

Style Snapshot

A look at a frame, its characteristics, and history

by William B. Adair

What Style Frame is this? Cassetta Style Frame;
20th Century; American variation

Where is it from? Italy. We know that Boston painter Hermann Dudley Murphy traveled to Italy to paint and acquire knowledge so it is possible that he saw the frame and developed the idea for his own use.

What time period is it from? Between 1900 to 1925

Who was instrumental in developing the style of this frame? Most American framers refer to this kind of frame as the “American Impressionist Style.” However, this is a generalized term that is difficult to refine as there are many variations on the moulding and just as many “pet” names I have heard it referred to over the years. Some call it the “Murphy Style” frame after Murphy. In 1903, Murphy, Walfred Thulin, and Charles Prendergast banded together to make frames, as they could not buy any that satisfied them.

This style frame can also be referred to as the “Hassam Style,” as New York artist Childe Hassam also used this design for his Impressionistic landscapes and sometimes had his monogram “H” carved into the centerpoints and corners. At the other end of the world spectrum, it is referred to in Italy as the “Liberty Style.”

What are the defining characteristics of this frame?
Carved inner edge, flat panel, and incised/carved outer

(Continued on page 117)



“After” — This cassetta-style frame was chosen for the reframing of this painting. The frame style was more historically accurate than the previous frame (see below).



“Before” — The painting was originally housed in this ornate, gilded frame with a liner.



William B. Adair received his B.F.A. in Studio Art from the University of Maryland in 1972. For the next 10 years he worked for the Smithsonian Institution’s National Portrait Gallery as a museum conservator specializing in the treatment of picture frames. In 1982 he formed his own company, Gold Leaf Studios, for the making of frames and the conservation of gilded antiques. Over the years his clients have included the U.S. Department of State and the National Park Service. He is the founder of the International Institute for Frame Study, a non-profit archive dedicated to collecting and disseminating information on the history of frames. He can be reached via e-mail at bill@goldleafstudios.com.

(Continued from page 120)

moulding, sometimes seen with a flower or incised pattern in the corner.

What design departures might be seen on some frames of this style? Sometimes the flat panel has a spooned and hammered effect or stippled pattern in the gesso to add some interplay with the light and texture of the canvas. Corner ornamentation was varied between floral motifs and monograms. In some patterns, the outer edge of the moulding has an incised set of lines to emphasize the rectilinear qualities of the design and add interest without excessive ornamentation.

What type of artwork would this frame most likely house? Landscapes, but it was also used for portraits as its popularity increased.

What furnishing/interior styles accompanied these style frames in their time? Arts and Crafts interiors.

Additional Comments: Beginning with the Eastlake Style in the 1870's, the development of this frame style was a natural reaction to the ponderous Victorian ornamentation of the preceding generations. The Italian term of "Liberty Style" refers to the period of reunification in the last quarter of the 19th century which brought about many changes in society and the decorative arts, including but not limited to the frame. The photo at the bottom of page 120 shows how the Hassam painting at the Mint Museum was previously framed. The top photo is the same painting with the more historically accurate "Hassam Style" moulding. ■