

Masters of the Custom Frame

by Patrick Sarver

At Master Framers in St. Paul, Minnesota, the emphasis is on custom framing, including in-house moulding, enhancement of commercial moulding, and one-of-a-kind original frames.



frames to maintain quality and keep our costs down,” says Roger. “We decided that, if we were going to stay in this business, we wanted to be the best in our marketplace. Today, I don’t think anyone else in this region can match our knowledge of frame history, or our experience in making custom frames.”

Master Framers provides top-of-the-line custom framing for many of the collectors and museums in the region. “Three or four years ago the Minneapolis Institute of Art wanted to reframe works that had been in storage,” Roger says. “We did something like 30 pieces for them over about two years. Right now, we’re doing two pieces a year. But they’re getting ready to add a new wing, so we’ll get another big amount of work in the near future.”

“We do projects that I don’t think any other framer in our area could handle, including reproductions of period frames,” says Eric. “We had one customer who wanted a frame with panels hidden inside of it. We have the resources, the materials, the custom moulding, the staff, and the history to do projects like that.”

Art and frame restoration and special projects account for half of Master Framers’ business; the other half is typical off-the-wall framing work. “A lot of our special project customers are artists, and they are



Co-owner Janet Hawn and son Eric Tollefson at the design counter at Master Framers. Left: Master Framers covers the first floor and part of the basement of an historic building the company owns in St. Paul’s Lowertown district.

Not far from a steamboat landing in the Lowertown district of St. Paul, MN, Master Framers stands quietly as the leading custom framer in the upper Midwest. Owned by Roger Nielsen and Janet Hawn, and assisted by Janet’s son Eric Tollefson, the company provides a range of quality framing services in their own historic, five-story brick building.

“This is an area where artists all came because it was cheap,” says Janet. It’s been a great setting for a company that puts a lot of old-fashioned craftsmanship into its business while drawing on the artistic talents of its neighbors.

“Back in the high inflation days, when moulding quality was going down and prices were going up, we started finishing our own



and worked on restorations and finishing. He came up with new finishes—faux and decorative layered finishes—that we probably wouldn't have done before. Employees like that really open doors and leave their mark. Even though he's gone now, today we can do faux tortoise-shell panels on frames or do faux malachite inlay."

Master Framers rarely says no to any design project, no matter how challenging. "Even if I can't do it myself, I know I can find someone who can," says Eric. "We have a huge resource base of talent and outsourcing."

"We had a client who acquired a set of art tiles depicting a cow," says Roger. "So, to keep with the cow theme, we had a custom stainless frame built by a welding shop, complete with rivets in the corners, to simulate the look of stainless steel milk tanks in a creamery. We didn't manufacture the frame, but we did come up with a concept and then got the job done."

A tough challenge for Master Framers involved a project for a nearby chapel. "This project came from an artist we had been working with," says Janet. "Her client is a patron of a church that was redoing its winter chapel. The project called for a single tabernacle frame of three panels incorporating five paintings."

"The problem was where it was going," says Eric. "It's a small chapel, and the only spot was in a corner behind a pew, next to an entrance to a confessional booth. It was an uneven space, so we had to use two different angles between the back panel and the two side panels. I spent almost two months drawing and researching. I sat in the gallery with all the books out and did drawing after drawing, trying to

One of the latest special projects handled by Eric was this tabernacle frame for a local chapel. The frame consists of more than 330 pieces of moulding. Because of space constraints, it had to be designed using two different angles between the back panel and the two side panels.



Eric works on a small tabernacle frame in the carpentry shop at Master Framers.

on a two-year cycle," says Eric. "They come in with several projects all at once, then we don't hear from them for a year or so. It takes that long for them to get going."

One thing that makes Master Framers stand out is the quality and the talents of its employees. "Not only are they talented and have learned to apply those talents to custom framing, but we are able to assimilate their experience into what we do," says Eric. "One employee, Udayan, worked for us for five years. He was a decorative painter



Master Framers currently uses three small rooms at the front of the shop as a gallery for local artists as well as a showcase for framing design. In a move designed to focus more on their core business, they plan to sublease the space for use by an independent gallery.

profile a customer likes, but refinish it to change it to something they prefer over the off-the-shelf look. Typically, a custom framing job involves a gilded frame with maybe a liner or a fabric-covered mat or fillets and maybe some ornamentation on the corners.”

