

American Frames: The 1970's

by Anne Vazquez

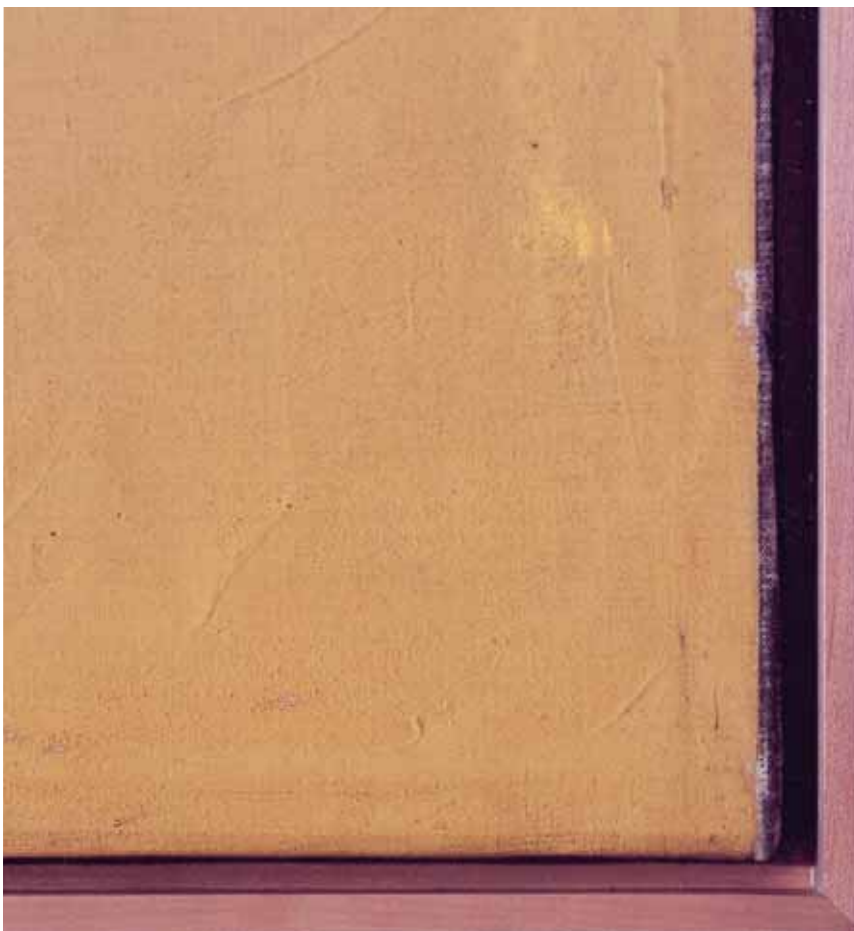


Photo 1: Wood strips were used to create float frames, like this one. With works of art on canvas, the strips were often nailed directly on the canvas, as had originally been done by artists during the 1920's.

As with the whole “picture” of home decor and fashion, frame styles can't be strictly divided by the beginning and end of a decade. However, there were some specific changes that occurred during the 1970's. While the classic styles persevered (as they have through virtually all decor trends), the continuing popularity of modern art affected the frames that were chosen during that decade.

The welded metal and metal section frames developed by Robert Kulicke in the 60's remained a popular choice (as well as the acrylic box). The unobtrusive nature of these frame styles paired well with the clean lines of much of the pop art created in the 70's.

However, while the sleek, minimal look so prevalent in the 60's continued to be a popular trend in the 70's, it did give way to some new

materials and shapes for frames.

Lacquered frames were often used, for example. Their high gloss look of these frames were in vogue and they were often designed with bright primary colors. The “near invisible” strip frames that were widely used in the 70’s were often made with these types of finishes (see Photo 1).

Burnt orange, green, yellow, and brown... the colors often associated with that transitional decade—the 70’s. While these earthy colors were certainly not the only hues found in art and home decor during this time, they were a main ingredient in the decor of the time.

Following from this trend, the “return” of wood was a significant movement in frame design. And it returned in full swing, with numerous species being used. This is not to say that frames with wooden finishes were absent during the 60’s, but they were often not viewed as elegant or refined choices for housing art.

Framemaker Jared Bark

had a part in changing the role of the wooden frame. In 1969, Bark Frameworks, located in New York City, began to

produce simple wood frames with a reserved style. Many types of wood were used, including such North American

species as ash, hard maple, basswood, cherry, red birch, and walnut.

The finishes on these frames were relatively modest (perhaps in keeping with the return to natural materials, as with the use of wood). These early frames from Bark were designed with a narrow stem profile, and the focus was on designing the frame in direct response to the art.

