

with the uniqueness of their creations, began to number the various editions of their work. If their work was executed in plaster, one can assume that they chose this material with deliberation. Constantin Brancusi, e.g., backed up his sold sculptures with surmoulages in plaster to serve him as inspiration for future works. Eli Nadelman, Claes Oldenburg, and George Segal, for example, created works using plaster as a primary medium—but this is another chapter in the history of plaster sculpture.

1. Jeanne L. Wasserman (ed.), *Metamorphoses in Nineteenth-Century Sculpture*. Fogg Art Museum, 1975, p. 15, no. 8.
2. According to a conversation with Sidney Geist.
3. Andreas Blühm, *The Color of Sculpture*, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 1996.
4. Christian von Holst, *Johann Heinrich Dannecker, der Bildhauer*, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1987, p. 100.

# Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Frames

Suzanne Smeaton, AAA

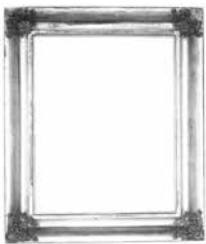


Figure 1. American frame, c. 1820s. Applied composition ornament with gilding, 34 x 28 1/4 inches. Courtesy Eli Wilner & Company

Appraising picture frames has become an important part of fine art appraisals. Whether containing a painting or viewed as an independent object, picture frames have grown in value in recent decades and frame connoisseurship is increasing each year. In assigning a value to a frame, the usual factors of condition, rarity, and size are of key importance. In addition, it is important to keep in mind that the market for period frames is inextricably entwined with the art market. The extraordinary prices achieved by frames are a correlate to the value of the paintings they surround. If a collector has just spent \$400,000 to \$600,000 on the Hudson River landscape of his or her dreams, it is not far-fetched to understand that he or she is willing to pay 10 percent of the cost of the painting a fine period frame to best complement the prize. Similarly, if a fine period frame is original to an artwork, that is noteworthy and makes the art more valuable.

Fabrication techniques are also critical to the understanding of a frame. Whether a frame is

carved or made with applied composition ornament can help to determine its age, origin, and ultimately its value. So, too, knowledge of gilding processes will help to illuminate the finer details of the quality and age of a frame. Up until the latter part of the eighteenth century, American frames were carved from wood and usually finished with a water-gilded surface. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a material known as composition or “compo” came into wide use. A mixture of chalk, hide glue, resin, and linseed oil, the moldable putty was pressed into intricately carved boxwood molds; it was soft and pliable when first removed from the mold, dried as it hardened, and could be treated just like carved wood. This revolutionized frame construction, allowing craftsmen to create a basic wood substrate that comprised the form and shape of the frame and then use compo for all the decorative elements. Nearly 100 years later, at the end of the nineteenth century, the pendulum swung once more and hand-carved frames returned. This was a reaction against increasing mass-production and a perceived loss of the



Figure 2. American Rococo Revival-style frame, c. 1850s. Applied composition ornament with gilding 35 7/8 x 42 3/4 inches. Courtesy Eli Wilner & Company



Figure 3. American fluted cove-style frame, c. 1860s. Applied composition ornament with gilding, 17 1/8 x 20 7/8 inches. Courtesy Eli Wilner & Company



Figure 4. American frame, c. 1870s. Applied composition ornament with gilding, 24 1/2 x 20 1/4 inches. Courtesy Eli Wilner & Company

hand of the artist. Late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century frame making utilized both techniques, completely hand-carved frames as well as frames made of a wood substrate with molded and applied ornament.

Regarding finishes for frames, there are two methods of applying gold leaf as well as two prevalent kinds of leaf that were most often used. The first and finest method of application is called water gilding. Relatively unchanged from the process invented in ancient Egypt, water gilding is a labor-intensive process.

First, a fine gesso layer is applied by numerous applications of wet gesso that must dry and be sanded before another coat can be applied. Up to eight coats of gesso are applied, followed by a layer of bole (clay) that is painted on. Bole is most often seen in a terra-cotta red color, but is also frequently gray or blue. The bole informs the color of the leaf and the color of bole often denotes the origin of a frame. In the nineteenth century, for example, red clay was used in France whereas Britain and America used a gray-blue color. After the bole dries, the surface is brushed with an alcohol and water mixture, hence the term water gilding, and the leaf is applied. Once dry, the gilded surface can be brushed with a soft cloth for a matte surface or burnished with a special agate-tipped tool for a shiny and reflective surface. The beautiful reflective surface rendered by burnishing is only possible by water gilding.

The second method of gilding is oil gilding. In lieu of the many gesso layers, a viscous oil size is brushed on, dries to a sufficient tack, and the gold is laid on. The gold can only be brushed with a soft cloth, not burnished. Oil gilding is well suited to areas of ornament with a varied “topography” because of its sticky surface; this form of gilding can get in and around the many crevices and curves. With these methods, it is not unusual to see nineteenth-century frames that employ gilding schemes of oil gilding for some areas and water gilding for others.

The two kinds of leaf are gold leaf and metal leaf. Gold leaf is gold with varying amounts of silver added to vary the color (karat). Metal leaf, also called Dutch leaf or Composition leaf, is an alloy of copper, tin, and zinc that is less expensive than gold leaf. Compared to gold leaf, it has a coarse texture, visible to the eye, that darkens with age as it oxidizes. Metal leaf was popular in

the early years of the twentieth century, not only because it was less expensive but because the warmer tonality was a better complement to some of the warmer colors used by artists at that time.

