

TRENDS IN MODERN AMERICAN FRAMING

THE EDWARD WALES ROOT BEQUEST

A CASE STUDY

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*“Frames have always
been an insoluble
problem to me.”*

—Robert Motherwell

EDWARD WALES ROOT (1884-1956) WAS AMONG THE EARLIEST collectors of early twentieth-century American art. In 1909 he purchased his first work of art from the painter Ernest Lawson (1873-1939), one of a progressive group of American artists known as The Eight. This group shared an antipathy for the conservative artistic traditions championed at that time, for example, by New York’s National Academy of Design.¹ Root embraced the work of these contemporary American artists. By contrast, his immediate predecessors, the collectors Thomas B. Clarke (1848-1931) and John Gellatly (1852-1931) “stopped short of the new generation of American painters that Edward Root saw confounding the art world at the turn of the century—the realists... and such of the American impressionists as Maurice B. Prendergast (1858-1924). These were the young men who instigated the Armory Show of 1913.”² The collection Root ultimately assembled, spanning five decades of American art, was unique at the time because of its chronological breadth and the number of artists that it included.³ In 1953, 132 works from his collection were exhibited at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the first time a private collection of contemporary art had been exhibited at the Metropolitan.⁴

Frame studies have emerged in the United States since the 1986 exhibition, *The Art of the Edge* at the Art Institute of Chicago. Previous generations of collectors and museums did not devote as much attention to frames as they do now. This essay on American frame taste in the first half of the twentieth century includes new information on the frames of this period, especially those dating from the early 1920s into the 1950s. It is a case study for this relatively new field of scholarly research.⁵ The observations and conclusions offered in this essay owe much to Root, and to the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute Museum of Art’s stewardship of his collection, since a vast majority of the frames in the collection were not changed or conserved during Root’s lifetime or after he bequeathed it to the Museum in 1956.

Virtually all of Root’s purchases were made from the artists’ dealers. The frames’ broad diversity of styles and lack of cohesive aesthetic suggest that Root was not involved in their selection and did not reframe a work after it entered his collection. This allows historians an undiluted view of the artists’ and dealers’ choices, rather than those of an individual collector. Root’s frames, therefore, are an important resource that can offer valuable insights

regarding prevailing modern American frame aesthetics and, in a larger sense, the negotiations and economic dynamics that took place between the artist who made the unframed artwork (and sometimes selected or made the frame that surrounded it), and the dealer who sold the same framed work to Root. This essay recaptures as much of that history as possible.

The frames in the Root collection can be grouped into seven stylistic categories. The first three relate to historical precedent, namely: transitional frames spanning nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetics as seen, for example, in the frames with reeded moldings chosen by George B. Luks (1866-1933); frames that reflect a French influence on works by Morris Kantor (1896-1974), Raphael Soyer (1899-1987), Eugene Speicher (1883-1962) and others; and early twentieth-century artist-designed and -crafted frames on paintings by Arthur B. Davies (1862-1928) and Prendergast. The four later frame styles reveal a different set of concerns. The modernist frames on works by Reginald Marsh (1898-1954), Edward Hopper (1882-1967), Arthur G. Dove (1880-1946), Yasuo Kuniyoshi (1889-1953) and others explore surface, texture, and tonality. Later modernist frames on works by Theodoros Stamos (1922-97), William A. Baziotes (1912-63), and some of their contemporaries demonstrate a similar concern for surface, texture, and tonality, as do the mid-century artist-designed frames by Lee Gatch (1902-68), and the mid-century presentations on works, for example, by Ilya Bolotowsky (1907-81), Jackson Pollock (1912-56), Charles Howard (1899-1978), and Mark Tobey (1890-1976).

The transitional frames in the Root collection reflect the shift from late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century aesthetics. They demonstrate the stylistic evolution from traditional complex moldings that are ornamented with details made out of composition or “compo,” as it is commonly called, to simpler moldings with carved rather than applied ornament.⁶ The surface treatment of these frames features a greater use of rubbed and painted surfaces than of traditional gold leaf. The hand-carved, dark walnut Italianate frame with a slim gilded liner on Luks’s *Closing the Café*, 1904 (cat. no. 129), is a typical example of the nineteenth century’s preference for elaborately ornamented frames.⁷ By contrast, the ten oil sketches that Luks painted in 1902 in Paris, of which *Luxembourg Gardens, Paris, No. 3* (FIG. 1) is a typical example, are understated, reeded moldings that were popularized in the nineteenth century by James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) and the British Pre-Raphaelites.⁸

The French impulse in this collection is strong. The use of French frames expresses the prevailing thought, originating in the late nineteenth century, that European frames would add an element of cachet to an American pic-



FIG. 1
George B. Luks (1866-1933)
Luxembourg Gardens, Paris, No. 3
1902 (cat. no. 123)
in a reeded, gilded molding,
stamped by H. Lieber Company,
Indianapolis, ca. 1921



FIG. 3
Maurice B. Prendergast (1858-1924)
Landscape with Figures, ca. 1912
(cat. no. 159), in a gilded and painted
frame made by Charles Prendergast
(1863-1948) that was inspired by
seventeenth-century designs, inscribed
"Prendergast" on the back of the top rail,
and possibly made between 1913-20



FIG. 2
Eugene Speicher (1883-1962)
Spring Bouquet-Brown Table, 1943
(cat. no. 187), in a machine carved,
gilded and distressed frame based
on eighteenth-century French
designs, by an unknown maker
ca. 1943

ture, which was often considered of lesser stature regardless of the quality of the work. The incorporation of European—largely French—design elements into American frame design validated the artwork and linked it to the more exalted European tradition.⁹

An original Barbizon-style frame surrounds Kantor's *Nocturne, Marblehead*, 1930 (cat. no. 109).¹⁰ However, the frame's surface has been abraded and the original gold has been covered with a gray wash. This raises the question: why was this frame used? It is possible that a canvas was created to fill this frame, as there does not appear to be a relationship, historically or aesthetically, between the frame style and the work. Similarly, a generic mid-twentieth-century French-style frame meant to suggest "art" appears on Soyer's *Study for "Sentimental Girl"*, 1934 (cat. no. 184). A paper label on the back reads, "Louvre Frame Company," and the cloth liner is painted with gesso.¹¹ Greater stylistic dilution is evident in the frame on Speicher's *Spring Bouquet-Brown Table*, 1943 (FIG. 2), which was embellished with machine carving, and its surface both gilded and distressed.¹²

The impulse to follow the French models and frequent departures from faithful replication of French antecedents persisted well into the twentieth century, as evidenced by the frame surrounding Speicher's *Brigham's Yard, Kingston*, 1928 (cat. no. 185). It is similar in intent to the one that surrounds Luks's undated portrait, *Mexican Boy* (cat. no. 131). Less elegant versions of earlier French models also surround two works by John Wesley Carroll (1892-1959): *Little Boy*, before 1936 (cat. no. 50), and *The Blue Feather*, 1937 (cat. no. 49). The gilded and rubbed surfaces on these frames were painted light gray to imply age. Also, the decorative forms were coarsely executed, which sets them apart from their crisply rendered predecessors. Another version of a French revival frame, with carved details, a light gray, natural finish and a cloth liner, surrounds Julian Levi's (1900-82) *Lobsterman*, 1945 (cat. no. 115).