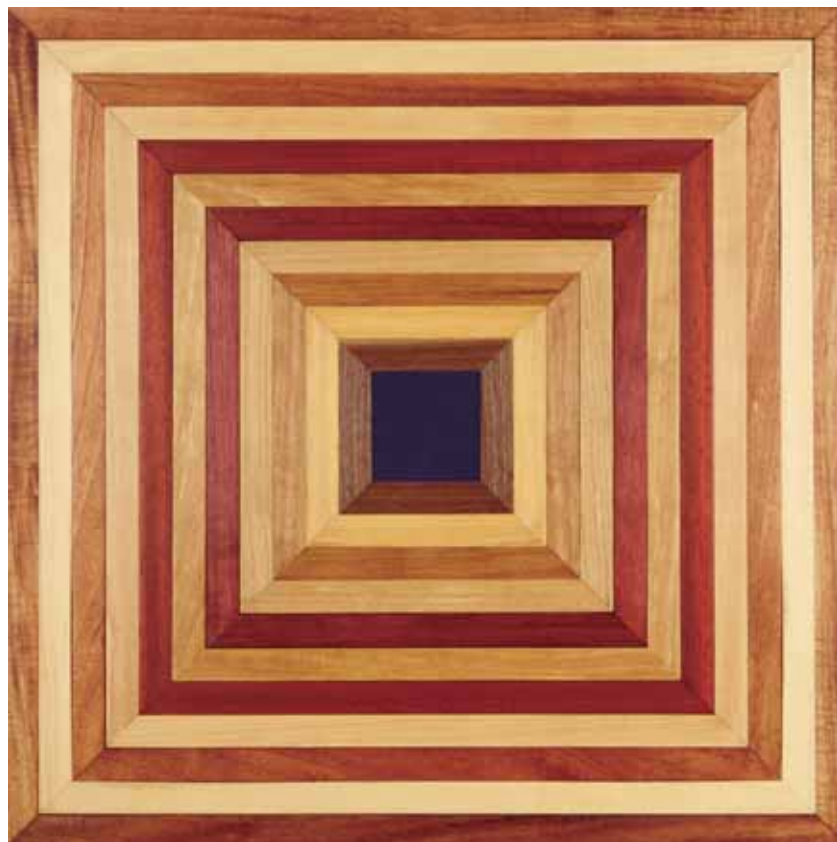


Photo 2: The woods used to craft the refined wooden frames that emerged in the 70’s included koa, light maple, mahogany, dark maple, padauk, oak, purple heart, ash, cherry, ramin, and walnut (shown above, from outside to inside).

Metals and other “shiny” looks were popular in framing the abstract art of the 1970’s.

Bark worked with many artists; Donald Judd was one of the first he worked with on a large scale. The frames Bark designed for Judd were primarily simple waxed basswood or ramin.

Bark used all the woods mentioned above for his frames, but he also incorporated some exotic species, including East Indian rosewood, purple heart, bubinga, and padauk. As the decade progressed, Bark’s frames were made with deeper and wider

profiles. This was in response to the increasing size of works of art on paper.

Many of Bark's frames were simply waxed, while some were given a rubbed acrylic finish which made light wood frames paler, for an almost chalky appearance. This enabled the frame to act a "bridge" between a white gallery wall and the artwork, Bark explains.

The varied colors of wood and interesting appearance of many wood grains provided a wide variety of looks. This gave more choices when designing a frame for a specific piece. Occasionally, Bark painted his frames—black, white, or gray.

During these years, Bark also adopted the fillet as an alternative to the window mat in presenting works on paper. These fillets were made of balsawood or hardwood, which separated the glazing from a back mat.

Generally, a half inch or so of the matboard was exposed around the sheet of paper as a border to separate the work of art. For the first several years of the 1970's, less window mats were cut than in the past—works on paper were often floated in a simple frame with a fillet.

Eclectic Framing

Another trend that occurred in the 70's was a wave of eclectic framing, in which contemporary frames were used to house older paintings. Some museum curators removed the period frames from their collections and replaced them with frames in the style of the time.

Once of these "reinstallations" occurred at the Museum of Modern Art in 1978. Period frames were removed from many of the late 19th and 20th century works of art at the MOMA. Strip frames were used to reframe these works.

Later, in the 80's, the aesthetic and historical value of matching the period of a frame with its art was revisited. As such, museum curators worked to reframe the art in their collections in an appropriate frame. (Since eclectic framing had occurred prior to the 70's as well, some of these curators were working to reverse eclectic framing done before this decade.)

The 70's was a decade of transformation and experimentation. The metals which came to the forefront in the 60's continued to be a highly popular choice, as well as the high gloss lacquer strip

The "return" of wood was a significant movement in frame design of the 1970's.

frames. Meanwhile the new techniques applied with wood frames brought them to be more highly regarded than they had been in the previous decade.

In general, the dominant style of frame during the 1970's was direct and straightforward in its response to the artwork it would surround. Ornament and decorative finishes were not dominant features.

It was a time when the popularity of modern, bright art, as well as "earthy" looks co-existed and frames of equally differing styles complemented these creations. ■