

Art of Stone

Frames made from Pennsylvania bluestone offer an aesthetically pleasing alternative to wood frames.

by Patrick Sarver

Back in prehistoric days, an artist's frame was simply the stone walls of a cave. Later came wooden moulding and, more recently, metal frames. Now, Alvin Epstein of Scott Center, PA, has developed an aesthetically pleasing framing material that takes art and framing back to its roots—frames made out of stone.

Epstein and his wife, Judith Present, own The Other Moose, a small framing studio “way out in the woods in the northern Poconos,” Epstein says. He does the production work while his wife handles the design counter.

The area in which they live is also known for its bluestone. “Bluestone is a staple in this area,” says Epstein. “It’s halfway between slate and sandstone and is used for a lot of things like houses and sidewalks. People here do everything with bluestone. There’s even a bluestone cutting competition every summer. But no one has successfully developed a bluestone frame before because they weren’t framers like I am.”

For his frames, Epstein says, he uses “cleft” bluestone, “which is natural, the way it’s cut and taken out of the quarry.” Bluestone actually comes in a variety of hues, with gray, blue, green, and purple tints common. “Some of the stone can be multi-color,” he says. “Usually the green and the purple are together. Other stones get patterns from white calcium deposits. I have a couple of frames with little white lines all over them that are beautiful. Then there’s iron oxide, which creates a beautiful touch of yellow, sometimes in straight lines, sometimes mottled.”



The bluestone quarry (above) is where it all begins for these frames. The rich textures and color variations that appear in some pieces of the stone are part of what makes these designs interesting. For instance, the framed photo of the flower at the bottom of this page coincides with the orange tones found in the stone.



Because the stone Epstein uses for frames is very thin, it has no other use and would be left behind at the quarry. "I pick the stone, which is then cut for me by Bill Mirch at Thompkins Bluestone using a computer-controlled machine. It shoots garnet granules in a jet of water at about 5,000 lbs. pressure through the stone in a pre-programmed pattern to create the frame."

The stone used is typically about $\frac{5}{8}$ " thick. "Sometimes it may be a little thicker if it's particularly beautiful," says Epstein. "But if it's not thin, it looks clunky. For special requests, I can provide frames up to 48"x72". Mostly, though, I make standard sizes, including an oval frame with a 7"x10" opening. The next size up is an 8"x10" rectangle, then an 11"x14" and a 16"x20". Usually the vertical legs of the frame are $2\frac{1}{2}$ " wide, and the horizontal ones are 2". For an 11"x14" frame, this means the outside dimension is 15"x19".

Because the stone is thin, the frames are surprisingly light. The 15"x19" frame, for example, weighs a little under 10 pounds. These are then reinforced on the back with a simple wooden frame, which is attached with a mastic adhesive. This gives the stone rigidity, and the stone helps support the frame.

Because of the slight irregularity in the surface of bluestone, Epstein has found that even the flat wood frame backing needs some special modification. "If you put a moulding with a flat face on the stone, the distance between the rabbet and the face of the frame—that little lip that comes out, a $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{3}{16}$ of an inch—is too much," says Epstein. "Because of irregularities in the stone, the glass can end up sitting pretty far back. And when you add the mat, the artwork gets even more recessed. To counter that, I have poplar milled by a local cabinetmaker so this distance is as small as possible. The only way I get away with this is that the wood is adhered to the back of the stone. The narrow lip also helps the glass sit closer to the stone without making contact with it."

Epstein adds another feature to keep the art as close to the frame as possible. "Every artwork I frame has a little black mat—as little as possible—to lessen the appearance of depth," he says. For the frames that he finishes for his clients, Epstein attaches the Wallbuddies hanging system to the wood frame on the back of the stone.

The result is essentially a simple, flat frame modified to accommodate an additional stone frame on the front. "The reason it needs to be custom framed is the distance between the face of the stone and the rabbet needs to be

minimized," Epstein says.

Because of the nature of the material, Epstein says he doesn't see bluestone frames ever being produced in volume but that they do offer a pleasing type of specialty frame. "If a frame shop wanted perhaps a dozen or two, that's within the capacity of the quarry and my own shop to produce those. For other shops, which would want to add their own finishing touches, I do sell just the stone



Here, a color photograph of a landscape has been housed in a rectangular bluestone frame. Note the vertical sides are slightly wider than the horizontal sides.

frame with wood adhered on the back. The wholesale price runs around \$17 a foot—"joined," he adds jokingly. "I've also developed a special box for shipping to make sure the stone arrives without fracturing," he says.

Last fall Goloborotko's Studio in Brooklyn, NY across from Manhattan featured 10 bluestone-framed black-and-white drawings in an exhibit entitled "Ferrics and Oxides." Each of the works was framed in bluestone, which also served as the inspiration for the drawings.

"I have very little local business [for these frames]," says Epstein, "but I have several clients from New York, including Sheila Goloborotko. The exhibit was great, especially since I only started making these frames earlier last year. I've also had customers come in for a regular frame and end up choosing these. In this area, bluestone is a big product and everyone knows what it is and loves it. When people actually see these stone frames, they just say, 'Wow!'"

For all the down-to-earth information on bluestone frames, visit www.theothermoose.com. ■