The two frames in the Root collection by Charles Prendergast (1863-1948), Maurice's younger brother, are remarkable examples of early-twentieth-century artist-designed frames. One example surrounds Davies's undated painting, *Inland Tempest (Inland Storm)* (cat. no. 62). The other is on Maurice Prendergast's *Landscape with Figures* (FIG. 3).¹³ Both frames illustrate European influences adapted for American taste.¹⁴ The latter is a broad, leafy design inspired by seventeenth-century examples. The most unusual construction



FIG. 4
Reginald Marsh (1898-1954)
Texas Guinan and Her Gang, 1931
(cat. no. 140), in an unornamented,
slope away molding that was gilded,
rubbed, and burnished, with a Royal
Art Framing Company label, ca. 1931

feature of this frame is the dowels that were used to anchor the carved ornament on the front to a supporting understructure.

The Charles Prendergast frame on *Landscape with Figures* is the only known exception to the belief that the frames on Root's works reflect prevailing taste rather than an aesthetic choice on his part. This is evident in the letter Root wrote, probably in late December of 1933, to Hermon More (1887-1968), Curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, who had requested *Landscape with Figures* for the Whitney's 1934 Maurice Prendergast exhibition.

The oil which I am sending you I bought out of the Armory Show in March [February] 1913. From 1920 until about 1927 it hung at the Metropolitan Museum, but I don't think Mr. [Bryson] Burroughs liked it very much, because he skied it over the doorway of the long American School gallery.... I have dated the painting 1913 [sic] but it did not have the appearance of a new picture when I bought it. Charles Prendergast made the frame for me later at my request and from an earlier frame of his own make [sic] that I had seen somewhere and admired.¹⁵

There are two nearly identical Charles Prendergast frames on paintings in the Brooklyn Museum's collection. One surrounds Davies's *Dancing Children*, 1902, and the other Lawson's *Winter Landscape: Washington Bridge*, ca. 1907-10. It is possible either of these frames was the one Root admired.¹⁶

In the 1930s, frames on American modernist paintings generally exhibited little, if any, decoration and established a new vision for the twentieth century that distanced itself from elaborate patterns and flowery embellishments and, instead, emphasized tonal, coloristic qualities. This new vision is apparent on frames for three Marsh paintings: *Lower Manhattan (New York Skyline)*, 1930 (cat. no. 139); *Texas Guinan and Her Gang* (FIG. 4); and *Zeke Youngblood's Dance Marathon*, 1932 (cat. no. 141).¹⁷ Even though the profile of the latter frame slopes into the painting—in contrast to the profiles on the two other that slope away—all three lack ornament.¹⁸ Gilding was used, but their rubbed and burnished surfaces are decidedly quiet and might be seen as complementary to Marsh's depictions of urban daily life and the immediacy of his realist style. The frames on *Lower Manhattan* and *Texas Guinan and Her*



FIG. 5
Edward Hopper (1882-1967)
The Camel's Hump, 1931
(cat. no. 105), in a frame signed by
Carl Sandelin (active in New York City,
ca. 1931-40), decorated with crosshatch-
ing and silver gilt, ca. 1931

Gang bear identical Royal Art Framing Company labels. A different Royal Art Framing Company label identifies the simple, undecorated frames that surround two later paintings by Peppino Mangravite (1896-1978), *Young Couple Drinking*, 1937 (cat. no. 136), and *Young Girl with Yellow Kerchief (Portrait of Frances Mangravite)*, 1941 (cat. no. 137).¹⁹

Another variation on unornamented 1930s frames is seen on Hopper's *The Camel's Hump* (FIG. 5). The frame was made of length molding to which gesso was applied and scored in a crosshatch pattern for textural effect and subsequently silver-gilded. The following inscription appears on the back in the right-hand corner of the lower horizontal rail: "Frame made for / Hopper painting by / Carl Sandelin 857 Lex[ington] Ave / NYC." Sandelin, who was active in New York City in the 1930s, framed other paintings for Hopper as well.²⁰

The frames for Dove's two 1937 works, *Summer Orchard* (cat. no. 74) and *Tree Composition* (FIG. 6), are narrow, gilded in silver and devoid of ornament. Dove made and finished his own frames; brushstrokes are evident in a corner detail of the frame for *Tree Composition* (FIG. 7).²¹ There are many references to frames in Dove's correspondence. For example, in a letter he wrote to his dealer, Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) on August 9, 1930, Dove expressed concern that some of his frames did not harmonize with the artworks.

I have an idea... about my last show. There was just something in those frames that did not blaze the way it should... [I] should like to take a few of them and redo the frames. They look so much more brilliant.



FIG. 6
Arthur G. Dove (1880-1946)
Tree Composition, 1937
(cat. no. 75), in an unornamented
silver gilt frame Dove probably made
ca. 1937



FIG. 7
Corner detail of the unornamented
silver gilt frame (FIG. 6) Dove probably
made for his painting, *Tree Composition*
1937 (cat. no. 75), ca. 1937



FIG. 8
Yasuo Kuniyoshi (1889-1953)
Empty Town in Desert, 1943 (cat. no. 114)
in a beaded frame with a painted and
rubbed gray over white finish, and a cloth
liner, by an unknown maker, ca. 1943

