



Modernist Frames:

A Unique and Divergent Chapter in American Frame Design

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Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Meyer Potamkin

Figure 1. Marsden Hartley, 1914. *Flower Abstraction*.



Courtesy of the Columbus Museum of Art

Figure 2. Marsden Hartley, 1914. *Berlin AntiWar*.

Until the early years of the twentieth century, richly gilded surfaces prevailed in American frame design. Even when finely executed nineteenth century designs were copied and mass-produced, frame surfaces were still gilded, even though less costly metal leaf was frequently used.

The turn-of-the-century had brought an increased awareness of the importance of hand craftsmanship and a return to carved designs rather than applied molded ornament, and the gilded surface not only continued, but was explored in depth for its possibilities of nuance and the relationship between the palettes of color in each painting and their gilded surround. The frames and the artworks they enclosed depicted and reflected the prosperous years deemed “the gilded age.”

The historical role of frames and their relationship to the paintings they surround and to the larger cultural and aesthetic context from which they emerge is especially compelling during the years that gave birth to Modernist painting. Natural wood and painted surfaces frequently took precedence over the gilded surface. This should come as no surprise when we remember that the advent of World War I took many trained craftsmen from the workplace, and an increasing technological society developed.

The Arts and Crafts idea of the totality of art and environment was expanded upon. Marsden Hartley’s frames of the ’teens show frames which go beyond complementing the artwork, they are integral to the composition. Bold colors and abstract shapes are carried through

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onto the frame surface (Figures 1, 2).

As the century progressed, the country's economic collapse and concerns regarding the Depression further influenced artists. Often, frames made by the artists of this period have a specific home-crafted quality; indeed, many of these frames seen by themselves can appear to be crudely constructed and naive in their design.

When seen together with the artworks they were made for, the sensitivity and pertinence of their design becomes apparent. As Barbara Rose explains in her book *American Art Since 1900*, "In the process of defining their own cultural identity and tradition, the best American artists of the 20's and 30's had come to make virtues of their limitations. Boldness, lack of refinement, and even a certain crudity were sought, along with a literalness that tied art incontrovertibly to its environment, and a directness which eschewed subtleties and nuances."

John Marin was one artist who made many distinctly unique frames to surround his works. In addition to experimenting extensively with the painted mounts that his watercolors were placed on before framing, Marin took ready-made frames and painted them with designs. He also carved frames and finished them to suit each artwork (Figures 3, 4). His designs became increasingly complex throughout the years. When interviewed in his eighties, Marin said, "If I were younger, I'd plunge into sculpture, but my framemaking will have to satisfy my sculptural urges."

From the mid-teens forward, frames have departed from traditional forms. In Arthur Dove's abstractions of the 1930's, even though he uses a narrow band of metallic paint at the inner edge, the frame profile is stark and simple and the inner silver edge paint instead of gilding (Figure 5).

Just as the surfaces changed, the profiles changed too. Flat and abstracted shapes that emphasize two

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Figure 3.
John Marin,
1944.
Hurricane.

Figure 4.
Detail of
Figure 3.



Courtesy of the Indianapolis Museum of Art



Figure 5. Arthur Dove, 1935. *Morning Sun*.

Courtesy of The Phillips Collection



Figure 6.
Theodore Roszak, 1935.
*Girl at the Piano
Recording Sound.*



Figure 7.
Detail of Figure 6.

Courtesy of the Indianapolis Museum of Art



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dimensional compositions are often surrounded by frames that amplify those forms (Figure 6). The painted white surface can often be seen on paintings by Stuart Davis, or frames are painted to harmonize specifically with the composition as seen in Roszak's *Girl at the Piano; Recording Sound* (Figure 7).

Due in part to their unusual and often crude appearance, many of

these frames, which are often works by the artist, have regrettably been removed from the artworks and discarded. In addition to those already mentioned many other artists such as Milton Avery and Georgia O'Keefe also created modernist frames. They are a vital component to the artistic composition as well as a telling reflection of the dramatically different social reality from which they emerged. 