanish frames from the 17th century are decorative objects whose function has expanded to well beyond the scope of their makers' intentions. Like aromatic seasonings kept close at hand by the knowing chef, these frame styles are surprising in their adaptability. Their properties of composition and ornamentation allow them to transcend the period and region in which they were crafted. They are appreciated by many as objects of design and craftsmanship independent of their ability to complement paintings. These frames are the ideal surrounds for the paintings they were created to



*Photo 1: Italian 17th century frame;
carved, polychromed, and gilded*

*Frames from the collection of
Diego Salazar Antique Frames*



*Photo 2: Spanish 17th century frame;
carved, polychromed, and gilded*

*Frames from the collection of
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embrace, and they also have the ability to enhance a variety of painting styles from later periods and different countries

Italian and Spanish 17th century frames styles are closely related; so much so that they are sometimes difficult to tell apart. They have what is commonly referred to as a cassetta profile, consisting of a frieze, which is a flat expanse of panel, and a raised inner and outer section. In actuality, the original Italian cassetta frame had a rounded center panel. Now the term cassetta, meaning "little box" in Italian, is most often used by framers to indicate a frame with a flat center panel.

The majority of the frame's decoration is in the frieze. This ornamentation was commonly rendered using a technique called sgraffito; the framemaker would paint over a gilded surface and then scrape off the paint



Photo 3: Paul Gauguin, landscape 1894, in an Italian 17th century frame; carved, polychromed, and gilded; from the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO

Courtesy of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri (Purchase: acquired through the generosity of an anonymous donor) F77-32

to form a design. Punchwork was another technique also used in creating designs on these frames; after the frame was gilded, tiny dots or punch marks were made with a tool to create a pattern.

Shown in Photo 1 is an Italian 17th century frame that is carved, polychromed, and gilded. It has a cassetta profile and the star designs in the center panel are achieved through the sgraffitto technique. The deep, rich, blue is complemented by a softer, muted color at the corners, creating corner ornaments composed of color alone. The techniques used by its makers were standard for the period, but the design and choice of decorative motif are unique.

The frame in Photo 2 is a Spanish 17th century frame. Like the Italian frame, it is carved, polychromed and gilded. However, the profile is different, and instead of sgraffito, the ornamentation on this frame is carved.

Ornamentation that would ordinarily be small and retained on

Italian frames, is sometimes seen enlarged to dramatic proportions on Spanish frames. Note the large corner elements take up two thirds of each side of this frame. The inner and outer sections are raised, but the shape of the frame echoes the crosseted corner design seen in Dutch frames rather than the standard cassetta profile. The inner and outer sections are rows of a tiny repeating ornament, which is a design and construction common in Italian frames as well. This is a style of frame one could envision around a painting by Picasso.

I queried the Expressionist painter Peter Josyph (whose canvas surrounded by a Spanish 17th century frame is discussed later in this article) about the use of these frames from centuries past around 20th century paintings: "Naturally, some pictures and frames will never make a match. But generally speaking any painter would be lucky to have one of these classic, 17th century frames dignifying his work. There's an aesthetic nobility



Photo 4: Peter Josyph, *St. Pierre de Montmartre* 1999; in a Spanish 17th century frame; carved and gilded

Frames from the collection of Diego Salazar Antique Frames

about them that quietly but forcefully represents almost any really good piece of art. And it provides an opportunity for a contemporary painter to collaborate with master artisans of another age. Four hundred years needn't keep their work apart. What's 400 years when people are working at their peak? To an artist who sees his work as overwhelmed by such a richly ornamented frame, I would say, 'Then paint a better picture.' It's not by accident that Picasso had a supply of these Italian and Spanish frames in the studio while he worked. He didn't try them to test the frame. He tried them to test the picture. If the test was a failure, so much the worse for the picture!"

Let us examine specific instances where Italian and Spanish 17th century frames make ideal surrounds for 19th and 20th century paintings. *Landscape (Paysan et son chen pres d'une barriere)* 1894, by Paul Gauguin (see Photo 3), is surrounded by an Italian 17th century frame. The frame is carved, polychromed, and gilded, with the panel ornamentation rendered with the sgraffito technique. This painting, from the

collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum originally hung in a French Louis XV style frame with a white finish.

One might ask: "Why take a French 19th century painting out of a French frame and put it in an Italian frame from centuries past?" This marriage of painting and frame is very successful in a number of ways. The quiet effect of the black and gold finish brings the eye directly into the vibrant colors of the painting, instead of competing with it as a brightly gilded surface, or a blaring white finish, would do. The flat cassetta profile of the frame complements the depth of the landscape, where as the protrusion of a Louis XV frame would be incongruous with a painting in which none of the elements in the artist's composition protrude. The carved ornamentation on the inner and outer edges is simpatico with the brushwork in the painting. Even though a French frame is of the same country of origin as the painting, on close examination, this Italian frame has far more to do with the painting in terms of color, depth, and feeling, all vital elements in framing fine



Photo 5: Italian 17th century frame; carved, polychromed, and gilded

Frames from the collection of Diego Salazar Antique Frames

art.

There is much controversy today with regard to how Impressionist paintings should be framed. There are those who champion the ornate French frame, and others who look for a frame closer to the simpler styles that some of the painters themselves were putting on their works. What seems to be overlooked in this discourse is that every painting is different with regard to what it needs as a surround; even the artists who had specific frame preferences varied these choices for different pictures, and certainly over the course of their careers. They experimented, they tried different things, and sometimes they compromised to quite satisfactory results. Like a master chef in the kitchen, perhaps we do better to ponder all the complex and wonderful qualities of the elements we are seeking to combine in a pleasing way, rather than choose a formula that limits the possibilities.

The image seen in Photo 4 is Saint Pierre de Montmartre, 1999, by the expressionist painter Peter Josyph. The frame is a 17th century Spanish frame that is carved and gilded. The center panel of the frame is decorated with deep, intricately carved ornamentation at the corners and center points. The artist evokes the strength and beauty of the cathedral using a minimum

of color and line. To place this beautiful image in a contemporary frame would completely take it out of context. Peter Josyph describes canvasses as being “little pieces of magic to be hung on the wall.”

To carry this analogy further, let us not in considering how to frame such an image, break the spell, which the artist has cast. He has conjured the mystery of a structure from centuries past using a distinctly contemporary style of painting. There is no need to provide the viewer with a contemporary surround as an identifier; we would be stating the obvious. Why not instead enhance the feelings of power and beauty that the artist has created in the painting? This 17th century Spanish frame, with its dramatic ornamentation and beautifully aged finish, complements both the painting, and the artist’s vision.

The paintings that we cherish always have much more to say to us than the artist ever imagined; that is part of the nature of art. These Italian and Spanish frames from the 17th century have more practical uses than ever dreamed of by their makers; perhaps that is part of the nature of a fine frame. The frame seen in Photo 5 is an Italian 17th century frame that is carved, polychromed and gilded. It has a cassetta profile and the intricate designs on the frieze are rendered by the sgraffito technique.

When I smell the rich aroma of a bunch of fresh basil, I think there must be more ways to use this glorious ingredient than just in my tomato sauce. When I look at the frame in Photo 5, I think surely an object such as that should not be relegated to wait in storage for the chance 17th century painting in need of a frame. When a passion for something truly wonderful, such as a frame like this, fuels investigation and experimentation, the results can dramatically change our perceptions of design and function. ■