“For example, we get Abe Munn frames and put our own finishes on them,” she adds. “We’re gilders, and maybe we want to create a particular style of frame. But why reinvent the wheel when you can buy moulding and put your own corner and gilding on it and match that finish to a frame we’ve already made for the same customer? On the other hand, we also use Munn moulding just the way it comes from them. It all depends on what a customer likes.”

“We usually do any carving right here, although it depends on the staff at the time,” says Eric. “If we get in something elaborate, we have a Russian carver across the street who does great work. I could do it or Roger could do it—and we do 75 percent of the hand carving in-house—but it would take too much of our time. We end up doing more compo because carving is so labor intensive.”

Master Framers works a lot with area artisans; in fact, throughout its own building there are creative people of many stripes. “We have a clothing designer, an interior designer, two independent artists, a textile designer, two band rehearsal studios, and a center for educating kids about photography and art,” says Eric. “I also share the woodworking shop downstairs with a carpenter, and there’s a pottery studio for 11 people who share studio space. On the fifth floor is a

figure out the angles. I even went to the chapel with a cardboard blank to make sure it would fit.”

“This project is an example of the collaborative effort of different artisans,” says Janet. “We had a woodcarver to do the small pieces. We had a cabinet shop make a corner shelf to support the frame and match the wood of the pews. Everyone here was involved.”

“When I started constructing this frame, the skill I had gained at a cabinet shop where I had worked part-time came into play,” says Eric. “There were 330 pieces of moulding on a frame that was no bigger than 4 x 4 feet. Udayan drafted a beautiful hand-drawing of the frame. Different ornamental parts were drawn on separate pieces that you could layer one on top of the other. My father scanned each of those, and we put them into PhotoShop to change and move around. I then took that into a CAD program and made a wire-frame model to show the chapel what it would look like. From that, Udayan did a watercolor study, which I used to build the frame in three dimensions. I started cutting pieces in April, and we delivered it at the end of June. The result was a 14th century-style

Renaissance frame, 22-karat water gilded with leaf stenciling on some of the panels. After that project, anything else is just a piece of cake.”

Master Framers also maintains an extensive number of their own moulding profiles, which they mill on-site. “When we first started, we designed 100 samples of moulding,” says Roger. “It just evolved from there because of customers’ needs.”

“It’s kind of cost-prohibitive to have a moulding knife made just because we want to a new sample,” says Eric. “It would be nice if we could because I have tons of ideas. But a new knife costs \$125 to \$400. Generally, when a customer requests something, that offsets the cost of the knife, which then gets added to our line.”

In addition, Eric says, about 20 percent of the pre-finished stock mouldings Master Framers sells has either a build-up on it to increase the depth, a compo corner added to it, or toning to match the art. Or perhaps they’ll add a block corner with a rosette. “Even on pre-finished frames, we customize,” says Eric.

“The average customer off the street is unaware that they can change things on frames,” says Janet. “We might use a particular

guy I work with who owns a company that creates scenes and sets for commercials and print ads. These are great resources. And in a lot of other buildings around here there are other people doing creative things. We have rich community to choose from.”

“We moved our woodshop downstairs because we needed the space and it was too dusty to have near the finishing area. I’m not down there everyday, so we got Tim, who lives in the building, to share the space. It helps us save on overhead, and we can take advantage of Tim as a resource. Having someone else around who understands woodworking is great. Plus, we’re doing mortise and through-tenon frames now because Tim brought in his mortiser. It’s a beneficial arrangement. It’s all about finding the right people. And in a community of artisans, they just kind of appear.”

When Master Framers first started, there was an artisan’s alliance within the building. “Little by little, they moved off and did their own thing,” says Roger. “Years ago, I had a dream of a conglomerate of contract workers here. But I think I did it from the wrong perspective because I was looking at it as a way of cutting our costs. Today, everybody is setting up their own business. You have to let people grow; you just have to find a way to keep them as a resource.”

