

PART II: THE INDIVIDUALITY OF FRAME STYLES

CHAPTER FIVE

ON THE EDGE OF CHANGE

Artist-Designed Frames
from Whistler to Marin

Suzanne Smeaton

EVER SINCE THE ADVENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL PICTURE FRAME centuries ago, artists have been concerned with frames not only as surrounds to physically hold their artworks but also as significant components in the presentation of their art. By the mid nineteenth century, framemakers were able to draw on several previous centuries for inspiration in both frame design and fabrication techniques, and artists were participating personally in the design and crafting of frames for their artworks.

This relationship among the artist, the artwork, and the frame is interesting for many reasons. Sometimes the artist actually constructed the frame, and at other times he or she designed the frame and someone else constructed it; elements became identified with a particular artist, whether or not he or she created them. Geography influenced designs, and frame styles were sometimes dictated by the subject matter of the paintings.

American expatriate James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) was one of the earliest innovators in frame design. Whistler was well aware of the designs by the British Pre-Raphaelite artists, who were themselves experimenting with frame design.¹ He created frame designs in the 1860s similar to those designed by his friend and fellow artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The frame on *Caprice in Purple and Gold: the Golden Screen* (FIGURE 32) has a broad flat panel with incised surface spirals and designs similar to those on the frame on Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix*. (FIGURE 33)

Whistler borrowed freely from a variety of sources. The geometric design at the outer frame edge of *Caprice* is the same pattern illustrated in Owen Jones's *Grammar of Ornament* (FIGURE 34), which was widely circulated at the time.²

Perhaps the most widely used elements Whistler adopted from the Pre-Raphaelites were reeded molding and gilded oak. Whistler used this simple understated combination with a sophisticated use of tonalities to best complement his subtle compositions. Rather than using the typical warm tones of gold leaf to finish his frames, Whistler often specified various shades of gold leaf that were more green and blue in color.³ Today, any number of compositions of reeded moldings grouped together are broadly referred to as Whistler-style frames. This subtle use of ornament and sensitively chosen surface color perfectly enclosed his works, which would have been overwhelmed in more conventional nineteenth-century frames with elaborate decorative embellishments and deep profiles.

Across the sea, the Hudson River landscape artist Frederic Church (1826–1900) designed frames for his paintings, including those inspired by his travels to the Near East. Church was profoundly affected by the rich palette of color in the Near East as well as by the Islamic and Moorish decorative patterns. (Nancy Rivard Shaw discusses three of these frames in chapter 10.)

Church's sketches and archival photos offer a rare glimpse into the collaborative process between artist and framemaker. Church sent drawings (FIGURE 35) to the framemaker Goupil with such annotations as "burnish the surfaces A & B" or "use the twisted rope" to specify his design requests. Goupil would send back a sample to show the finished composition for Church's approval. (FIGURE 36)

The photo of the frame sample shows us quite clearly how a typical nineteenth-century frame made of a wooden substrate with applied composition ornament looks before gilding. We can also see that the framemaker has given Church two different design options at the sight edge.

There were other late-nineteenth-century artists, such as Charles Caryl Coleman (1840–1928), who also designed frames for their paintings. Coleman lived and worked extensively in Italy. Many of his frames were made there and have elegantly carved decorative elements. The frame on *Still Life with Peach Blossoms* (1878), with its painted green ground and applied, gilded carvings, is one such example. At the bottom center of the frame, painted in gold on the olive ground, Coleman repeats his monogram of three interlocking C's and reinforces the painting's composition with the carved plant designs that grace the panel. In the frames on both *Quince Blossoms* of 1878 (FIGURE 18) and *Under the Vines* of 1898, Coleman uses a wide panel and gilded oak surface to dramatic effect. On these frames, Coleman's creative use of three lotus leaves grouped together at each corner recreates the triple-C monogram in a unique way.