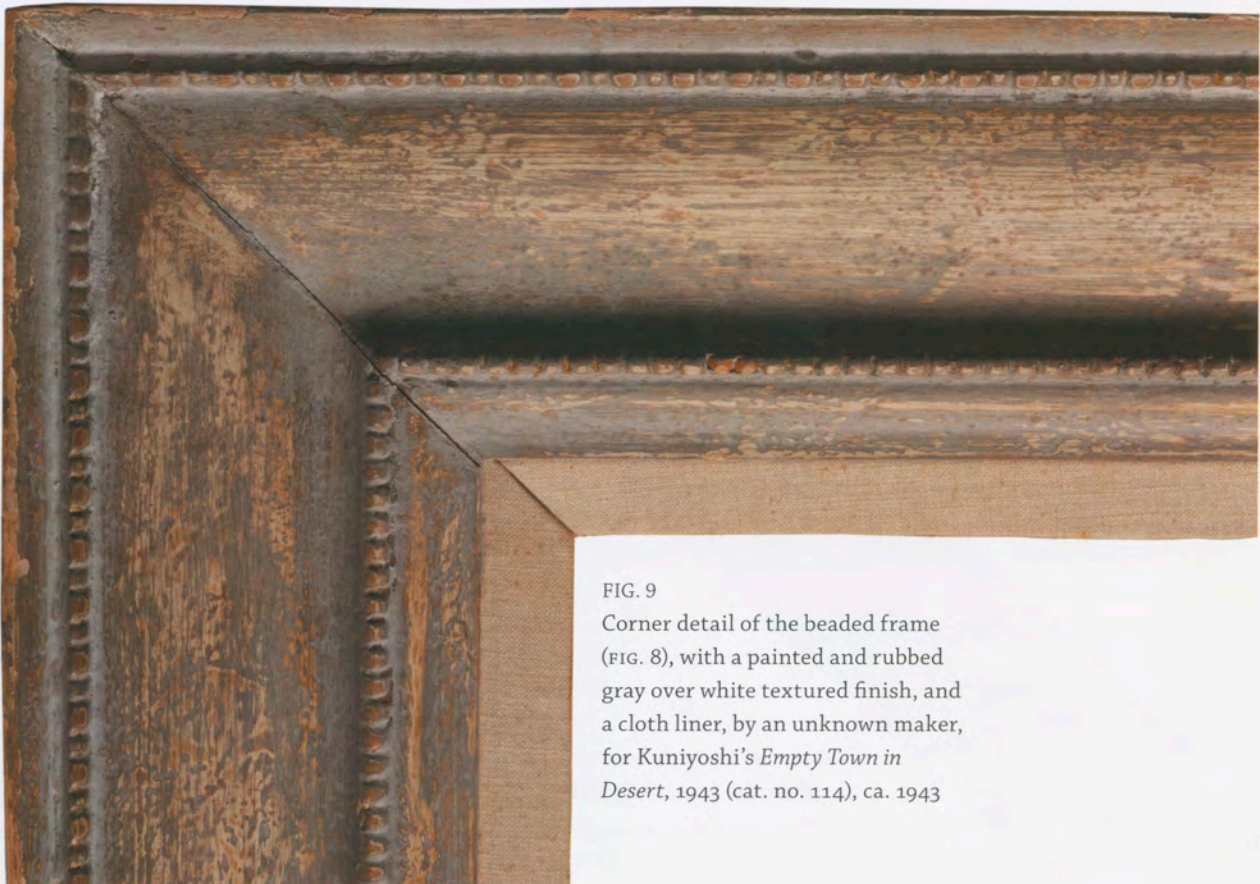


FIG. 9
Corner detail of the beaded frame
(FIG. 8), with a painted and rubbed
gray over white textured finish, and
a cloth liner, by an unknown maker,
for Kuniyoshi's *Empty Town in
Desert*, 1943 (cat. no. 114), ca. 1943

Dove clearly wished to control the presentation of his work but was constrained by his limited financial resources. “As you say,” Dove pointed out to Stieglitz, “it comes to a matter of money and in my case the place of that. Feel quite delighted to be able to make the sort of thing I want to go with the paintings.”²²

Painted and rubbed surfaces became popular in the 1930s and 1940s. When Henry Lee McFee (1886-1953) framed *Boy*, 1932 (cat. no. 143), he used a soft ogee profile that was painted and then perhaps stained.²³ The frame’s rubbed and lightly scored surface is compatible with the color and texture of the chair upon which the young boy is seated, creating a subtle link between the painting and its surround.

Yasuo Kuniyoshi created a similar resonance between frame and artwork in two pictures, *By the Sea*, 1942 (cat. no. 113), and *Empty Town in Desert* (FIG. 8). In the latter he used a traditional profile embellished with two rows of beading that border a wide frieze. The frame’s rubbed gray over white finish echoes the colors of the picture’s clouds, and its textured surface (FIG. 9) is replicated in Kuniyoshi’s vigorous brush strokes.²⁴

Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967) employed yet another approach. Seven of Root’s Burchfield frames have a light gray finish with even lighter-colored painted wood liners, such as the one on his 1948 watercolor, *Flame of Spring* (FIG. 10).²⁵ In 1929 Burchfield began a relationship with the dealer Frank K. M. Rehn (1886-1956) which lasted for nearly forty years. The cost of some of Burchfield’s frames must have been incurred by Rehn as records indicate that Rehn deducted both his commission and the cost of framing when making disbursements to Burchfield.²⁶ However, a 1932 letter in the archives of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center, and three letters Burchfield wrote to Edward and Grace Root (1891-1975) between May and October 1937, suggest that at least some of the frames he used in the 1930s were made by a Buffalo frame maker, Carl L. Bredemeier (1892-1946). Burchfield’s correspondence with the Roots also indicates that Bredemeier, as well as Burchfield himself, carved ornament on some of his frames but, at some point during that decade, Burchfield stopped doing this. “I have given up carving my frames,” he noted in a letter to Edward; “on none of my new ones have I done any carving. I think they are better plain.”²⁷

Later modernist frames on paintings by Stamos, Baziotes, and their contemporaries often feature simple, angular profiles made of wormy chestnut that often was rubbed or abraded and joined with painted liners. Henry Heydenryk, Jr. (1905-94) pioneered the use of wormy chestnut in 1938. As he explained in *The Art and History of Frames*, the chestnut tree blight in the United States left in its wake dead trees that were infested by worms. This wood, considered undesirable by the lumber industry, was steamed to exterminate the worms and then dried—a process that creates grained and textured wood filled with wormholes, hence the term “wormy chestnut.”²⁸ Wormwood was an inexpensive, understated and nuanced framing material well suited to the psychologically charged and emotionally evocative painting styles emerg-



FIG. 10
Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967)
Flame of Spring, 1948 (cat. no. 33), in a
light gray frame with a lighter-colored
wooden liner, by an unknown maker,
ca. 1948



FIG. 11
Theodoros Stamos (1922–97)
Monolith, 1947 (cat. no. 198), in a wormy
chestnut frame with a textured surface,
natural finish, and painted wooden
liner, possibly made by Stamos, ca. 1947

ing in American art in the 1940s. The introduction of wormy chestnut was a transformative moment in modern American frame taste and signaled the ascendancy of natural wood frames. Decorative gilding gave way to painted and manipulated surfaces, and, in time, to natural wood frames. The use of this alternative material mirrors the socio-cultural and aesthetic trends of the post-World War I era and the impact of the Great Depression, historical watersheds that created economic hardships for both artists and dealers who, as has been demonstrated, were largely responsible for the frames on the paintings in the Root collection.