Frame designs are closely linked to architectural styles and interior decorative trends, and a knowledge of both is helpful in assessing frames. As with the swing of a pendulum, styles tended to shift from simple to elaborate and back again. In the early years of the nineteenth century, when the simple elegance of Duncan Phyfe furniture reigned supreme, the primary type of art being made was portraiture. For the dignified images produced, frames of simple cove moldings were made. If any ornamentation were used, it was often just a shell or leaf at each corner (see figure 1). Other motifs from the Classical Revival style, wreaths, palmettes, and urns, occasionally appeared as well. As the century progressed, painting moved toward landscape, the celebration of what was seen as divinity expressed through the untamed American wilderness. Ornament on frames of the 1850s reflected elements in the paintings, naturalistic forms such as nuts, leaves, vines, and berries. The simple rectangular frames of earlier years softened, and frames frequently had projecting corners and centers, and oval openings (see figure 2). These features echoed the popular John Henry Belter furniture created during the Rococo Revival period.

During the 1860s, the swing of the pendulum brought with it Neoclassical ornament and the fluted cove-style frame. Soft undulant forms were replaced by refined geometries. The fluted cove style with a laurel leaf and berry pattern at the top edge was the quintessential frame style for Hudson River landscape paintings (see figure 3).

In the 1870s, painting styles grew to include genre scenes and depictions of exotic locales in the Near East. Geometric motifs, which echoed furniture and architectural details in the artworks, were employed. Moorish and Islamic calligraphy was used to embellish frames that enclosed scenes such as the interior of a mosque (see figure 4).

The 1880s signaled the height of Victorian eclecticism. There was no such thing as “too much of a good thing.” Frames were elaborately



Figure 5. American Barbizon-style frame, c. 1880s. Applied composition ornament with gilding, 35 x 27 inches. Courtesy Eli Wilner & Company

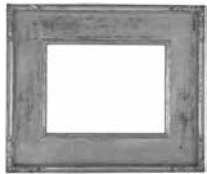


Figure 6. American frame by Hermann Dudley Murphys/Carrig-Rohane studio, 1908. Carved and gilded, 22 5/8 x 26 5/8 inches. Inscribed on verso "Carrig-Rohane 1908." Courtesy Eli Wilner & Company



Figure 7. Verso of a Carrig-Rohane frame showing Murphy's inscription. Courtesy Eli Wilner & Company

composed of many different patterns of ornament at once. The French Barbizon style, itself a design based on Louis XIII frames, also gained popularity and was widely reinterpreted in America (see figure 5). This was also a time of widespread industrialization, and frame manufacture was no exception. Machines allowed patterns to be stamped onto lengths of molding that could be chopped and joined, and silver leaf was used with an ochre-tinted sealer to emulate the appearance of gold for a fraction of the price. One of the results of mass manufacture was that ornament on frames was not carefully applied to resolve details. Patterns were joined with jarring effect and corner leaves of pewter and lead were nailed on to mask the crude miters.

As the nineteenth century turned to the twentieth, American Impressionism took hold and artists were experimenting with new styles of brushwork and a new palette of color, a new style of frame for a new style of art was born. It is appropriate that an artist introduced some of the finest handcrafted frames of their time. Hermann Dudley Murphy lived and worked just outside Boston when he created his studio, Carrig-Rohane, Celtic for red cliff. The name was a reference to Murphy's Celtic roots. Following Murphy's travels to Europe in the late 1890s, he taught himself to carve and gild, and he created frames based on the fifteenth-century Venetian *cassetta*-style frame. The *cassetta* profile is characterized by a flat frieze and raised inner and outer edges. Murphy's interpretation and those that followed are now widely referred to as American Impressionist frames (see figure 6). In addition, after each frame was made, Murphy inscribed it on the verso with a signature and a date signaling that this, too, was a work of art (see figure 7). Although a frame need not bear an inscription to be valuable, signed frames by any maker are highly prized. During this period, there was a heightened interest in the tonalities of the gilded surface and many frames were finished in silver leaf, various shades of gold leaf, and the more coppery metal leaf to best complement the artworks they enclosed.

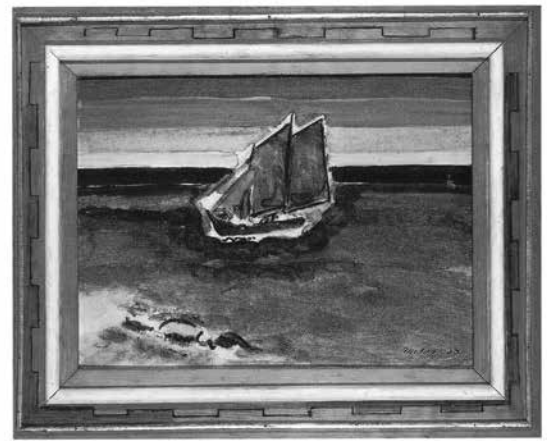


Figure 8. American frame, 1938. Shaped and painted wood, 15 1/2 x 21 1/2 inches, surrounding John Marin's, *Boat and Sea, Cape Split, Maine*. Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis. Courtesy Eli Wilner & Company

With the conclusion of World War I, the coming Great Depression, and an increasingly technologically oriented society, art changed again. In frames, gilded surfaces gave way to painted and manipulated surface treatments. American Modernist painters, such as Arthur Dove and Marsden Hartley, created simple frames that subtly complemented their art. John Marin took mass-produced frames and made them his own by drawing, painting, and carving on them (see figure 8). Though at first look these frames may appear crude, they are often integral to the overall artwork they enclose and create a dynamic presentation in which the hand of the artist is powerfully present.

Frame scholarship continues to grow. For further reading on frames, please see the extensive bibliography at <http://www.eliwilner.com>.



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