

Added commentary on
A Master's Legacy

Here are more comments about Robert Kulicke that we were unable to include in the article due to space considerations. They offer further insight into the artistry and character of the prominent 20th century American frame maker.

Laurence Kanter
Curator of Early European Art, Yale University Art Gallery; former curator of the Robert Lehman Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art

“I was an admirer of Bob's paintings for a long time, but we knew each other through his frames. I knew of Bob as a frame maker in his early days with APF or before they became APF. Robert Lehman owned a great many of them, and I was curator of the Lehman Collection. Bob came to look at the collection, and I came to realize just what a subtle frame maker he was and how clever his imitations of historic frames were, not just in style but also in the actual surface and structural defects and strengths. He was really quite brilliant. I had done an exhibition of renaissance frames of the Lehman Collection in the late 80s that interested him, so we had a great deal to discuss. I went to visit his studio where we talked a lot about his paintings--not only how he made them but also how he designed them for his



frames and how he designed his frames for his paintings. We also talked about his experiments with different materials for manufacturing his frames, including some very strange cast materials. But he was always very keenly aware of the structural combination of frame and image.”

“I remember that there was one frame in the Lehman Collection of which

I was particularly proud. At that time I thought it was an intact and extraordinary example of a sixteenth-century Venetian frame. I showed it to Bob and went on about how good I thought it was, and he made no response. He had made some comment on every other frame we had talked about, but for this one he said nothing and just smiled. I learned shortly afterwards that the frame had been completely rebuilt and the surface was completely modern and was made in a technique that Bob had pioneered. It was an old frame underneath, but it had been completely restored. I've often wondered if he restored it but was too polite to tell me so because I was so excited by it. I'm not embarrassed by the situation, because I think it was a remarkable frame and the repair job on it was even more remarkable. If it was his I'm sure he was very proud of it. And if it wasn't he probably wished he knew who did it so he could find out how to do it that well.”

Roy Davis

Partner, Davis & Langdale, New York, NY

“I first met Bob at art school in Philadelphia. Then we lost track of one another during the war. Bob went to Paris and learned how to become a frame maker by working with craftsmen there. He also collected Coptic textiles from auctions and dealers and brought them back in a trunk and sold them. With that money, he started his business.”

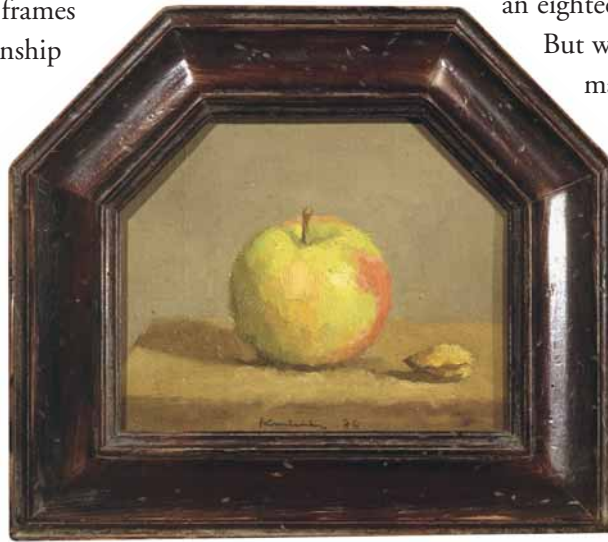
“I ran a showroom for him in my gallery and was very much involved in the business. We were both also very acquisitive and inquisitive. He was a rabid collector of all kinds of things other than frames and things that had some relationship to framing. We used to walk up and down Third Avenue together and would go into antique stores and buy whatever we could afford. In some instances we even bought some things and sold them to other dealers to make the payroll for the frame shop.”

“Bob worked 18 hours a day. When he had factory on East 91st Street, the factory was open virtually the entire night, and friends used to come and make their own frames in exchange for helping burnish gold or other chores. His life was totally involved in this, but at the same time he was painting. I don't know how he found the time to do it, but he produced an enormous number of pictures.”