Master Framers also has been able to develop its own resources, sometimes because of unexpected events. Four years ago, their bookkeeper embezzled a major amount of the company’s funds. “We were able to prove \$123,000, but she took more,” says Janet. “That just



Kristin Nelson-Baird works on restoring a frame in the shop area. Behind her are a portion of the company’s molds used to make compo corners and other ornaments.

about killed us. We anticipated a four-year recovery period and were well into that when 9/11 hit. Things have been slowly coming back up since then, but it’s still slower than we’d like.”

“When things slowed, I picked up a part time job at a cabinetry and millwork shop,” Eric says. “As soon as I started working there, I was able to do Arts & Crafts stuff because they had a mortiser and tools like that. It was extra income, and I also learned new skills that I could put to use here. It completely broadened my horizons. Two or three months after I started that part-time job, we got the project for the chapel. If I hadn’t been at the cabinet shop, I don’t think I would have been able to do it.”

Eric has since moved on to working with the scenic shop in his own building, where he has learned other skills. “We have a show coming

up in September at the state fair where we focus on Stickley-era Arts & Crafts design. Last year I had an idea to build a booth that looked like a room, a showcase to hang framed art that looked like the environment of a home. Now I know how to manufacture a quick room that can be assembled and disassembled.”

Master Framers is also in the process of a major business transition, as Roger plans for retirement. “I’ve been in the business since 1959,” he says. “My plan is to phase out of the business and sell my interest to Janet. We’re currently 50-50 partners. I will continue on as a consultant and an art conservator.”

“We’re using this transition period to add new technology and to make ourselves more efficient,” says Eric. “Part-time jobs elsewhere have helped me see our inefficiencies. This is a great opportunity to bring the shop into the 21st century. For example, by using CAD software, we can make drawings in 30 minutes that used to take several hours. While it’s fun working on special projects, we need bread-and-butter framing to help pay the bills. With the changes we’re making, that will be much easier and will give us time to market and promote our custom projects.”

Besides adding new technology, Janet and Eric plan to make better use of their space. “We would like to lease our gallery space to someone in the gallery business,” says Janet. “We would like to keep it as a gallery, with an open archway so each of our customers could mingle with the other business while still giving us window access. Or we could get another business that is aligned with framing and art, like a designer or an architecture firm that needs showroom space.”

“For the longest time, too much

of our space has been taken up for administration,” says Eric. “We’re taking this opportunity to pull all our office space together. We’re going to build a custom office using every inch of space, a central hub for information and administrative duties. Then we can rent the leftover space to another business.”

“We are also in the process of creating printed operation manuals for employees, like a manual for finishing,” says Eric. “We have notes all over the place on finishing and gilding. We have a book of our own profiles. I want to digitize that and put it all in CAD because we’re always adjusting our moulding.”

Eric is also investigating point-of-sale (POS) software. “It’s a bigger step for us because of all the custom work we do. We have to add all of our own profiles and our own finishes. Along with that, we’re setting up our business infrastruc-

ture and establishing a network. If a customer is replicating a frame we did two years ago, the biggest waste of time is looking up information. With the right software, all the information we need will be available quickly.”

Master Framers is also developing specialized services to offer other framers. “We get a lot of restoration work from referrals,” says Roger. “A lot of framers could use us as a resource for special projects, but they’re not sure how they can take advantage of what we offer.”

“I just got a call from a shop in another city who wanted an 18-inch circle frame,” says Janet. “She told me, ‘Someone said you could do this.’ I told her what it would cost, which is certainly more than a manufacturer’s frame, but it was what her customer wanted.”

“I think the biggest lesson we’ve learned over the years is to maintain your core business plan,” says Eric.

“We’ve dabbled in moulding production for other shops and selling botanical prints because we got a deal at an antiques show. That really drained our resources as a custom framer. It’s important to have a specific goal, not to try to do everything. Otherwise, you lose your identity. With more organization and focus, even if we lose a key person, the next person in line can pick things up and keep us rolling.” ■

Patrick Sarver, was editor-in-chief of PFM’s sister publications [Art Trends](#) and [Digital Fine Art](#) for six years, writing about galleries and their business. Previously, he had served as executive editor of [Rutgers Magazine](#), the alumni magazine of Rutgers University, as well as executive editor of [New Jersey Monthly](#), a leading home and lifestyles publication.