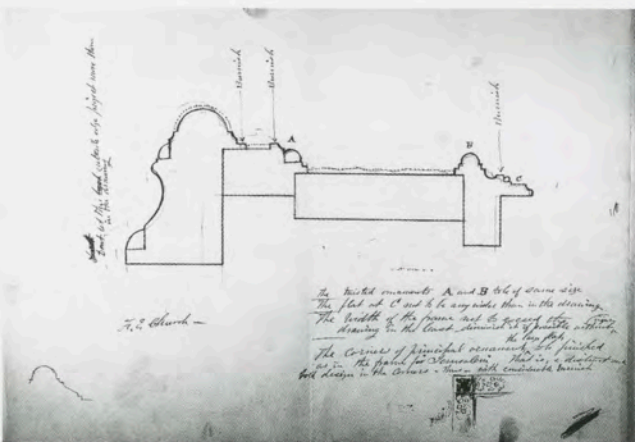
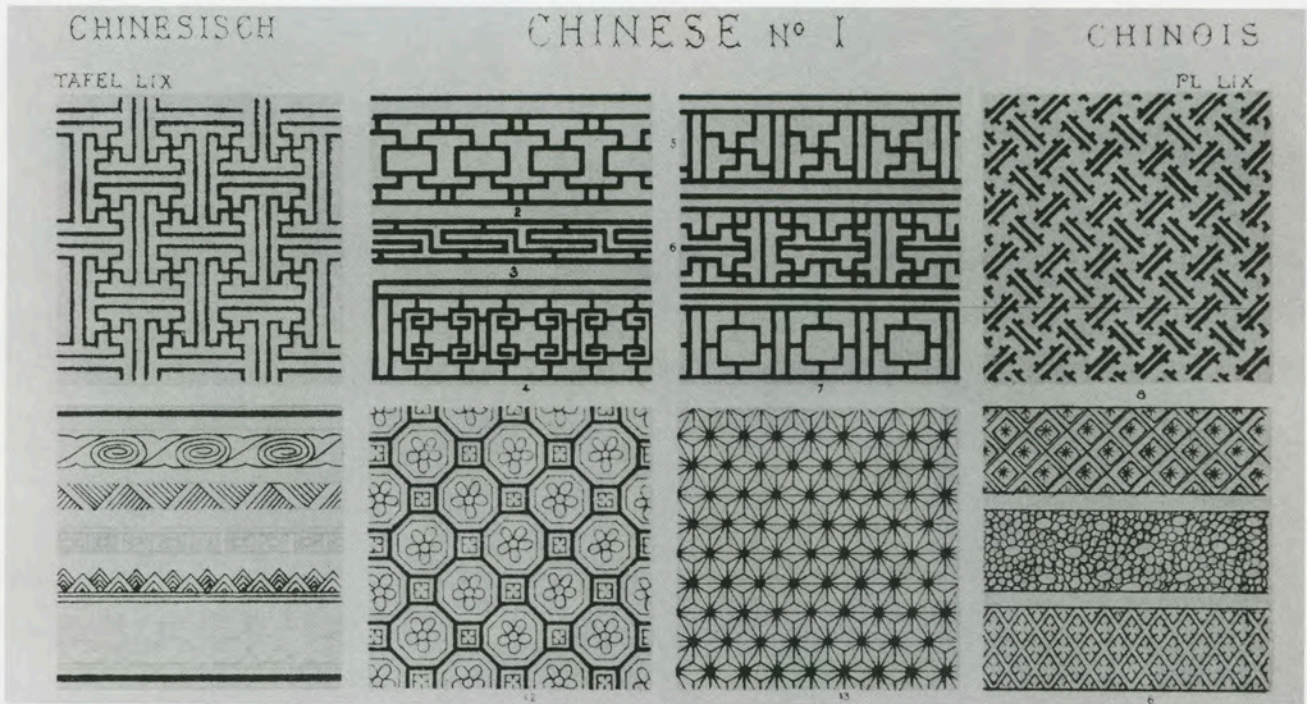
Artist Elihu Vedder (1836–1923), a friend of Coleman's who produced very imaginative paintings, also lived and worked in Italy and had many frames made there for him. In one example, the spectacular tabernacle style frame on *Cup of Love* of 1887, the beautifully carved frame surrounds the allegorical painting. The frame is richly decorated and borrows its form from the tabernacle style that was introduced during the Italian Renaissance.



32. Wood, applied composition ornament, incised surface decoration, gilded, on *Caprice in Purple and Gold: the Golden Screen*, James McNeill Whistler, 1864. Courtesy the Freer Gallery of Fine Art, Smithsonian Institution

33. Oak, applied composition ornament, gilded, on *Beata Beatrix*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1872–73. Courtesy the Art Institute of Chicago





34. Detail. *Grammar of Ornament*, Owen Jones, 1856

35. Drawing of a frame molding by Frederic E. Church, c. 1870. Courtesy the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation

36. Frame molding sample, c. 1870. Courtesy the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation

Frame styles understandably become identified with the artists who designed them, as in the case of Whistler, Church, Coleman, Vedder, and others. This identification can also happen when a particular frame style isn't necessarily made or designed by an artist but is simply a design he frequently selects for his artworks. Thus, the false impression may be created that only one style of frame is appropriate for the artist. On the paintings of Thomas Eakins (1844–1916), for example, the original richly decorated frame on *Swimming* is in marked contrast to the simple wood frames widely referred to as Eakins frames in many museums today. (FIGURE 37)

When *Swimming* was acquired by the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, the painting was clearly not in its original frame. The curator, Doreen Bolger, set about to determine what frame might have been used by Eakins. Through the course of her research, she scrutinized photos of past exhibitions for clues. In the photo of the 1917 exhibition of Thomas Eakins's paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (FIGURE 38), we can just see *Swimming* on the wall at the right. Having a visual reference, Bolger investigated further and learned that the original frame survived at the museum from which the painting had been acquired. The frame had been removed some years earlier and was languishing, unidentified, in the basement. This discovery led to the happy reunion of painting and frame.