Theodoros Stamos operated a frame shop in New York City from 1941 until 1948.²⁹ It is highly likely that the wormy chestnut frame on his painting *Monolith* (FIG. 11), was of his own making. A compelling case can be made that Stamos also made frames for Baziotes' works. They had a close relationship. Both men were of Greek descent and were active in the Abstract Expressionist movement. They also exhibited together—in 1948, for example, at The Museum of Modern Art and the Venice Biennale—and, as it has been observed, Stamos's artistic style during the late 1940s was influenced by Baziotes.³⁰ Frames on two of Root's Baziotes paintings, *Toy*,

1949 (cat. no. 6), and *The Mummy*, 1950 (cat. no. 4), were made of the same material and have the same profile as the frame on Stamos's *Monolith* (FIG. 11).³¹ The finish on the two Baziotes frames is also the same, albeit slightly darker in tone.³²

Another work by Baziotes in the Root bequest, *Black on White* (FIG. 12), was painted during the years Stamos had a frame shop. Although the rounded outer edge of this work's frame distinguishes its profile from the two Baziotes frames mentioned above, the distinctive textured surface of the wood, evident in a corner detail (FIG. 13), creates a sense of integration between the surface texture of the painting and the frame it surrounds. The aged or weathered-looking finish that exists on this frame was described by the painter Robert Motherwell (1915–91) in a 1946 letter to William L. McKim (d. 1977), a trustee of the Society of the Four Arts, Palm Beach, Fla., where Motherwell's 1943 painting, *Personage* (Norton Museum of Art), was exhibited after it was purchased by the collector Ralph Norton (1875–1953). "The kind of frame that seems to go best with present-day pictures," Motherwell wrote, "is wide and plain wood that has been 'pickled.'"³³

Not all of the wormy chestnut frames made at this time used wood grain as an understated textural complement to the works they surround. For example, the frame on Clayton S. Price's (1874–1950) *Head*, 1949 (cat. no. 160), has an uneven and assertive surface treatment that complements the rawness of Price's paint strokes. Similar wood frames with narrow profiles are on Perle Fine's (1908–88) *Taurus*, 1946 (cat. no. 86), and Charles Seliger's (b. 1926) *Organic Form: Air, Sea, Land Enveloped*, 1948 (cat. no. 177). While these frames are expressive of a mid-twentieth-century aesthetic vision, economic considerations continued to influence the choice of materials and techniques. During this period self-expression remained paramount. One wonders, however, if the manipulation of a profile that is scratched, scrubbed, or scored and given a surface tonality that blends with a prominent color in the painting—as seen, for example, in the frame for Baziotes' 1945 *Black on White* (FIG.

FIG. 12
 William A. Baziotes (1912-63),
Black on White, 1945 (cat. no. 2)
 in a wormy chestnut frame with a
 textured surface, semi-opaque white
 finish and a painted wooden liner,
 possibly made by Theodoros Stamos
 (1922-97), ca. 1945



12, 13)—is more expressive than the manipulated surface on, for example, Speicher's *Spring Bouquet–Brown Table* (FIG. 2), or Mangravite's *Young Girl with Yellow Kerchief (Portrait of Frances Mangravite)*, 1941 (cat. no. 137). This raises the issue regarding the suitability of a style of frame for works by figurative artists like Speicher (FIG. 2) or Mangravite versus the appropriate style of frame for pictures by modern abstractionists like Stamos and Baziotes (FIG. 11, 12, 13). It would seem that the frames used by these artists echoes the differences evident in their aesthetic point of view.

A frame feature that the figurative and abstract artists in the Root collection share, however, is the use of a cloth-covered liner. The frames on paintings by figurative artists such as Soyer, Mangravite, Kuniyoshi, McFee, and Levi, as well as those by abstract artists such as Stamos, Baziotes, Gatch, Tobey, and Reuben Tam (1916-91)—many of which date from the 1940s and early 1950s—have cloth-covered liners.³⁴ It remains a question when this frame detail began appearing on modern American paintings. The paintings in the Root bequest dating from approximately the time of the Second World War that have this feature indicate cloth liners were popular at that time.³⁵

Lee Gatch's frames demonstrate the efforts of mid-twentieth-century American artists to create their own frames. In a 1958 article about framing, the artist and author Dorothy Gees Seckler (1910-93) commented on Gatch's sensitivity to frames in her discussion of one of his "mosaic" frames. "Among the very few artists who have successfully designed and made their own frames is Lee Gatch who enhances his delicate paint surfaces with frames of a subtle, angular mosaic." In a caption for a detail of Gatch's painting, *The Thespian* (formerly, World House Galleries, New York), Seckler noted: "This one uses pieces of canvas in slightly varying tones; others utilize the contrasting grains of wood rectangles."³⁶ Gatch made a variety of designs over the years including, in the 1950s, "drawer front" frames that united in a radical way the canvas and its surround. These frames recall an Italian *cassetta*-style frame with its characteristic wide, flat frieze.³⁷ Gatch's *cassetta* derivatives include the frames for *The Eye of Silence*, 1951 (cat. no. 89), and *Winter Garden No. 5* (FIG. 14). What appear to be Italian *cassetta*-style frames surrounding both these paintings are, in fact, wooden drawer fronts. By attaching his canvases directly to these drawer fronts, Gatch created the illusion of a separate frame and artwork. Like Dove's frames, they demonstrate that economic con-

FIG. 13
 Corner detail of the wormy chestnut
 frame (FIG. 12), with a textured surface,
 semi-opaque white finish and a painted
 wooden liner, possibly made by Stamos
 for Baziotes' painting, *Black on White*,
 1945 (cat. no. 2), ca. 1945





FIG. 14
Lee Gatch (1902-68)
Winter Garden No. 5, 1952
(cat. no. 92), mounted on a wooden
“drawer front” frame with a natural
finish, made by the artist, ca. 1952



FIG. 15
Ilya Bolotowsky (1907-81)
Marine Variation No. 2, ca. 1940-42
(cat. no. 18), in a white frame by an
unknown maker, ca. 1940-42



straints need not prevent a frame design from being complementary to the work and expressive of the artist's aesthetic. Gatch's integration of the frame and painting surface is a further iteration of the trend toward minimal surrounds in mid-twentieth century American framing practice.

