

Style Snapshot

A look at a frame, its characteristics, and history

by Mark Guthrie, CPF

What style frame is this? The Tondo frame, or round frame; in an elliptical shape, it's called the Tondo Ovolò. The Italian term, Tondo, is a shortening of Rotondo, the Latin word for round. In its most accurate usage, the term refers to any artwork created in a circular format but, over the years, it has become an understood allusion to the surrounding frame.



Photo 1: Originally ascribed to Antonio Barile, this frame has been re-attributed to the Florentine family of del Tasso. At five points are carved, three dimensional, heads (Christ, two prophets and two prophetesses). The creation of this frame occurred c.1506-1508.

Where is it from? The tondo, as we framers refer to it, has its origins in Tuscan Italy. Likely inspirations are found in sixth century B.C. Greek mosaics and in fourth century A.D. Byzantine carved ivory plaques and roundels (circular-shaped decorative motifs modeled after ornamented shields).

What time period is it from? Earliest known examples are from the Pre-Italian Renaissance (13th century). These were often painted roundels used on altarpieces with raised or punched edges, indicating a border. During the 14th century astragals were added to the inner and outer edges of the border, creating a cassetta-like surround. (Astragals are narrow, convex mouldings, often with a form of beading on them.) Later in the Renaissance (15th century), the design developed into a more sculptural object. Lush fruit and floral forms began to emanate from gilt wood, carved stone, and glazed terracotta tondi.



Photo 2: A typical Renaissance tondo frame possessing the hallmarks of Luca della Robbia design aesthetics. The circular wreath garland, festooned with fruit and leaf forms and clasped at the compass points with a classical cross-strap ornament, is emblematic of tondo frames of the 15th century.

Who was instrumental in developing this style of frame? It's uncertain who may have been the originator of this particular style; however the most notable innovator is Luca della Robbia. His glazed terracotta tondi, elaborately decorated with fruit garlands, have become emblematic of the form.

What design departures might be seen on some frames of this style? Although its usage was fairly constant within

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Italy, the tondo and tondo ovolo regularly disappeared and re-emerged elsewhere throughout history. During the French Louis' periods, the form enjoyed popularity as a romantic setting for portraiture. And because France, at this time, held stylistic sway over all of Europe, employment of the tondo came to be relatively widespread. Eventually, another innovation (that still finds use) began to take hold—the spandrel (the format that houses a round or elliptical subject with a square or rectangular outer edge).

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What type of artwork would this frame most likely house? For many years, use of the tondo never departed from its original purpose of implementation—as a component of the sacred altarpiece. Almost without deviation, early tondi housed paintings of The Holy Family or, more commonly, Madonna and Child. This contributes to the reasoning

behind the tondo's other name—"The Birth Tray." In an echoing of the ancient Greek veneration of fruit as attributes of their

Olympian gods, the Italians developed the tradition of presenting a new mother with a bountiful tray of fruit as a symbol of virtue and health (and possibly for sustenance?). Due to this tradition, it became only reasonable that, to honor the most revered mother, her image should be surrounded with a permanent symbolic reference—richly gilt or glazed to further magnify her regal status. ■