Eakins did, indeed, design simple wood frames, but only for a select group of paintings. These frames are usually found on portraits and are typically decorated with patterns and inscriptions that further inform us about the sitter. In 1897 Eakins wrote to Professor Henry Rowland, "I once painted a concert singer and on the chestnut frame I carved the opening bars of Mendelssohn's *Rest in the Lord*. It was ornamental, unobtrusive and to musicians, I think it emphasized the expression of the face and pose of the figure." (FIGURE 39) We also know from his writings that Eakins had gone to particular trouble to capture the shape of the singer's mouth perfectly as she sang this particular passage.⁴ Eakins later created another such frame for Professor Rowland embellished with formulas and mathematical equations. (FIGURE 40)

Winslow Homer (1836–1910) is another artist who used different styles of frames in different periods. For example, *Snap the Whip* of 1872 is enclosed by a frame typical of the 1870s. (FIGURE 41) We know that Homer was interested in frames as early as the 1870s, because in 1874 he wrote to Lawson Valentine, a supplier of varnishes who had become a collector of Homer's watercolors. Homer wrote, "I have been experimenting in frames and my great success as a framemaker is due to your excellent varnishes."⁵ In contrast, for many paintings of the 1890s and early 1900s—often bold marine paintings such as *Gulf Stream* of 1899 (FIGURE 42)—Homer himself designed much simpler frames.

In 1900 he wrote, "I have telegraphed them [Knoedler] to hurry up on the frame for *Gulf Stream*—I am having a fine one made in keeping with the picture."⁶ Writing to Knoedler in 1902 about a painting entitled *Eastern Point*, he expressed more of his concern with the subtleties of framing. "When I saw the picture at your place I was disappointed with the frame. I did not say anything about it but I noticed it was an inch and a half or two inches too narrow and not up to the usual mark."⁷ Boston artist and framemaker Hermann Dudley Murphy (1867–1945) had perhaps the most profound impact on American frame design at the turn of the century. Murphy was greatly influenced by Whistler and had traveled in Paris at a time when Whistler's studio was a gathering place for many young artists. He also traveled throughout Italy and saw, among other things, fifteenth-century Venetian cassetta frames. (FIGURE 43) Cassetta means "little box" in Italian and refers to the frame profile, with a wide flat frieze and raised inner and outer moldings. Upon returning from his travels throughout Europe, Murphy was without the resources to have frames made, so he bought the necessary supplies and taught himself the skills of carving and gilding.⁸ Murphy's adaptation of the cassetta form into what we now refer to as the American Impressionist-style frame (FIGURE 44) appeared at a time when American art was changing dramatically. New palettes and different styles of brushwork, in addition to experimentation with new media, called for a radically new style of frame. Murphy's design was perfect. He said,

The framing of a picture is in every way as important a factor in its looking well and receiving the attention it deserves . . . to frame pictures of different styles alike in one design of frame is to kill their individuality. You may spoil absolutely the effect of a fine picture by an unsuitable frame, just as you may make an almost poor one look distinguished by a proper setting. Put a delicate, subtle Whistler nocturne in a glittering, heavily ornamented frame and hang it on a wall with a lot of other pictures and you will never see it.⁹



37. Wood, applied composition ornament, gilded, on *Swimming*, Thomas Eakins, 1885. Courtesy the Amon Carter Museum

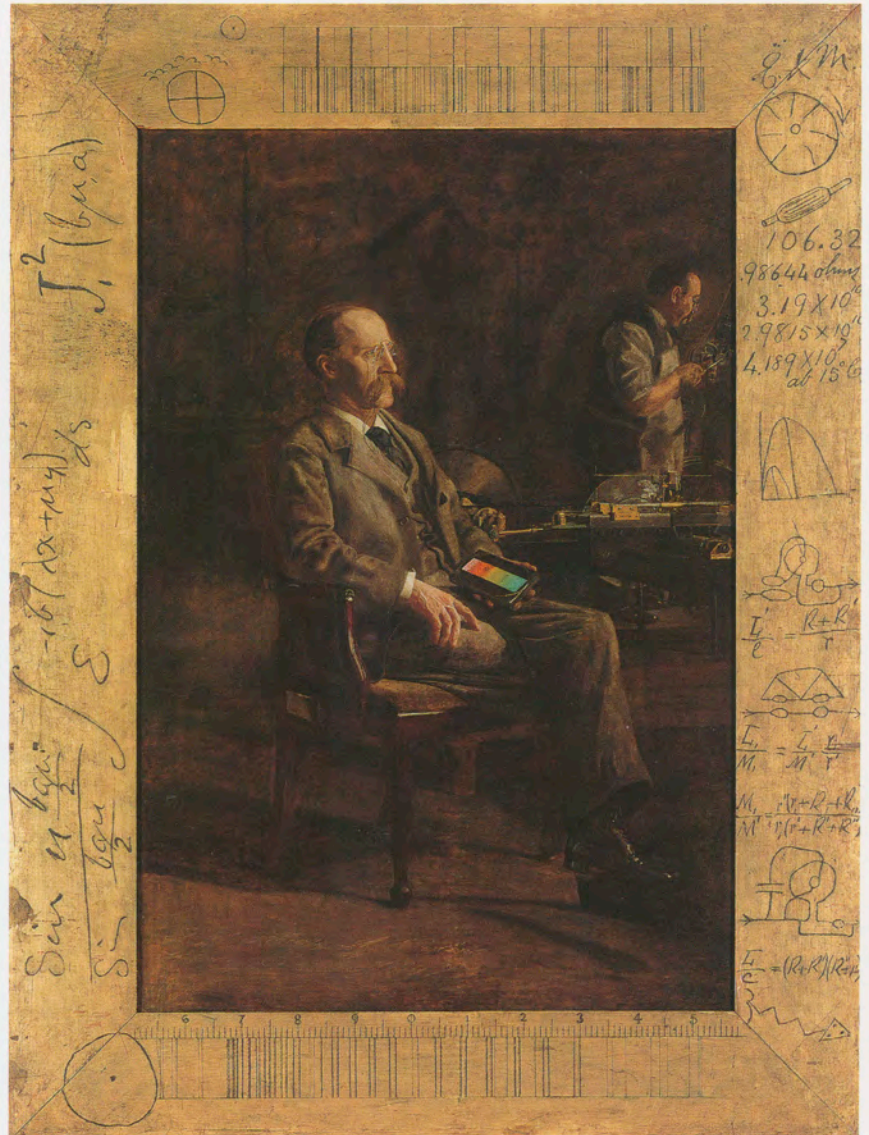
38. View of the Eakins memorial exhibition, 1917, the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art