“Painting and frame making were totally separate for Bob. If he produced a frame that he loved, he used it on one of his pictures. It wasn't a matter of whether it suited the picture or not; he just did it. One of my favorite stories about Bob was that if he started to make a Louis XV frame, he then put one on every picture that came into the shop regardless of whether it was appropriate or not. This was a reflection of his enthusiasm. He was less interested in Baroque frames, though, and more interested in frames that were more provincial. And while he was prepared and made copies of repro-

ductions of elaborately carved frames, his interests lay more in the provincial side of frame making and frame design. And the same was probably true in his interests in art.”

“His background was very strongly strengthened by his knowledge of design. He also had a pretty thorough understanding of how to go about resolving the problems that arose from whatever designs he chose. But it was clear by the nature of the art that the art dictated the nature of the frame. In the past frames had been more or less an extension of the architecture of the furniture design of the time. The carvings you see on a piece of eighteenth-century furniture are the same as you'll see on an eighteenth-century frame, for example. But with Bob, the art was always primary.”



Mike Kulicke

Son and frame maker in Mount Bethel, PA

“My father had a strong ego. My mother just recently told me a story about the Thannhauser wing at the Guggenheim Museum—the square gallery next to the big

spiral that has a collection of paintings donated by Justin K. Thannhauser, a collector who lived on Madison Avenue around the corner from my parents' showroom. My father was a regular at his house. Thannhauser liked big carved antique frames, either originals or reproductions. On one occasion, Thannhauser asked for a big wide molding for something. On the way out, his wife indicated to my mother to keep the molding a little narrower, because that was her thing. This couple finally gave the Guggenheim money for the gallery, and the art went from their house to this new wing with the frames intact. After about 20 years a curator or museum director decided to put all those antique frames in the basement and put on all floater frames, 1/2" wide wood or metal, and reframe everything modern. And so, the whole wing was reframed. Then in late 80s, the museum decided to put those frames back on. Walter Jamison, a man my father trained as a frame consultant, went with my father to discuss the reframing. And the curator or director said

something like the Louis XVI period frames were not exactly appropriate for the art. And my father said no, in fact, it's exactly that style. My father was convinced he was correct and thought the director was sort of just pulling rank. Most any businessperson would say fine, let's go on with our business. But my father didn't like it. Not being a diplomat, he said he had to leave. And he just walked out. The other frame people in the room apologized for my father's temper and proceeded with the project without his assistance. I guess at the time he basically was more interested in doing his paintings and framing his work."

"My father's philosophy was that the purpose of a frame is to present a work of art in the most sympathetic manner possible. The frame designer uses the designs and styles of an architect to make furniture, which frames are. All furniture designers use styles from the architecture of their period, and a frame is designed to fit a style of furniture."

Fredricka Kulicke

Daughter and owner of Fredricka Kulicke School of Jewelry Art, Parsippany, NJ

"He started playing around with cloisonné around 1960. It grew from doing reproductions of his own paintings as cloisonné miniatures. Then he learned goldsmithing to make settings for them. When he put beautiful handmade cloisonné pendants on store-bought chains, they looked terrible, so he got involved in handmade chains. And then he taught himself how to do granulation, which is another ancient technique that wasn't done much in the western world for the last 1,000 years. He did exactly what he did in the frame industry with jewelry. He changed the frame industry by having it look differently at frames. The frames out there today are his innovations. In the jewelry world he changed the look of modern jewelry."

"He was never a sit down bench jeweler. He did make a lot of pear jewels—his pear paintings translated into pear cloisonné. He put silver backs on them all the time because he didn't want his pear jewels melted down for the gold. He was also interested in research and development and created new projects to teach students because he had this vision that he needed to change the

jewelry industry in the U.S. and give it a sense of history. So he came up with all these projects and figured out how to do all the ancient techniques you see in old art books and museums. If you look through old medieval art books and ancient Greek art books, it's all jewelry, because that's what survived."