The outstanding feature on the frames in the Root collection that surround the works of such mid-century artists as Bolotowsky, Pollock, Howard, Tobey, and Stuart Davis (1894-1964) (cat. no. 65) is the absence of gilding. It is difficult to imagine Pollock or Tobey placing a gilded frame on their works. Despite the stark, minimalist approach to framing that these artists adopted, specific and deliberate complements are still apparent. There is, for example, a sophisticated, all-white profile surrounding Bolotowsky's vigorously colored painting, *Marine Variation No. 2* (FIG. 15). White moldings also complement such abstract works as Tam's *Horizon Conditions*, 1944 (cat. no. 211); Arshile Gorky's (1904-48), *Making the Calendar*, 1947 (cat. no. 96); Stamos's *Bone*, 1945 (cat. no. 191); Harry Bertoi's (1915-78) undated *Mandala* (cat. no. 12); and Pollock's two paintings, *Number 20, 1948* (FIG. 16) and *Number 34, 1949* (cat. no. 152).³⁸ The use of white moldings may allude to the white frames the French artists, Camille Pissarro (1830-1903) and Edgar Degas (1834-1917), began using as early as 1877.³⁹ French chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul (1786-1889), whose color theory was of critical importance to late-nineteenth-century avant-garde European painters, described the visual impact an artist could achieve by using a white frame. "White placed beside a colour heightens its tone," Chevreul wrote; "it is as if we took away from it the white light that had weakened its intensity."⁴⁰

FIG. 16
Jackson Pollock (1912-56)
Number 20, 1948 (cat. no. 151), in a
white frame, by an unknown maker
after 1948



FIG. 17
Charles Howard (1899-1978)
Wild Park, 1944 (cat. no. 108), in a
brown frame with a painted wooden
liner, by an unknown maker, ca. 1944

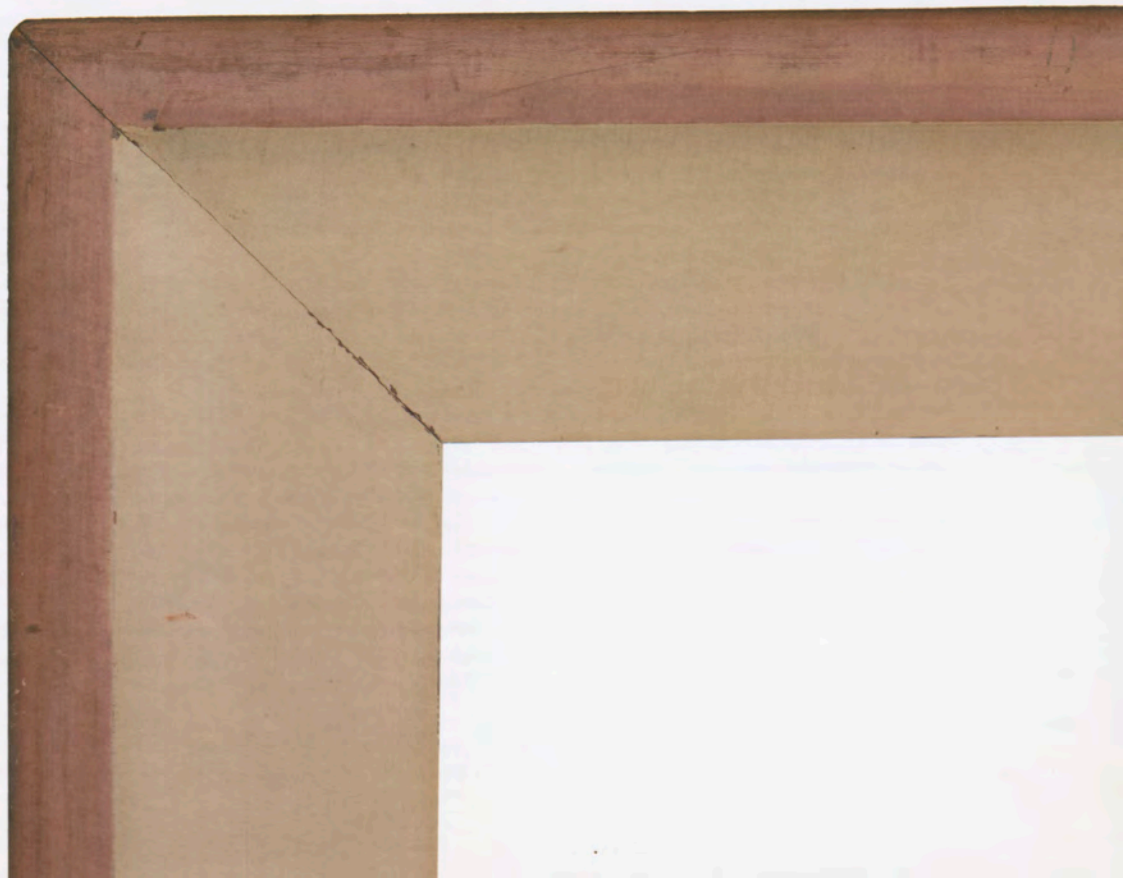
In addition to the use of white, Chevreul advocated the use of frame colors that complemented or matched the predominant colors of the painting it surrounded.⁴¹ This idea, which influenced the framing practice of artists such as Degas and French artist, Georges Seurat (1859-1891), is also evident in the austere wood frame that surrounds American artist Charles Howard's *Wild Park* (FIG. 17), which appears to be a purposeful choice by the artist.⁴² The frame is separated from the painting by a slim, maroon-colored painted wood liner similar in tone to the elliptical shape in the upper right corner of the composition, but darker than the red form at the left of the design. The dynamic relationship that exists between the painting and its frame is also evident in Tobey's *Awakening Night* (FIG. 18). This work has a wide, unembellished frame that emulates the appearance of a frame and a mat (FIG. 19).⁴³ This ensemble mirrors the trompe l'oeil tradition of illusionism so prominent in late nineteenth-century American art.⁴⁴