39. Chestnut, incised decoration, rubbed gilding, on *The Concert Singer*, Thomas Eakins, 1892. Courtesy the Philadelphia Museum of Art

40. Chestnut, incised surface decoration, gilded, on *Professor Henry A. Roland*, Thomas Eakins, 1897. Courtesy the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy

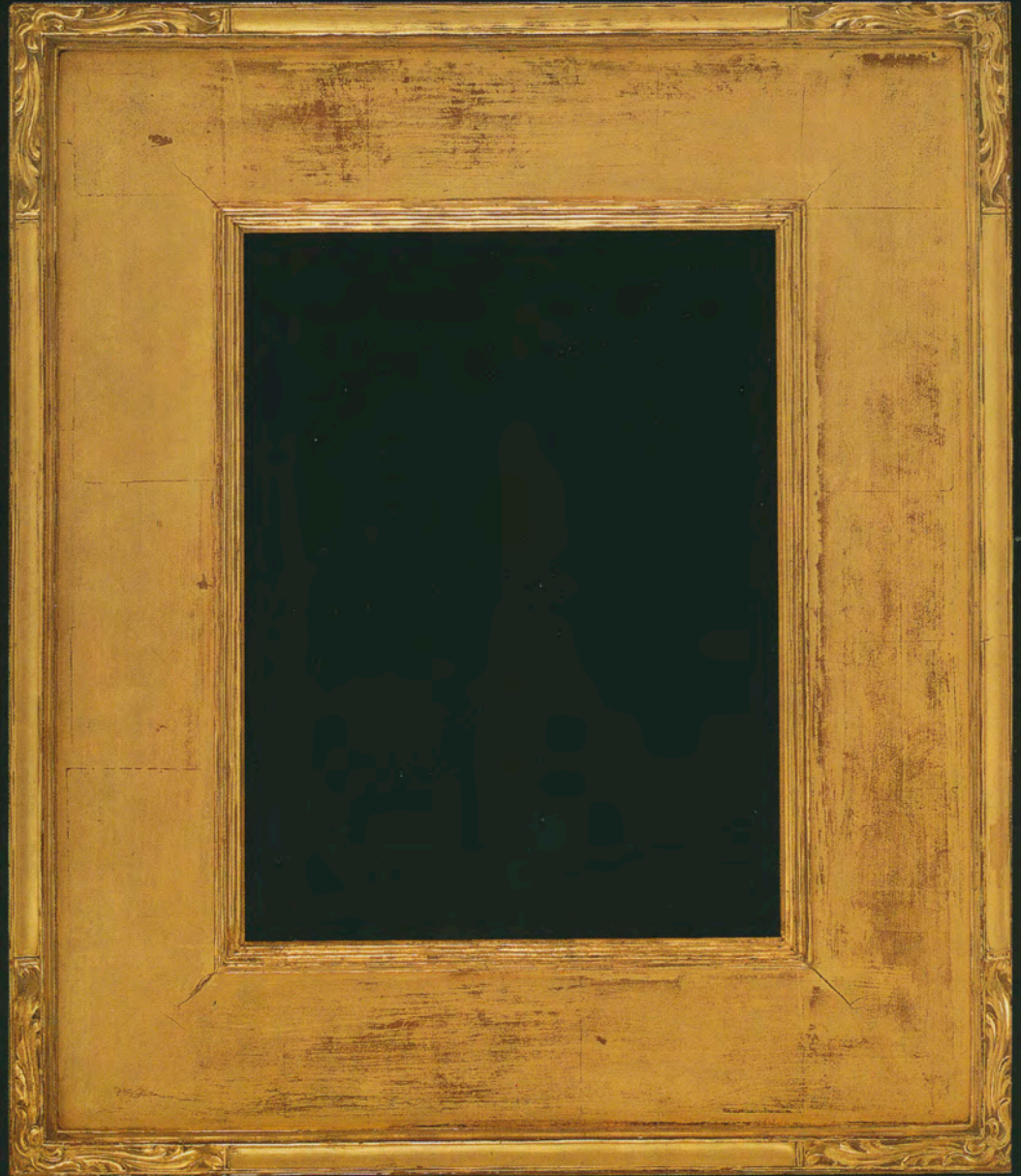
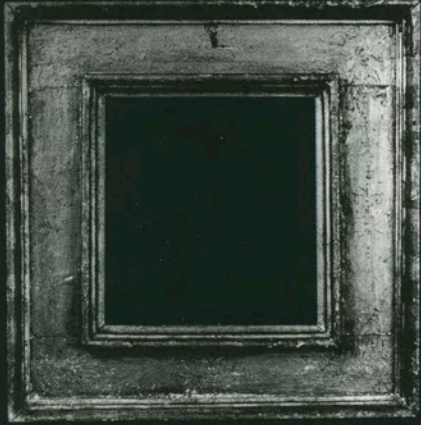




