

A Survey of Frame History

Part II: Moveable Frames

by Diane Day, CPF



Figure 1: The characteristic Dutch frame had evolved by the Seventeenth century., From Frameworks by Paul Mitchell.



Figure 2: Many consider the frame decorations of Spain to be strong, but heavy. From Frameworks by Paul Mitchell.

Altarpieces in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth centuries continued to increase in size and use more and more elaborate inner and outer frames and supports. These large and heavy gilded frame units not only focused attention on the painting, but helped to illuminate it as well. The Churches of Italy and Spain were dimly lit and the gold used on altarpieces reflected light onto the painting, thus illuminating and giving the subject an other-worldly glow.

The northern Europeans did not use as much gold on their frames: they did not need it to illuminate their artwork. Churches and secular buildings in northern Europe had larger windows and light colored walls and floors which resulted in well lit interiors. Northern Europe produced more secular and allegorical works which were

placed in relatively plain gilt and black, or gilt and polychrome, frames. The frames complimented the artwork and fit into the simple interiors of the buildings where they hung.

By the Seventeenth century, what we think of today as the characteristic Dutch frame had fully evolved (Figure 1). The polished black frames were made of ebony (a wood easily available through trade), or had an ebony finish and were made by combining various flat and round mouldings. This type of frame had existed since the Fifteenth century, but framemakers had become more sophisticated in the use of width and depth, light and shadow. The merchants' way of life ruled during this period and their middle class tastes and wealth were reflected in the frames they bought to put in homes and

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commercial buildings.

In Spain, stylistic changes arrived later and lasted longer than in other parts of Europe. Different frame styles were produced at the same time. The Spanish had an inclination toward the flamboyant. They had a particular fondness for bold wood carving and wood sculpture, and as a result, the ornamentation on the frames they produced was much more sculptural. Frame decoration was stronger and heavier looking, and the gold leaf finish had a nearly brown tone to it (Figure 2).

At this point in history, skillful carvers made decorative frames which enhanced the paintings they surrounded. The moveable wooden frame had emerged and was being placed around secular as well as simplified religious scenes. Various framing styles, motifs, etc. spread from region to region and each country developed its own versions. With moveable paintings came a shift in the purpose of the frame. The frame was increasingly used to focus attention on the artwork, becoming a window to connect the spectator to another world.

There was a steady increase in secular paintings—and thus



Figure 3: One of many examples of the Italian cassetta frame. From *Frameworks* by Paul Mitchell.



Figure 4: Detail of the above cassetta frame.

frame production—during the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries. The increase in secular frames in Italy, the artistic center of Europe during the Renaissance, resulted in the architectural tabernacle frame being replaced by relatively simple rectangular frames with classically-inspired patterns and decoration. Columns, pediments, and bases disappeared leaving only a decorated frieze between narrow mouldings. This type of frame is known as a cassetta (Italian for “small box”) frame (Figures 3 and 4) and is reminiscent of classical architectural borders. It was an easy frame to make, having only three sections, but allowed for a great number of modifications. It was the introduction of the basic picture frame as we know it today. Italian design influenced taste throughout Europe, and during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries the cassetta developed some distinct regional variations. The inner and outer edges of the cassetta were carved to varying degrees. Some variations also raised the edges considerably. The projection of the edges resulted in new profiles which eventually evolved into the Baroque style. ■

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