An examination of frames in the Root collection, embracing the period from 1921 to 1952, makes a critical contribution to understanding the history of frames and framing practice in the first half of the twentieth century and, by extension, to the history of taste in America during these dynamic years. Root seems to have accepted the prevailing concepts of modern American framing: gilded moldings surround the earliest works in his collection whereas bolder, simpler and more assertive frames define the borders of the later pictures. In contrast to the personal and deliberate reasoning that guided the pictures he purchased, as discussed in the preceding essay by Mary E. Murray and Paul D. Schweizer, the variety of frame styles that surround the works Root bequeathed to the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute suggests that he had no conscious approach or consistent guiding aesthetic or philosophy about framing. Most of the frames in his collection were designed, made, or chosen by the artist whose work it surrounds, or added to a work by a dealer. They appear to have been added to the pictures very close in time to when the work itself was made and have not been removed, changed, or modified for more than fifty years. Root's collection, therefore, tells us more about cultural taste with regard to frames than would a collection in which frame selection was a conscious process that was undertaken by a dealer or collector. It is exactly this sort of collection that should be studied to understand prevailing ideas about modern American framing.



FIG. 18
Mark Tobey (1890-1976), *Awakening Night*, 1949
(cat. no. 214), in a frame with a gray, shallow, inner
cove and a narrower, mauve, raised outer edge
that creates the appearance of a frame and a mat,
by an unknown maker, ca. 1949

FIG. 19
Corner detail of the frame
(FIG. 18), with a gray, shallow,
inner cove and a narrower,
mauve, raised outer edge
that creates the appearance
of a frame and a mat, by an
unknown maker, for Tobey's
Awakening Night, 1949 (cat.
no. 214), ca. 1949



ENDNOTES

- Mary E. Murray, *American Twentieth-Century Watercolors at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute* (Utica, N.Y.: Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, 2000), 13. Also, Edna M. Lindemann, *The Art Triangle: Artist, Dealer, Collector* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Burchfield Art Center, 1989), 37-38.
- Aline B. Saarinen, *The Proud Possessors: The Lives, Times and Tastes of Some Adventurous American Art Collectors* (New York: Random House, 1958), 258.
- Lindemann, *The Art Triangle*, 35. Ferdinand Howald (1856-1934) is the only individual whose collection of modern American art rivaled Root's. He bequeathed 271 works to the Columbus Museum of Art and approximately one hundred more to his family. The American pictures Howald gave to the Columbus Museum were by 36 artists in contrast to the 227 pictures by 80 artists that Root bequeathed to the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute. Both men collected only thirteen of the same artists' works. For Howald, see Abraham A. Davidson, *Early American Modernist Painting, 1910-1930* (New York: Harper and Row: 1981), 174-75. Also, see Edgar P. Richardson, "The Ferdinand Howald Collection," in Marcia Tucker and Kasha Linville, *American Paintings in the Ferdinand Howald Collection* (Columbus, Ohio: Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, 1969), 1-6; and Mahonri Sharp Young, "Ferdinand Howald and His Artists," *American Art Journal* 1, no. 2 (Autumn 1969): 119-28.
- Saarinen, *The Proud Possessors*, 265. For a contemporary assessment of Root as a collector and the works he exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum in 1953, written by the Associate Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture, see Robert Beverly Hale, "The Growth of a Collection," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 11 (February 1953): 153-63. A copy of the exhibition's four-page checklist, *The Edward Root Collection Exhibited at The Metropolitan Museum*, February 12-April 12, 1953, is in the Edward Wales Root Papers, Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute Archives, Record Group 13, Folder 76. (Subsequent references to documents in the Institute's Root archives are abbreviated: R[ecord] G[r]oup [number], F[older] [number], Root Papers, MWPAI Archives.) For a review of the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition, see Aline B. Louchheim (later, Saarinen), "Root's Collection of Art Displayed," *New York Times*, February 12, 1953, 21.
- Research on the early twentieth-century American frames in the Howald Collection at the Columbus Museum of Art is in progress by the authors. Brief surveys of modern American frame practice appear in William B. Adair, *The Frame in America, 1860-1960* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Reserve Board, 1995), 8-11; and in Tracy Gill, *The American Frame: From Origin to Originality* (New York: Gill and Lagodich Fine Period Frames, 2003), 44. See also, Suzanne Smeaton, "Embracing Realism: Frames of the Ashcan Painters, 1895-1925," in James W. Tottis et al., *Life's Pleasures: The Ashcan Artists' Brush with Leisure, 1895-1925* (Detroit, Mich.: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2007), 91-105.
- Composition or "compo," is a moldable putty-like material made of chalk, hide glue, linseed oil, and resin that is pressed into molds. The use of this material eliminates the labor-intensive process of hand carving decorative embellishments.
- A liner is an undecorated flat section of a frame that creates a visual transition between the perimeter of a painting and the frame's ornamental sections. Liners are typically gilded, painted, or covered with cloth.
- Reeded molding, fashioned out of parallel convex bands of wood or compo, are so-named because of their resemblance to bundled reeds. Root noted in a hand-written memorandum that Luks framed these ten oil sketches (cat. nos. 119-28) in 1921. This is one of the rare surviving comments Root made about the frames in his collection, which, in this case, were presumably selected by the artist himself. It is noteworthy that Luks chose a style of frame that became popular in Europe decades earlier. All ten frames were stamped on the back with a capital L inside a diamond. This is likely the mark of the Indianapolis art supplier, H. Lieber Company, which sold picture frames and moldings in the United States and Europe. The authors thank David A. Miller, Senior Conservator of Paintings, Indianapolis Museum of Art, for this information.
- On the dominance of European references and sources for American artists, architects, and patrons during the period from 1885-1920, see Wayne Craven, *American Art: History and Culture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 287. "American millionaires," Craven noted, "wanted their clubs, libraries, train stations and art museums to express a rebirth of the grandeur of European golden ages past."
- A Barbizon frame features stylized floral elements on a convex molding. It is a nineteenth-century interpretation of a Louis XIVth frame, and is named after the Barbizon school of nineteenth-century landscape painters who worked near the French village of Barbizon, near Fontainebleau Forest. Works with frames of this design became popular in the United States in the post-Civil War era.
- The term *cloth liner* is used instead of the frequently employed expression, *linen liner*, because technical analysis has not been undertaken on the liners discussed in this essay. That being said, the frame for Baziotes' painting, *Shadow*, 1951 (cat. no. 5), has a graphite inscription, "linen" written on the back the liner's wooden support.
- A frame that is *distressed* has a surface treatment intended to simulate the appearance of age and wear.
- Two other paintings in the Museum's collection, formerly owned by Root, also have Charles Prendergast frames. Davies's *Refluent Season*, before 1911 (acc. no. 58.39, see "Appendix 2: Purchases and Gifts of Art from Grace Root between 1956 and 1964") is inscribed "Prendergast 1909" on the back of the top rail. The frame on Maurice Prendergast's *Beach, St. Malo*, ca. 1907 (acc. no. 86.64), has a paper liner that covers the entire back of the frame and obscures whatever signature or inscription Charles Prendergast made. This painting and the front of the frame are illustrated in Carol Clark, Nancy Mowll Mathews, and Gwendolyn Owens, *Maurice Brazil Prendergast, Charles Prendergast: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Williamstown, Mass.: Williams College Museum of Art, 1990), 230.
- Much has been written about the Italian, French, and Spanish sources for Charles Prendergast's frames. See, for example, Gill, *The American Frame: From Origin to Originality*, 37. Also, Carol Derby, "Charles Prendergast's Frames: Reuniting Design and Craftsmanship," in W. Anthony Gengarely and Carol Derby, *The Prendergasts and the Arts and Crafts Movement* (Williamstown, Mass.: Williams College Museum of Art, 1989), 29-43.
- Root to More, ca. 1933, R. G. 13, F. 48A, Root Papers, MWPAI Archives. Bryson Burroughs (1869-1934) was Curator of Paintings at the Metropolitan Museum from 1909 to 1934. According to Carol Clark, Root paid \$125 for the frame. See, Paul D. Schweizer et al., *Masterworks of American Art from the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 110, cat. no. 49.