41. Wood, applied composition ornament, gilded, on *Snap the Whip*, Winslow Homer, 1872. Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art

42. Wood, gilded, on *Gulf Stream*, Winslow Homer, 1899. Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art





43. Wood, painted surface, sgraffito decoration, 15th century Venetian. Justine Simoni Collection. Courtesy Eli Wilner and Company

44. Wood, carved corner decoration, gilded, American Impressionist style, inscribed on verso: "(M)/ 1908/ Carrig Rohane." Crafted by Hermann Dudley Murphy. Justine Simoni Collection. Courtesy Eli Wilner and Company

Murphy did something else that was to have a lasting influence. When he had completed each frame he turned it over and inscribed it with a signature and a date, thus making a statement that it too was a work of art. (FIGURE 45) Murphy's frame inscriptions are signed with his cipher: an M with a circle around it (much like Whistler's use of the butterfly), the date, and the words Carrig-Rohane. Carrig Rohane is Irish for red cliff, a reference to his Celtic roots, yet another similarity Murphy and Whistler shared. Finally, the frame verso usually bears a three- or four-digit number near the dated signature. This number usually corresponds to a work-order number. We are especially fortunate that many of these order books survive today, a part of the Carrig-Rohane Papers in the Archives of American Art.

In addition to making cassetta adaptations, Murphy borrowed from other sources for other designs. The British frame style known as the Sunderland frame¹⁰ (FIGURE 46) is an obvious inspiration for a tour de force of carving by Murphy; the large horizontal frame (FIGURE 47) displays Murphy's extraordinary abilities. Lustrous gilded surfaces are typical of his frames. Another original Murphy frame combines his adapted cassetta form and a carved version of grille work, an obvious nod to the intricate grille frames designed by architect Stanford White. An exuberant floral pattern is another European form adapted by Murphy and widely interpreted later by other framemakers such as the Newcomb-Macklin Company.

Charles Prendergast (1868–1948), brother of artist Maurice Prendergast and himself a talented artist, created fine frames for himself, his brother, and many other artists and collectors of his time. Regrettably, few are signed. Charles said, "A good frame will bring out all the fine points of a good picture and it will strengthen a poor one, making it seem better than it is, although nobody who knows art will be fooled."¹¹ Charles worked for a short while with Hermann Dudley Murphy in the Carrig-Rohane frame studio and later worked on his own. Maurice often collaborated with his brother Charles in the design and making of frames.¹²

It is interesting to note that important frame commissions financed the two most important moves the brothers made.¹³ The first, a move from outside Boston into Boston proper, was made possible by the financier T. W. Lawson, who commissioned them to create a special frame to surround a painting of his prized bulldogs.¹⁴ (FIGURE 48) The move from Boston to New York City in 1914 was financed by the frame project commissioned by the Insurance Company of North America in Philadelphia.¹⁵

Some Prendergast frames draw upon traditional European precedents. Sketches can be found in Maurice Prendergast's sketchbook from his visit to Venice that detail frame profiles and designs he saw there. (FIGURE 49) These sketches were later transformed into several frames. Two examples are in the cassetta profile. The first bears the lion of Saint Mark rendered in blue paint and gold leaf in a surface treatment known as *sgraffito*. The second (FIGURE 50) bears the anthemion pattern also found in the sketchbook.

Charles thought of his framemaking as true artistry. Regarding wood carving he said, "The art of wood carving has a message of its own to deliver, with its own peculiar and perfect way of expressing it . . . Our professional carvers are sometimes created as machines and the best way to gain recognition is to show that they are something much better than machines. Good work compels respect, and if the craftsman wishes to take a higher rank, he must become an artist as well."¹⁶

Charles's incising of frame surfaces gave his frames a unique charm. In combination with a painting by Maurice, *The Bathers*, the graceful designs and sophisticated use of silver leaf rather than the gold leaf create the perfect setting. His experiments with silver leaf led to some designs of surprising distinctiveness. He created a frame with a silver ground and gold posies by applying a translucent ochre shellac to the areas where the flowers are drawn, giving the appearance of gold. He further treated the outer edge by intentionally rubbing away much of the leaf and exposing the red clay beneath. Charles Prendergast created frames for many other artists with great success. As early as the 1930s, Parke-Bernet had a sale and put out a catalogue in which one item was described as "A painting: frame by Charles Prendergast."¹⁷

Artist Max Kuehne (1880–1968) was a friend and protégé of Charles Prendergast, and his frames bear a marked resemblance to those by his mentor. (FIGURE 25) Kuehne, like Charles, seldom signed his frames. This has led to the occasional misattribution of Kuehne frames as Prendergast frames and vice versa. Kuehne also made frames for Maurice Prendergast, yet another reason why Kuehne frames are sometimes mistaken for Charles Prendergast's frames. Kuehne's hand tends to a looser design than Charles's more deliberate drawing.