"All of us who learned from him have gone on and evolved to do other techniques and add some modern touches. But he was such a purist that he hated faceted stones. He didn't want to put any in his jewelry because they didn't exist in ancient times. But you have to incorporate faceted stones if you want to sell your work today. So all of us who do the type of jewelry that he started now incorporate modern faceted stones with the ancient gold work."

"He also experimented including cloisonné in picture frames. He really loved ancient book covers. A big book cover would have a saint in the middle, and in the corners there were little saints and a lot filigree and granulation and fancy gold work all over. He did that, but with a pear in the middle and put the whole thing on a sheet of 18 karat gold."

Pam Sheehan

Kulicke's Widow

"He trained me as a frame maker from 1992 on. And for all of our marriage, we were partners in that. We framed all his shows together. He just adored the fourteenth century, the Egyptian, and fifteenth century Madonnas. He framed his pears like they were fifteenth-century Madonnas."

"Painting and frame making was the core of his life; that's what made life worthwhile for him. There is a central core to his work, although he would go to a new project when something would catch his fancy. Sometimes he wouldn't be successful in carrying out whatever vision he had and would try again. In the early days of the jewelry school, for example, he gave eight years of his life and all of his time to rediscovering granulation."

"He used to tell a story about when he was in art school as a kid. He made frames for money for all his fel-

low students, and they'd have exhibits. He was such a good salesman and was so charming and enthusiastic that he made a lot of frames. Then he said that one day he went into the Philadelphia Museum and looked at the frames and was absolutely mortified at how terrible his own frames were. But instead of giving up, he just treated that moment of humility as a seed that would spring to life later on, when he thought that he had failed as a painter. He still felt that he could succeed as a frame maker because he loved being in museums and loved studying frames.”

“He could almost commune with a frame and make up stories about it. He would just look at all the details and just imagine where a frame had been, how it had survived—all sorts of crazy and fantastical things. Sometimes he would do that to remember a frame. One time, when he was in Boston on a cold winter night, he passed a window with a frame in it. It looked like an old frame that had been found in an attic and restored though not in a particularly skilled way. He stood there, which he described as freezing to death, creating a drawing and making up a story about this frame so that he could remember it and reproduce what he was experiencing in its presence.”

William Adair

Owner, Goldleaf Studios, Washington, DC

“Georgia O’Keeffe had come up with a clamshell frame, and Bob’s work with her led to the development of the metal section frame. At first, all the corners kept coming apart. Bob said he could get the extruded material but had to give it to somebody to weld. He felt it would be better if they could just cut the sections and have a device to hold them together without the welded corner—which is what they eventually did.”

“At one point Bob told me that he had never been happier in his framing life than when he only had one client who was always satisfied with his work no matter what, and that client was himself. He also said that people are going to copy your designs so you have to keep changing to stay ahead of the curve. He felt that it was okay to stand on another artist’s shoulders and borrow designs freely but don’t spit on his head.”

Marty Horowitz

Owner, Goldleaf Framemakers of Santa Fe, NM

“I had just gotten out of the draft in 1970 and needed a job. So I decided I to go to Kulicke Picture Frames. So I walked in, all dressed up in my bellbottoms, platform shoes, and French T-shirt, and demanded that they hire me. And they did! Unbeknownst to me, Bob had been forced out of his own frame company by that time, but everybody was still in place. There were designers like Don Herbert, who worked with Bob on the metal section frame. There was Bud Esry, who worked with Bob on the old T-top plastic insert moldings. The three of them had a great association and worked for years together in bringing Bob’s most famous creation, the welded aluminum frame, into existence. After about 3½ years, I moved to Frames Unlimited in Soho during all the expansion of artists and great galleries. And that’s when I finally met Bob. He came into my office one day, and we got along right away.”

“The most important thing about the Kulicke operation was that it wasn’t just contemporary frames. Kulicke had a full line of period frames. This is where I learned about period frames, and I have Bob Kulicke to thank for it. What he did gave me the knowledge that I pass on today to all the people in my classes.” ■