16. The authors do not know of any other frames by Charles Prendergast that have a similar design. The pioneering collector Lillie P. Bliss (1864-1931) bequeathed the Davies painting to the Brooklyn Museum in 1931. Laura Leggett Barnes (1874-1966), widow of the collector Albert C. Barnes (1872-1951), bequeathed the Lawson painting to the Brooklyn Museum in 1967. For the provenances of these paintings, see Teresa A. Carbone, Barbara Dayer Gallati, and Linda S. Ferber, *American Paintings in the Brooklyn Museum: Artists Born by 1876* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Brooklyn Museum, 2006), 440, 751-52. The Prendergast frame on the Brooklyn Museum's Davies painting is illustrated in Smeaton, "Embracing Realism: Frames of the Ashcan Painters, 1895-1925," in Tottis et al., *Life's Pleasures: The Ashcan Artists' Brush with Leisure, 1895-1925*, 96.

17. The frame on Marsh's 1932 *Zeke Youngblood's Dance Marathon* (cat. no. 141) has a graphite inscription on the back of the top rail that reads: "Made by KONZAL +[?] SOMMERFELD . . . [?] Reginald Marsh." Nothing is presently known about these, presumably, two frame makers.

18. The term *profile* designates the contours of a frame's cross-section. A frame with a slope away profile has its highest point near the picture plane with the majority of the molding receding outwards from this point towards the outer edge of the frame.

19. The Royal Art Framing Company, which was located in New York City, is perhaps best known for making distinctive monogram frames for the painter Childe Hassam (1859-1935). For information about this company, see Susan G. Larkin, "How Hassam Framed Hassams," in H. Barbara Weinberg et al., *Childe Hassam: American Impressionist* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), 334-35, 342nn44-45.

20. Other Hopper paintings in public collections that have documented Sandelin frames include *Ground Swell*, 1939, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.. For an illustration of this frame and Hopper's wife's remark about the frame on another work by her husband, see Suzanne Smeaton "On the Edge of Change," in Eli Wilner, ed., *The Gilded Edge: The Art of the Frame* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000), 73, 80-81. Three paintings in the collection of the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Mass., also have Sandelin frames: Hopper's *Railroad Train*, 1908; Waldo Peirce's (1884-1970) *The Birches*, 1937; and Robert Gwathmey's (1903-88) *Sharecroppers*, ca. 1940. In 1940, for what might be the last time, Sandelin's name appeared in the New York City telephone directory. His address that year was 133 East

60th Street. Nina Gray provided this information to Paul D. Schweizer in a May 4, 2007 email message.

21. For additional comments on Dove's frames, see Smeaton, "On the Edge of Change," in Wilner, ed. *The Gilded Edge*, 73.

22. Dove to Stieglitz, August 9, 1930, Alfred Stieglitz Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, Box 13, Folder 325.

23. An ogee curve combines convex and concave lines to form an S shape.

24. The two Kuniyoshi frames are stylistically related to the frame on a painting by Marsh, *The Britannic Sails*, 1939 (acc. no. 53.414), that Root gave the Museum in 1953 (see "Appendix 1: Edward W. Root's Gifts to the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, 1949 to 1955"). In contrast to the frames on Marsh's 1930 *Lower Manhattan (New York Skyline)* (cat. no. 139) and his 1931 *Texas Guinan and Her Gang* (cat. no. 140), the frame for *The Britannic Sails* shares with the two Kuniyoshi frames a traditional profile ornamented with beaded decoration, a cream-colored finish, and a cloth-covered liner.

25. Six additional Burchfield watercolors in the Root bequest (cat. nos. 26, 28, 37, 41, 42, 45) were originally in frames with similar finishes and painted liners although the profile of each is slightly different. For conservation reasons, the watercolors are no longer exhibited in these frames.

26. For Rehn's business transactions with Burchfield in the early 1930s, see Lindemann, *The Art Triangle*, 25, 33n99.

27. Burchfield to Root, October 6, 1937, R. G. 13, F. 8, Root Papers, MWPAI Archives. Burchfield noted in his May 31 letter to the Roots (R. G. 13, F. 8) that he wanted to reframe four watercolors (cat. nos. 26, 28, 42, 45) they purchased in the late 1920s and early 1930s because he considered the existing frames "terrible." In this letter his use of the phrase "have them made" suggests that someone else would make the new frames. This comment is consistent with archival documentation at the Burchfield-Penney Art Center, which indicates that Bredemeier was designing and hand-carving frames for Burchfield in 1932. (Nancy Weekly, Head of Collections and the Charles Cary Rumsey Curator, Burchfield-Penney Art Center, Buffalo, N.Y., and Tullis Johnson, Research Assistant, provided information about Bredemeier to Paul D. Schweizer in April 5, and August 13, 2007 email messages.) The frames on two other Root watercolors (cat. nos. 37, 41) have similar but not identical

decoration that was either carved or shaped with a file on the top edge of the four corners of each frame. Root purchased these works before Burchfield wrote Root on October 6, 1937 saying he then preferred plain frames.