The cassetta form, first reintroduced by Murphy and used extensively by Charles Prendergast and Kuehne, became widely



45. Frame verso showing inscription by Hermann Dudley Murphy, 1908. Justine Simoni Collection. Courtesy Eli Wilner and Company

46. Wood, carved, gilded, c. 1650, on *Arthur Capel, First Earl of Essex, and His Wife, Elizabeth*, Sir Peter Lely, c. 1653. Courtesy the National Portrait Gallery, London

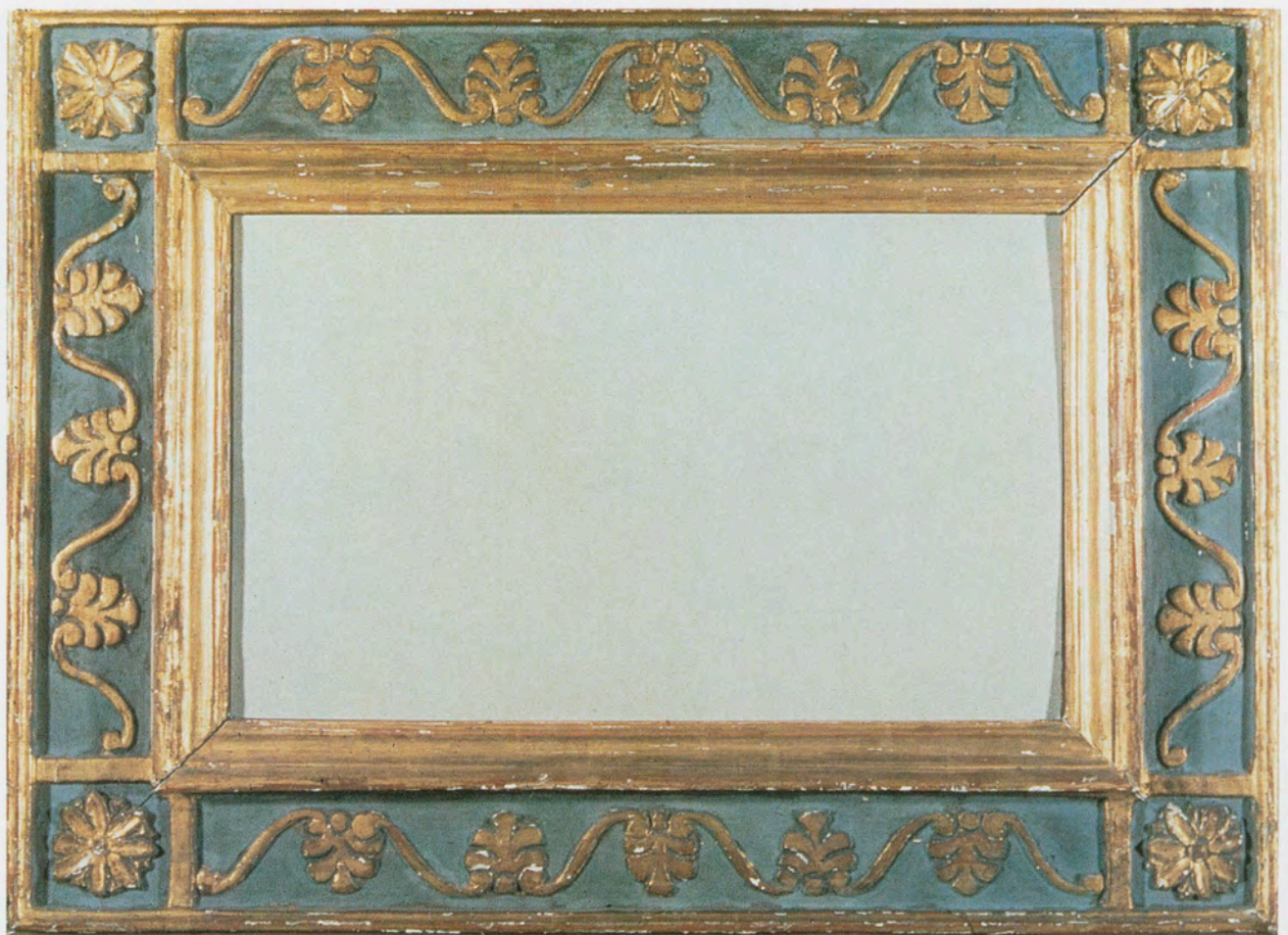
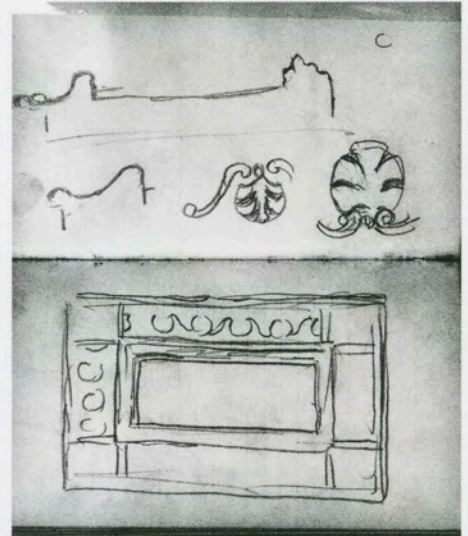
47. Wood, carved decoration, gilded; inscribed on verso: "(M) 1910/ Carrig Rohane." Crafted by Hermann Dudley Murphy. Justine Simoni Collection. Courtesy Eli Wilner and Company