28. Henry Heydenryk Jr., *The Art and History of Frames: An Enquiry into the Enhancement of Paintings* (New York: James H. Heineman, 1963), 108.

29. *Dictionary of Art*, s.v. "Theodoros Stamos."

30. Roberta Smith, "Theodoros Stamos, 74, Abstract Painter Dies," *New York Times*, February 4, 1997.

31. Two other Stamos paintings that Root bequeathed to the Museum, *Conversation Piece* (cat. no. 192), and *The Reward* (cat. no. 200), both 1948, have frames that are similar in material, finish, and profile to the frame on Stamos's *Monolith* (FIG. 11), and the ones on Baziotes' *Toy*, 1949 (cat. no. 6), and *The Mummy*, 1950 (cat. no. 4). The five frames are also similar to the frame on another Baziotes painting, *Three Forms*, 1946, which Root gave the Addison Gallery of American Art. The frame on yet another Stamos painting bequeathed by Root to the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, *Seedling (The Embryo; Vortex and Spiral)*, 1945 (cat. no. 201), with carved decoration and a cloth liner, is similar in style and finish to the frame on another Stamos painting, *Hibernation*, 1947, that Root also gave to the Addison (see "Appendix 3: Edward W. Root's Gifts of Art to the Addison Gallery of American Art, Everson Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, and Whitney Museum of American Art"). For Root's relationship with the Addison Gallery, see Susan C. Faxon, "Portraits of Patronage: The History of the Addison Gallery's Collection and Its Donors," in *Addison Gallery of American Art: 65 Years* (Andover, Mass.: Addison Gallery of American Art, 1996), 55-56, 58.

32. A crayon inscription on the back of the frame for Baziotes' *The Mummy*, 1950 (cat. no. 4), reads: "Heavy / scratched / dark brown." The frame on another Baziotes painting that Root gave the Museum, *Shadow*, 1951 (cat. no. 5), constructed of wormy chestnut and with an elaborate profile, bears Heydenryk and Kootz Gallery labels.

33. Motherwell to McKim, February 22, 1946, curatorial files, Norton Museum of Art, published, courtesy of the Norton Museum of Art. The authors thank Jonathan Stuhlman, Curator of American Art, Mint Museum of Art, for sharing this letter. For pickled wood finishes, see "Pickling: A Pickled Finish," <http://antiquerestorers.com/Articles/SAL/pickle.htm>.

34. The following figurative artists in the Root bequest have frames with cloth-covered liners: Maurice Sterne (1878-1957), *Three Figures, Bali*, 1912 (cat. no. 209); Speicher, *Brigham's Yard, Kingston*, 1928 (cat. no. 185); Soyer, *Study for "Sentimental Girl,"* 1934 (cat. no. 184); Mangravite, *Young Couple Drinking*, 1937 (cat. no. 136), and *Young Girl with Yellow Kerchief (Portrait of Frances Mangravite)*, 1941 (cat. no. 137); McFee, *Still Life—Knife*, ca. 1941 (cat. no. 144); Kuniyoshi, *By the Sea*, 1942 (cat. no. 113), and *Empty Town in Desert* (FIG. 8); and Levi, *Lobsterman*, 1945 (cat. no. 115). Abstract artists in the Root bequest that used frames with cloth covered liners include: Stamos, *Seedling (The Embryo; Vortex and Spiral)*, 1945 (cat. no. 201); Tam, *Waipahee Mountains*, 1949 (cat. no. 213); Baziotes, *Shadow*, 1951 (cat. no. 5); Gatch, *Winter Garden No. 3 (Winter Garden)*, 1951 (cat. no. 91); and Tobey, *Voyage of the Saints*, 1952 (cat. no. 219).

35. Motherwell wrote in his February 22, 1946 letter to McKim (see n. 33) that a neutral-colored liner would help the appearance of his painting *Personage* if, to make the picture compatible with older works, it was exhibited in an historical frame. "The best way to make the picture go with older pictures is to put an old-style frame on it—I think a neutral grey (natural) linen insert helps almost any picture in such a frame."

36. Dorothy Gees Seckler, "The Art of Framing," *Art in America* 46, no. 1 (Spring 1958): 84.

37. The Italian word *cassetta* means, "little box" and, in this context, refers to a frame with a wide, flat frieze bordered by raised inner and outer moldings and carved corner decorations. This frame style dates from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

38. Pollock's *Number 20, 1948* (cat. no. 151) is no longer exhibited in the frame illustrated in FIG. 16 because its tapered inside edge obscured the outer edges of the composition and its interior dimensions had the potential to abrade the edges of the work's paper support.

39. For Pissarro's and Degas' use of white frames in 1877, see Matthias Waschek, "Camille Pissarro: From Impressionist Frame to Decorative Object," in Eva Mendgen et al., *In Perfect Harmony: Picture + Frame, 1850-1920* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 1995), 141-42.

40. Ibid., 142. Michel-Eugène Chevreul published his observations on color theory in *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs* (Paris, 1839). This volume became a pivotal work for the Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists. See also *Dictionary of Art*, s.v. "Michel-Eugène Chevreul."

41. For Chevreul's recommendation that a frame's color should be neutral or white, or match the dominant colors of the artwork it surrounds, see Isabelle Cahn, "Edgar Degas: Gold or Color," in Mendgen et al., *Perfect Harmony*, 131-32.

42. For Degas' use of colored frames, see *ibid.*, 132; for Seurat, see Matthias Waschek, "Georges Seurat: The Frame as Boundary and Extension of the Artwork," *ibid.*, 153-62.

43. The term *mat* is used to describe a paper or cardboard border that surrounds a picture. It assures that the picture's glazing does not rest directly on the surface of the artwork, and provide a visual transition or contrast between the picture and its frame.

44. *Trompe l'oeil* ("fool the eye") is a French term that describes a style of painting in which the objects depicted are so naturalistic in appearance that they look real. For a masterful example of this tradition in the Museum's collection, see John F. Peto's (1854-1907) *Fish House Door with Eel Basket*, 1890s (acc. no. 65.15). The painting's original frame, a plain, wide, flat profile that is similar in shape and color to the boards depicted in the painting, expands the composition onto the frame surface.



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