48. Wood, carved, incised and punched surface decoration, gilded, known as the "Dreamwold" frame, by Charles Prendergast, 1908. Inscribed on verso. Courtesy the Terra Museum of American Art

49. From "Sketchbook" by Maurice Prendergast, c. 1900–1905. Courtesy the Williams College Museum of Art, gift of Mrs. Charles Prendergast

50. Wood, carved with painted surface, parcel gilding, by Charles Prendergast, c. 1907–12. Courtesy the Williams College Museum of Art



interpreted and reinterpreted by other artists and framemakers. Childe Hassam first ordered this style of frame, as seen in a 1905 Carrig-Rohane order book, from Murphy. Cassetta frames also appear on other later Hassam paintings, though they are not made by Murphy. Hassam further adapted the design by having his initials added to the composition of other frames and created at least two different variations of this frame style. (FIGURES 51 AND 52)

Yet another artist and framemaker who used the cassetta form and experimented with incising and silver gilding was Frederick Harer (1880–1949) of Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Harer's father had been a woodworker, and he inherited his father's woodworking tools and skills.¹⁸ In addition to frames for his own works, Harer made frames for other Pennsylvania artists such as Daniel Garber and Edwin Redfield. Like Murphy, Harer signed each frame on the verso. (FIGURE 53) Harer's frames combine a sensitive use of matte and burnished surfaces as well as sophisticated combinations of punched designs (FIGURE 54) made with tools Harer created himself specifically for this purpose.¹⁹

The historical role of frames and their relationship to the artworks they surround, as well as to the larger cultural and aesthetic context from which they emerge, became particularly compelling with the advent of Modernist painting. Natural wood and painted surfaces frequently took precedence over the gilded surface. This should come as no surprise when we remember that World War I took many skilled craftspeople from the workplace and that an increasingly technological society was developing. The economic collapse in 1929 and concerns about the Depression further influenced artists; frames made by artists of this period often have a particularly home-crafted appearance. Many of these frames, when seen by themselves without the paintings they were designed to surround, appear crudely constructed and naive in design.

Marsden Hartley (1877–1943), a modern artist who painted in a number of styles, used frames on his early artworks that go beyond complementing the painting—they are integral to the composition. Bold colors and abstract shapes in the paintings are carried through onto the frame surface. (FIGURE 55) With later works, Hartley often took ready-made frames and modified them for specific paintings.

Artist Florine Stettheimer (1871–1948) frequently created frames to enhance her paintings. On *Beauty Contest: To the Memory of P. T. Barnum* of 1924 (FIGURE 56) she essentially created a proscenium, complete with draped curtains and tassels, a literal stage on which the event occurs. The white painted surface and isolated use of gilding further integrate the frame and painting.

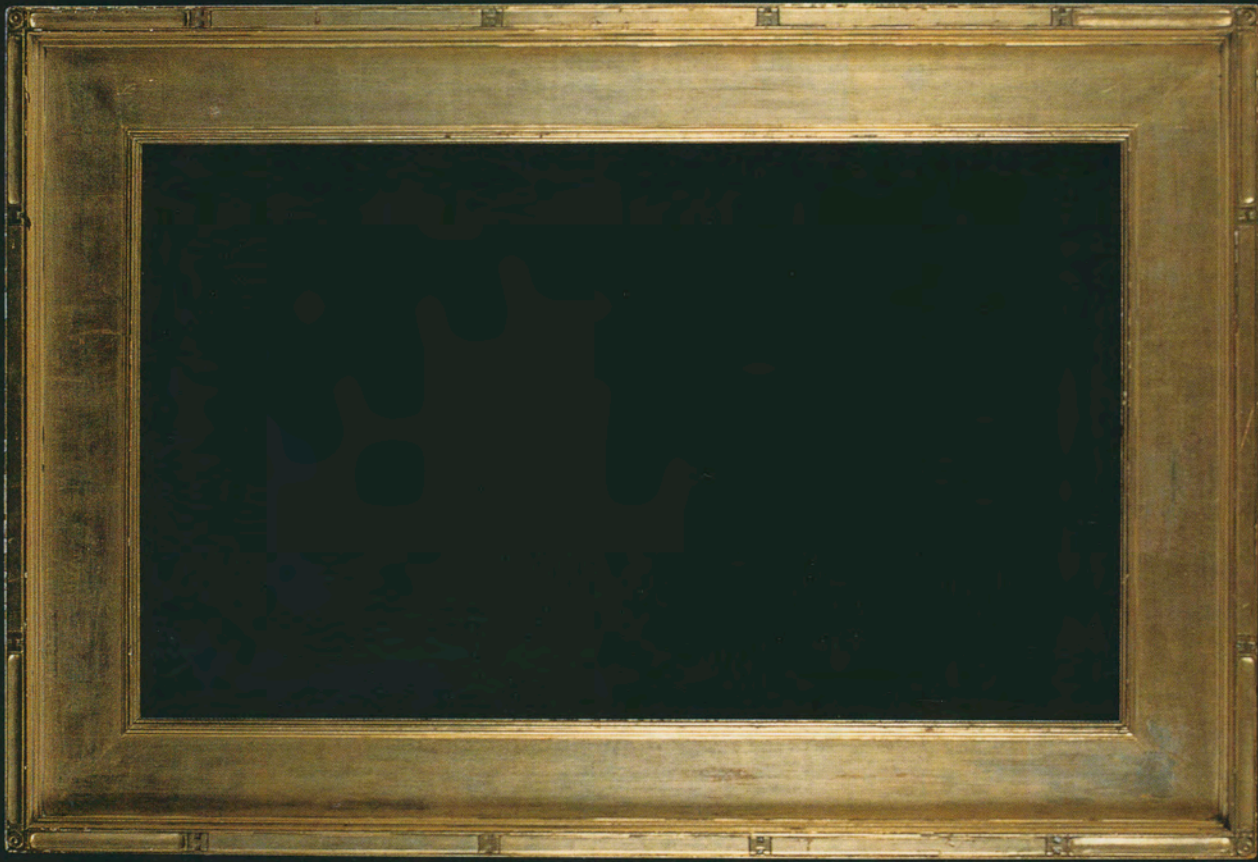
Arthur Dove (1880–1946), a pioneer abstract artist, experimented extensively with frames for his artworks. Like many of his contemporaries, Dove was reacting to society's increasing materialism, and he tried to create frames within limited means. Simple and varied wood profiles, along with the use of decorative accents, allowed Dove to create frames that were basic, inexpensive, and well suited to his compositions.

In several frames from 1929 to 1930, copper, rather than the more conventional silver or gold, provided the perfect accent. (FIGURE 57) In 1930, in a letter to his friend Alfred Stieglitz, who owned Gallery 291 where Dove showed his work, Dove wrote,

I have an idea . . . about my last show. There was just something in those frames that did not blaze the way it should. Think I have found that thing. It was the effect on the eyes and after two years of using Japan size gold that they sell in the store. I have found out how to do it better with a varnish ground . . . Have taken out of the large frames that was [sic] left and redone it with leaf . . . The frames have more the same feeling as the paintings. It makes as you know an amazing difference. Should like to take a few of them and redo the frames. They look so much more brilliant.²⁰

Most paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986) are in simple silver frames of a profile known as clamshell molding, but examples can be found of more unusual frame designs. One of them is the frame on her painting *Ram's Head, White Hollyhock-Hills* of 1935. (FIGURE 58) The frame is probably one of the first metal frames to appear during the twentieth century and is made unique by its scalloped edges and a swept reverse profile.

In 1939, painter Edward Hopper (1882–1967) had a frame made for his *Ground Swell*. (FIGURE 59) The plain wood frame with a central panel painted white recalls the weathered wood of the sailboat depicted. The white panel draws the eye into the central compositional element of the sail. The frame is inscribed on the back, "Made for Edward Hopper by Carl Sandelin frame maker 13 East 60th Street NYC."



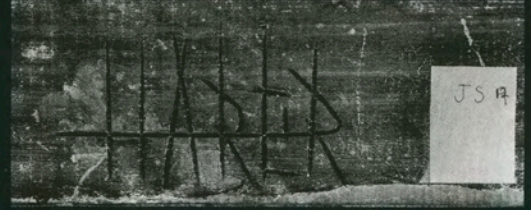
51. Wood, carved and gilded with block 'H' monogram, c. 1910, designed by Childe Hassam, crafted by the Royal Art Company. Courtesy Eli Wilner and Company

52. Detail of above



53. Frame verso showing inscription by Frederic Harer, c. 1910. Justine Simoni Collection. Courtesy Eli Wilner and Company

54. Wood, carved, gilded; crafted by Frederick Harer, c. 1910. Inscribed on verso, "Harer." Justine Simoni Collection. Courtesy Eli Wilner and Company





55. Wood, painted surface, on *Berlin Ante War*, Marsden Hartley, 1914. Courtesy the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio



56. Wood, carved, painted, parcel gilding, on *Beauty Contest: To the Memory of P.T. Barnum*, Florine Stettheimer, 1924. Courtesy the Wadsworth Atheneum



57. Wood length molding, innermost edge wrapped in copper, on *Alfie's Delight*, Arthur Dove, 1929. Courtesy the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University



THE
**GILDED
EDGE**

The Art of the Frame

EDITED BY

Eli Wilner

THE GILDED EDGE

The Art of the Frame

EDITED BY *Eli Wilner*



CHRONICLE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO