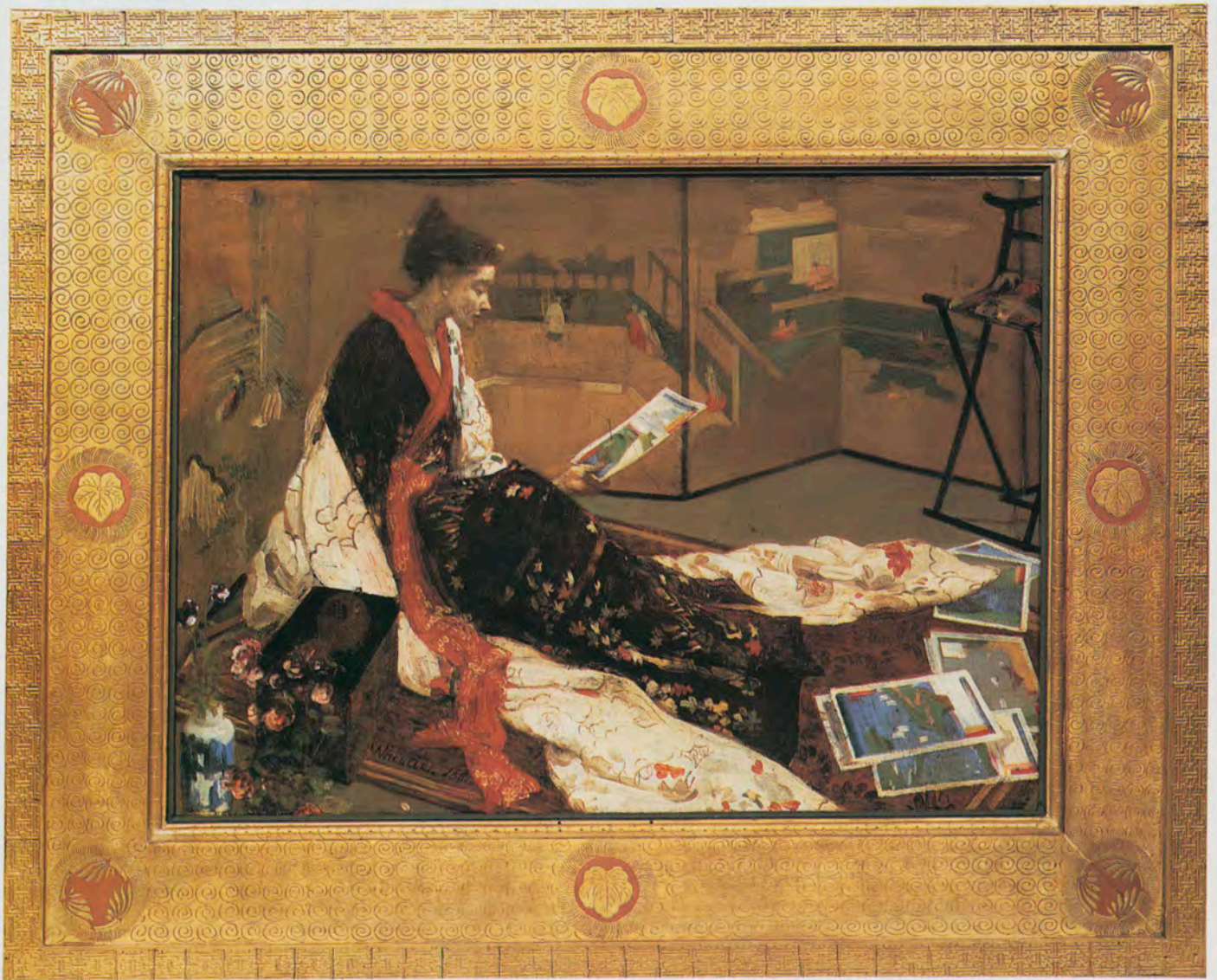


AMERICAN
PICTURE FRAMES
OF THE ARTS
AND CRAFTS PERIOD,
1870-1920

BY SUZANNE SMEATON





Pl. I. Caprice in Purple and Gold: The Golden Screen, by James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), 1864, in a frame designed by Whistler. Signed and dated “Whistler. 1864.” at lower left. The painting is oil on wood panel. The frame is carved, incised, and gilded wood with applied cast ornament; opening size, 20¼ by 26¾ inches. The frame incorporates such Oriental motifs as whorls and paulownia leaves. The outer band is a design called Chinese No. 1 in Owen Jones (1809–1874), *Grammar of Ornament* (London, 1856), Pl. LIX. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

The fascinating history of the American picture frame chronicles the evolution of decorative and artistic trends in this country, but it is only in recent years that American frames have come to be appreciated in their own right by museums, collectors, and dealers.¹

Until the early 1870's frames were predominantly of wood with many sections of cast ornament, applied and gilded. Designs often incorporated naturalistic elements which mirrored the celebration of the American landscape by painters of the Hudson River school.

As industrialization increased after the Civil War so did a counter movement which emphasized simplicity of design, hand craftsmanship, and a greater role for the decorative arts. As applied to interiors, this new aesthetic sought to combine furniture, decorative objects, and works of art in an integrated environment, refining the eclecticism of Victorian interiors.² In picture frames, cast ornament and deep, complex profiles gave way both to elaborate frames with much flatter

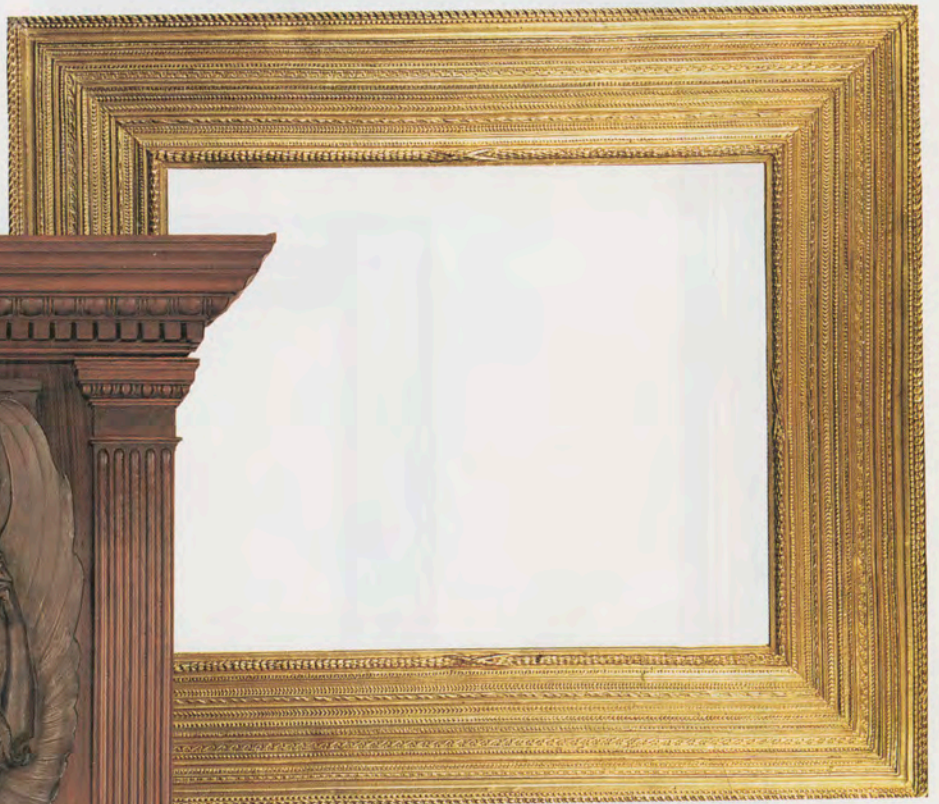
profiles and to much simpler frames elegantly hand carved and subtly gilded to harmonize with the works of art within them. Some frames were signed and/or dated.

James McNeill Whistler was among the first American artists to perceive the frames on his works as extensions of his paintings. His designs for frames reflected not only the aesthetic of the Pre-Raphaelites³ but also the assimilation of seventeenth-century Dutch frames, Oriental ceramics, the interiors of the English architect and designer Thomas Jeckyll (1827–1881), and patterns gleaned from Owen Jones's *Grammar of Ornament* of 1856.⁴

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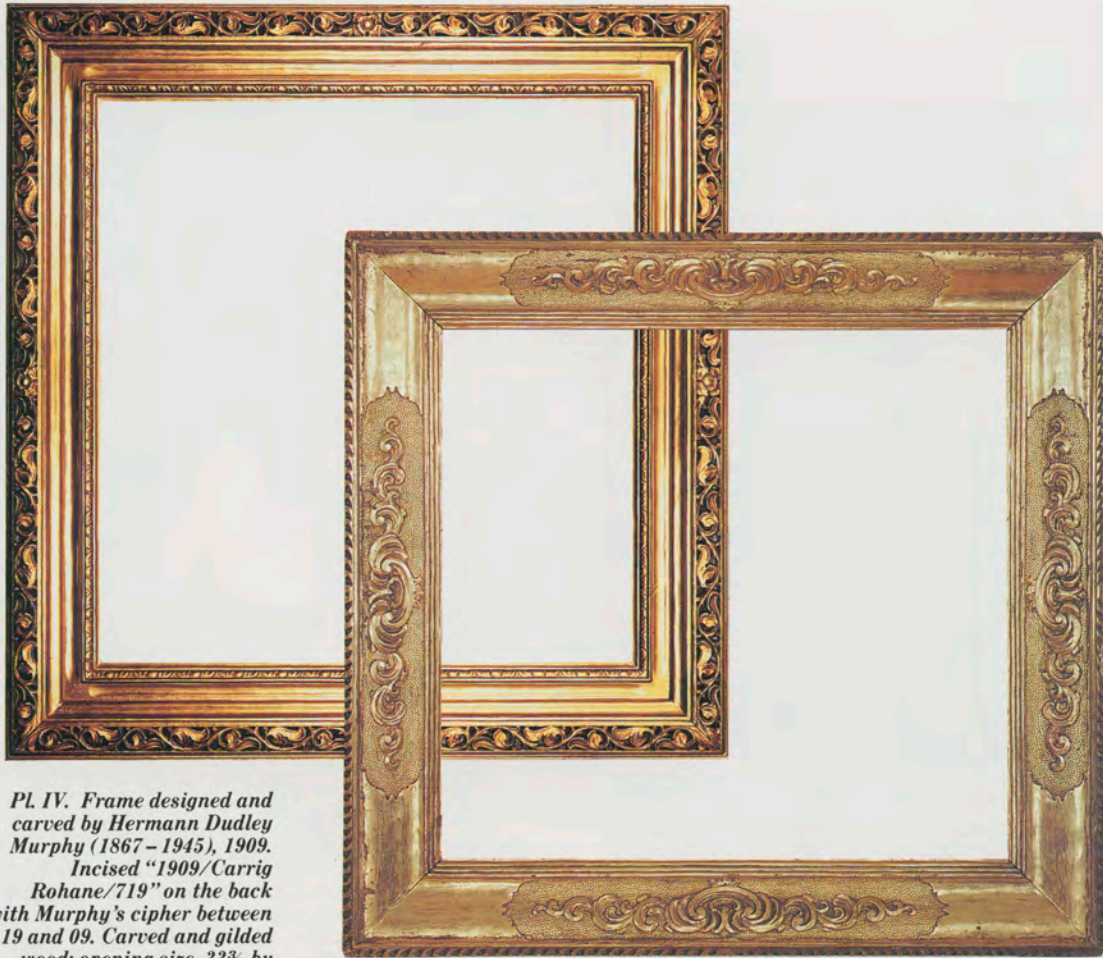
Pl. II. Amor Caritas, by Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907), modeled in 1898, cast in 1899, in a frame designed by Stanford White (1853–1906). The tabernacle-style frame is carved wood; opening size, 51¼ by 18 inches. Art Institute of Chicago, Roger McCormick Fund.



Pl. III. Frame designed by White, c. 1900. Gilded wood and applied cast ornament; opening size, 17½ by 21¾ inches. The ornament is composed of rows of classical architectural elements. Several variations of this design are found framing bronze reliefs by Saint-Gaudens in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photograph by courtesy of Eli Wilner and Company, Period Frames and Mirrors.

Whistler's frames of the 1860's have broad, incised and gilded flat surfaces; bold moldings; and inset round or square ornaments such as are found on frames designed by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882). The Oriental influence is apparent in the frame Whistler designed for *Caprice in Purple and Gold: The Golden Screen* (Pl. I), which incorporates bamboo motifs as well as whorls and circular designs based on the paulownia leaf.⁵ Whistler's later frames display the reeded molding used earlier by Rossetti, often in conjunction with unadorned sections, and an emphasis on specific shades of gilding so as to harmonize with the tonalities of the painting inside the frame. These frames with reeded moldings are known today as Whistler frames. Although Whistler designed but did not actually make the frames himself, he often signed them with his butterfly signature.⁶

The architect Stanford White stands out among those who brought a fresh aesthetic to frame design. Although he is best known for his work with the architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White, he also designed jewelry, picture frames (see Pls. II, III), and funerary monuments. In the words of his son Lawrence Grant White, "he was like a many-sided prism, reflecting the light in an infinite variety of colors, but forced by a lens to focus all its powers in one direction."⁷ White's frames are timeless—a sophisticated blend of



Pl. IV. Frame designed and carved by Hermann Dudley Murphy (1867–1945), 1909. Incised “1909/Carrig Rohane/719” on the back with Murphy’s cipher between 19 and 09. Carved and gilded wood; opening size, 33¾ by 35¼ inches. Wilner and Company photograph.

Pl. V. Frame designed and carved by Murphy, 1905. Incised “1905/Carrig Rohane/#186” on the back with Murphy’s cipher between 19 and 05. Carved, punched, and gilded wood; opening size, 31 by 29 inches. Collection of Deborah and Edward Shein.

classic architectural elements and a unique artistic sensitivity. He designed frames for a number of the best-known artists of his day, who were both his associates and friends.⁸ Many of Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s works were framed by White,⁹ and Thomas Wilmer Dewing (1851–1938) wrote him: “Dear Stanny, Will you design me a frame for my little pastels. . . ? I don’t want to use Whistler’s design. Do you think a little lace edge? Or what?”¹⁰ In the 1890’s Abbott Thayer (see Pl. VI) wrote White, “I want you to—once more—make me a frame design, this time for the enclosed figure. . . I have a workman here who thinks he could carve the wood if you would make the design; and I want to try him. I confess that I shall soon be after you again for a frame for a head; and Freer will want one for a landscape.”¹¹

Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919) had White design many frames for works in his collection, some of which may be seen by visiting the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

Boston was the heart of frame design at the turn of the century. Exemplary work was produced there by Hermann Dudley Murphy and his Carrig-Rohane frame shop; Charles Prendergast, the painter Maurice’s brother; Walfred Thulin; and the Foster Brothers frame company.



Pl. VI. Angel, by Abbott Handerson Thayer (1849–1921), c. 1889, in a frame designed by White. The painting is oil on canvas. The frame is gilded wood and applied cast ornament; opening size, 36 by 27⁷/₈ inches. National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C., gift of John Gellatly.



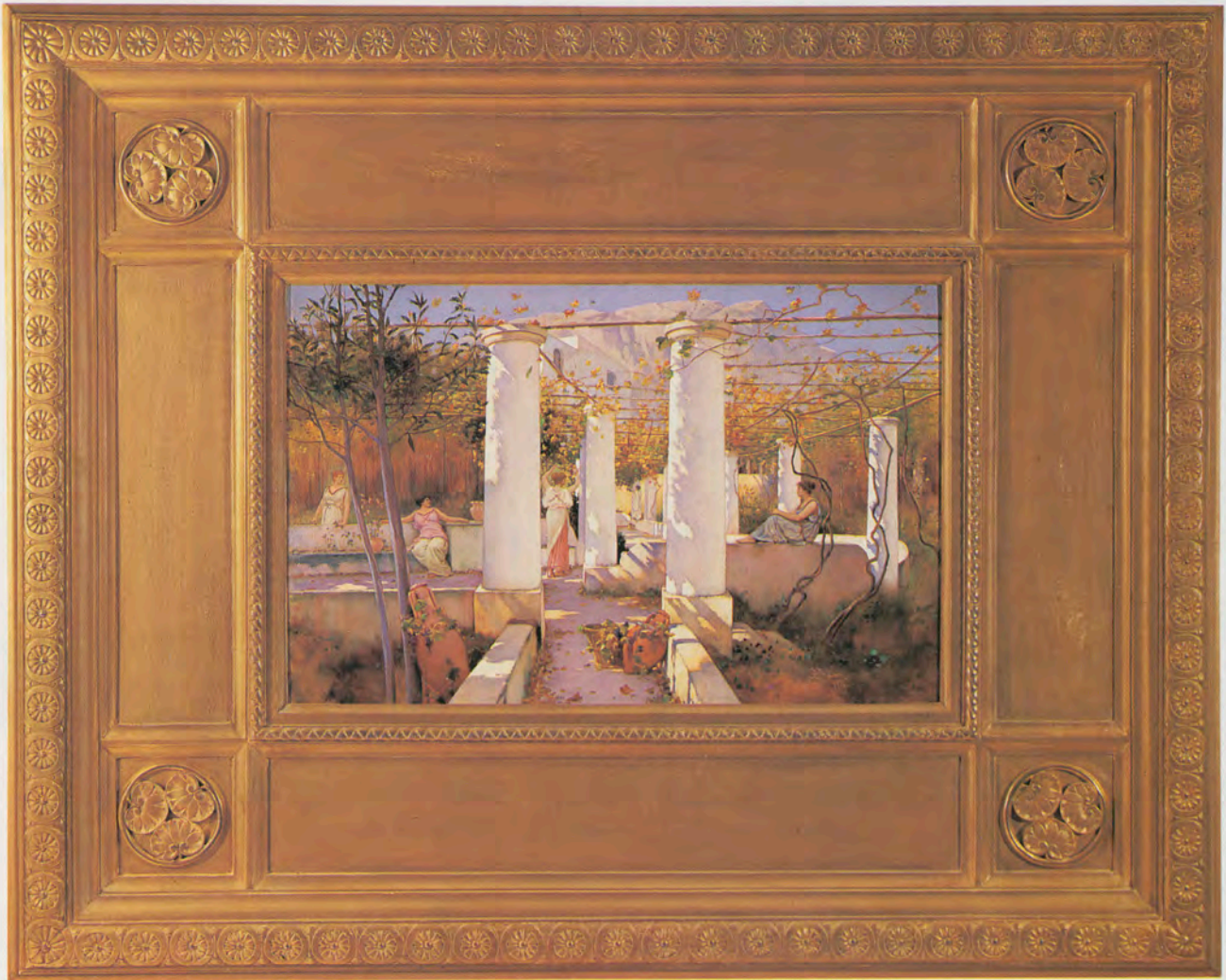
Pl. VII. *Beach Number 3* (formerly entitled *Bathers by a Waterfall*), by Maurice Prendergast (1858–1924), c. 1913, in a frame designed by Charles Prendergast (1863–1948). Signed “Prendergast” at lower right. The painting is oil on canvas. The frame is carved, incised, punched, and gilded wood; opening size, 18 $\frac{5}{8}$ by 27 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Adelaide Milton de Groot.

Pl. VIII. *A Spring Morning*, by Frederick Childe Hassam (1859–1935), c. 1890–1891, in a frame designed by Hassam. Signed “Childe Hassam.” at lower left. The painting is oil on canvas. The frame is carved and gilded wood; opening size, 27 by 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Photograph by courtesy of Berry-Hill Galleries.

Pl. IX. *Under the Vines*, by Charles Cary Coleman (1840–1928), 1898, in a frame designed by Coleman. Inscribed “CCC [in monogram], Capri. 1898” at lower right. The painting is oil on canvas. The frame is carved and gilded oak with applied cast ornament; opening size, 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ by 33 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Berry-Hill Galleries photograph.

A link between Murphy, who was also a painter, and Whistler was their common belief in the importance of the frame in the total perception of a work of art and their habit of signing their frames (see Pl. IV). But Murphy’s influence on American frame making was far greater than Whistler’s. Echoing the perspective of the arts and crafts movement, Murphy favored simple, elegant, hand-carved frames (Pls. IV, V). His designs are a rich synthesis of many sources, particularly sixteenth-century Venetian, or *cassétta*, frames with their flat profiles and corner decorations. Murphy reinterpreted these frames in what is known today as the American impressionist frame.

Murphy designed, carved, and gilded frames as early as 1898. In 1903 he opened the frame shop called Carrig-Rohane in the basement of his house in Winchester, Massachusetts, in association with Charles Prendergast.¹² In 1905 the shop was moved to Boston, where Murphy later formed an association with Walfred Thulin. In 1907 he participated in an exhibition at Copley Hall in Boston that was primarily devoted to frames as an art form.¹³ Murphy made frames for many leading artists of the day, including Frederick Childe Hassam, William Merritt Chase, and Emil Carlsen. In 1917 he turned over his shares in Carrig-Rohane to his artisans and sold the company to Vose Galleries of Boston, Incorporated.



Charles Prendergast began making frames about 1895 with the encouragement of his brother Maurice and at the suggestion of his neighbor Hermann Dudley Murphy.¹⁴ He drew on the Chinese and Persian art in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, for much of his inspiration (see Pl. VII). His travels in Italy in 1898 and again in 1911 and 1912 were another rich source of inspiration. Infrequently, there were more orders than Charles alone could handle, and Maurice would help him fill them. Interestingly, both major moves made by the Prendergast brothers were financed by substantial frame commissions. Their move from Winchester to Boston in 1912 was made possible by a frame commissioned by the financier Thomas W. Lawson (1857–1925), and their move from Boston to New York City in 1914 was provided for by an order for eighteen frames to set off the portraits of the past presidents of a Philadelphia insurance company.¹⁵

Many trips to New York prior to their move established the Prendergast brothers in the art scene there, and it is known that Charles provided a number of frames for the 1913 Armory Show. During his career he made some four hundred frames, among them a number commissioned by Dr. Albert C. Barnes (1872–1951) for paintings in his famous collection. These, several incised gesso panels, and a sculpture, all by Charles Prendergast, can still be seen at the Barnes

Foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania.¹⁶

Walfred Thulin, who at one time worked with Murphy in his Carrig-Rohane frame shop in Boston, was born in Sweden and came to the United States at the age of twenty-two as a skilled wood carver. About 1912 he opened his own shop on Boylston Street, Boston, where he worked until shortly before his death in 1949. His close association with the famous church architect Ralph Adams Cram (1863–1942) involved him in carving at many of the great churches built during his lifetime, including the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City, for which he made an altar cross.¹⁷ Thulin's distinctive monogram can be found on such objects as trays, chests, and candlesticks as well as on the elegant frames (see Pl. XVI) he created for many of the leading artists of Boston, Sargent and Frank W. Benson among them. Thulin was a member of the Boston Art Club, and in 1919 he exhibited at and received a medal from the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts. Thulin's work is found in many of America's principal museums.

The Boston frame-making firm of Foster Brothers was founded in 1875 by John Roy Foster and his brother Stephen Bartlett Foster. Their frames can be found on paintings by many top artists of the day, most notably those of the Boston school such as William Paxton and Edmund Tarbell. The artistic influ-



Pl. X. Frame made by the Newcomb-Macklin Company, c. 1910. Carved and gilded wood; opening size, 27½ by 35½ inches. Wilner and Company photograph.

ence of Jan Vermeer on the artists of the Boston school¹⁸ found its way into the frames around their paintings as well. To complement the simplicity of subject matter, conservatism, and subtle gradations of light in the paintings, Foster Brothers' masterfully carved frames reinterpreted the crosssetted corners and carved ripple and checkerboard patterns of Dutch frames and blended them with simpler American foliate motifs (see Pls. XI, XII).

Outside Boston the talent of many gifted but anonymous artisans is evident in the beautiful frames produced in quantity by the Newcomb-Macklin Company (see Pl. X), which had showrooms in both New York and Chicago and sent out traveling salesmen to work with individual artists. Founded in Evanston, Illinois, in 1871 by S. H. McElwain, the company came by its name when McElwain recommended his bookkeeper, Charles Macklin, to John C. Newcomb and they became partners in 1883.¹⁹

In addition to making frames for such well-known East Coast artists as Sargent, Maxfield Parrish, and George Bellows, Newcomb-Macklin served many members of the artists' community in Taos, New Mexico. Many of their frames, as well as those of other frame makers (see Pl. XV), incorporate American Indian motifs. They can frequently be found on paintings of the American Southwest by such artists as Walter Ufer and E. Martin Hennings. Newcomb-Macklin appears to have been most active during the early years of the twentieth century, maintaining an extensive stock of ready-made frames in standard sizes and a variety of finishes in addition to a comprehensive se-



Pl. XI. Frame made by Foster Brothers, c. 1900. Affixed to the back is the company's round brass medallion inscribed "Foster Brothers/Makers/Boston Mass." Carved and gilded wood; opening size, 25¾ by 32¾ inches. Wilner and Company photograph.

Pl. XII. The New Necklace, by William McGregor Paxton (1869–1941), 1910, in a frame made by Foster Brothers. Signed and dated "Paxton/1910" at lower left. The painting is oil on canvas. The frame is carved and gilded wood; opening size, 35¾ by 28 inches. On the back of the frame is the Foster Brothers' round brass medallion. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Zoe Oliver Sherman Collection.

lection of styles for custom-made work.

Bucks County, Pennsylvania, produced several gifted and innovative frame makers, of whom the foremost was Frederick Harer, a painter, sculptor, and etcher as well as a frame maker. The son of a successful furniture maker in Blossburg, Pennsylvania, Harer learned woodworking at an early age and in later

years used his father's tools to execute many of his designs.²⁰ Harer traveled extensively and the influences of Spain and the West Indies are particularly evident in his frames, which uniquely blend naïveté and sophistication. Stencils, incising, mat and burnished gilding, and designs punched with nails he had cut and filed down to specific patterns helped him produce ex-



Pl. XIII. Frame made by Frederick Harer (1880–1949), c. 1910. Inscribed “Harer” on the back. Carved, incised, and gilded wood; opening size, 10¾ by 13⅞ inches. Wilner and Company photograph.

Underneath: Pl. XIV. Frame made by Harer, c. 1910. Inscribed “Harer” on the back. Carved and gilded wood; opening size, 4⅞ by 6¾ inches. Wilner and Company photograph.

traordinarily creative frames whose beauty has only increased with time (see Pls. XIII, XIV).

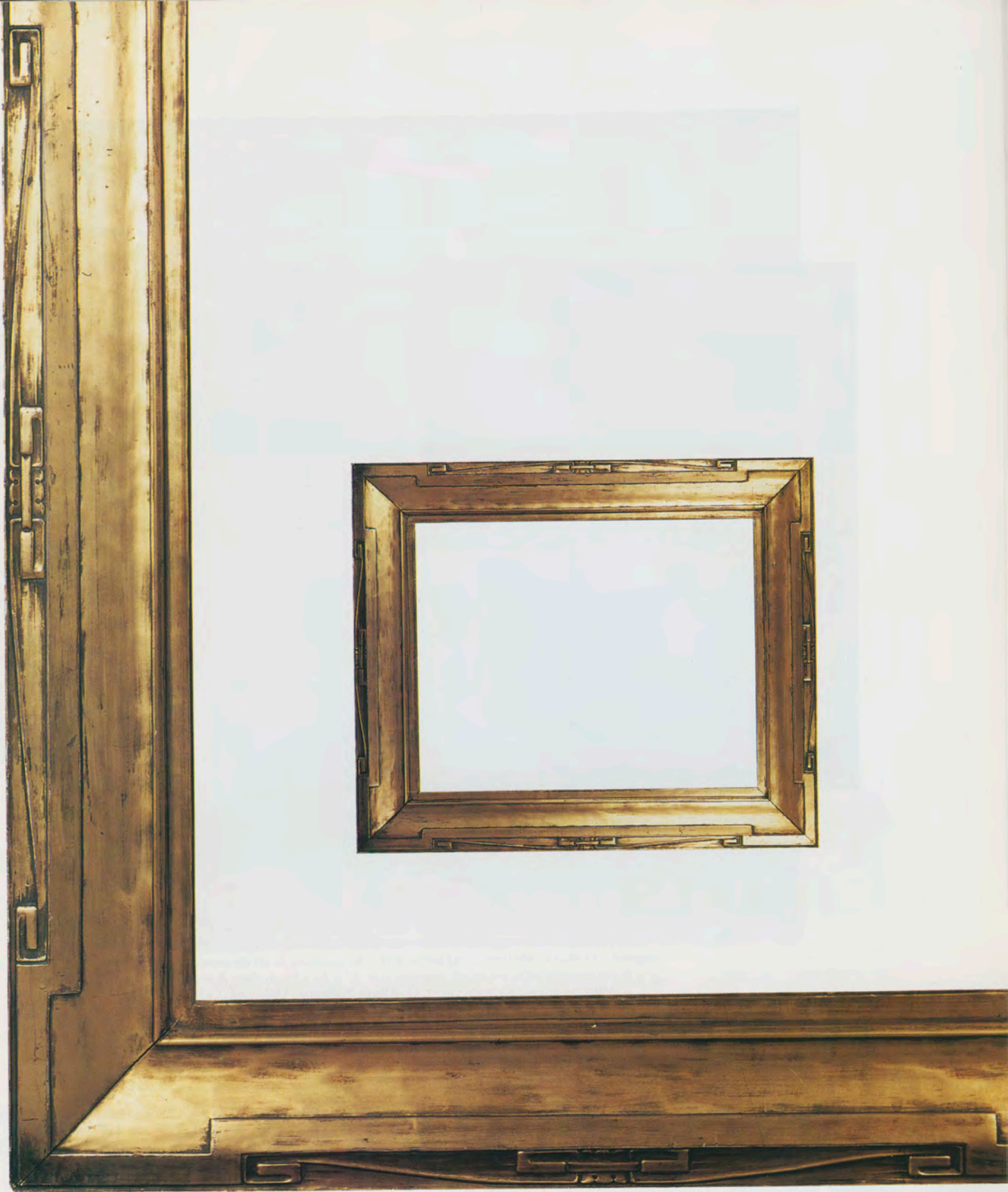
Harer’s frames can be found on paintings by Daniel Garber (1880–1958) and Edward Redfield (1869–1965) as well as on his own works. During a long and illustrious career he studied at the Pennsylvania Museum School of Industrial Arts and under Thomas Anshutz (1851–1912) and William Merritt Chase (1849–1916) at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. He exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy, the Baltimore Watercolor Club, and the National Academy of Design in New York City.²¹

Many other firms and individuals on the East Coast were responsible for the creation of fine frames, including Doll and Richards (1866–1973) in Boston; F. H. Loeser in Brooklyn, New York; J. H. Miller Company in Springfield, Massachusetts; and Slater Studios, Albert Milch (w. 1906–1916), Denis Dinan (w. 1885—at least 1899), and the Royal Art Company, all of New York City. Among the artists who designed their own frames were Elihu Vedder, Hassam (see Pl. VIII), Max Kuehne, Joseph H. Sharp, Irving Couse, Charles

Caryl Coleman (see Pl. IX), Louis Comfort Tiffany, Walt Kuhn, and John Marin.

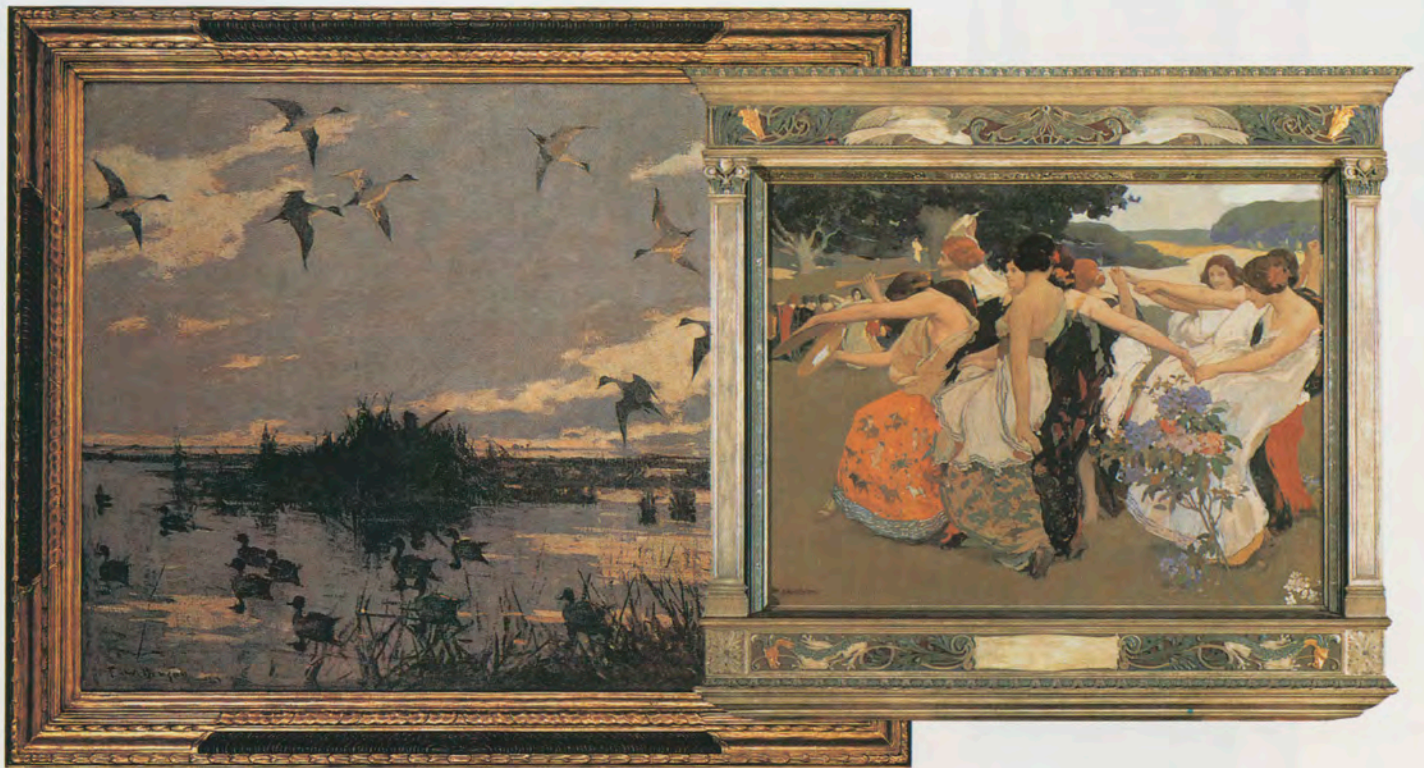
While the East Coast predominated as the center of frame making, the California artists Arthur and Lucia Mathews made a substantial contribution. Arthur brought early training in architecture—his father’s profession—to his work as an artist and to the composition of his frames, which were influenced by the theories of Whistler. Arthur’s wife, Lucia Kleinhans, in her own right a talented artist, met him at the California School of Design in San Francisco in 1893, and thereafter worked with him.

After the devastating earthquake and fire of 1906, the Mathewses contributed to the rebuilding of San Francisco by raising and distributing relief funds to artists and forming such ventures as *Philopolis* magazine, *Philopolis* Press, and the Furniture Shop. The shop, itself designed by Mathews, became a source of many decorative objects, furniture, and two types of picture frames. The first consisted of simple but original moldings painted to complement the tones of the paintings they framed. The second type was more



Pl. XV. Frame in what is known as the Taos style, maker unknown. Carved and gilded wood; opening size, 23½ by 29⅞ inches. The design incorporates American Indian motifs. Wilner and Company photograph.

elaborate and thematic (see Pls. XVII, XVIII), incorporating architectural elements, strongly Oriental designs, and natural motifs associated with California such as cypress trees, oranges, grapes, and the ever-present poppy. World War I created a scarcity of both craftsmen and materials, and in 1920 the Furniture Shop closed. In making their frames the Mathewses employed a variety of woods, painted surfaces, and inlay, and a method of flat relief carving that they taught



Pl. XVI. *Pintails Decoyed*, by Frank Weston Benson (1862–1951), in a frame made by Walfred Thulin (1878–1949), 1923. Inscribed “F. W. Benson. ’23” at lower left. The painting is oil on canvas. The frame is carved, painted, and gilded wood; opening size, 35³/₈ by 43³/₈ inches. On the back it is inscribed “1923 Thulin” with Thulin’s cipher between 19 and 23. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, gift of Frederick L. Jack.

Pl. XVII. *Youth*, by Arthur F. Mathews (1860–1945), c. 1917, in a frame made by Arthur and Lucia Kleinhans Mathews (1870–1955). Signed “Arthur F. Mathews.” at lower left. The painting is oil on canvas. The frame is carved and painted wood; opening size, 37³/₄ by 49³/₄ inches. A detail of the painting appears on the cover. Oakland Museum, Oakland, California.

their craftsmen, who had been accustomed to the higher relief carving they had learned in Europe.²²

Only a minority of surviving late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century frames are labeled by their makers. However, makers unknown to us today have been responsible for extraordinary frames that can stand alone as works of art in their own right.

This article is adapted from *“The Art of the Frame”: American Frames of the Arts and Crafts Period* (Eli Wilner and Company, New York, 1988).

¹ Relevant recent exhibition catalogues are: William Adair, *The Frame in America, 1700–1900: A Survey of Fabrication Techniques and Styles*, (AIA Foundation, Washington, D.C., 1983); Richard R. Brettell and Steven Starling, *The Art of the Edge: European Frames 1300–1900* (Art Institute of Chicago, 1986); and Suzanne Smeaton, *“The Art of the Frame”: American Frames of the Arts and Crafts Period* (Eli Wilner and Company, New York, 1988).

² See *In Pursuit of Beauty, Americans and the Aesthetic Movement* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1986), pp. 110–141, 320–326.

³ See Alastair Grieve, “The Applied Art of D. G. Rossetti—1. His Picture Frames,” *Burlington Magazine*, January 1973, pp. 16–24.

⁴ See Ira Horowitz, “Whistler’s Frames,” *College Art Journal*, vol. 39 (Winter 1979–1980), pp. 124–131.

⁵ For a discussion of this frame and others designed by Whistler, see David Park Curry, *James McNeill Whistler at the Freer Gallery of Art* (Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., in association with W. W. Norton and Company, New York and London, 1984), pp. 157–159.

⁶ See, for example, Whistler’s *Variations in Pink and Grey: Chelsea* (Freer Gallery of Art) and Curry, *James McNeill Whistler*, pp. 121, 158.

⁷ *Sketches and Designs by Stanford White* (New York, 1920), p. 1.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of the frames designed by White, particularly for Dwight W. Tryon and Thomas Wilmer Dewing, see Joyce K. Schiller, “Frame Designs by Stanford White,” *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts*, vol. 64, no. 1 (1988), pp. 20–31.

⁹ See Kathryn Greenthal, *Augustus Saint-Gaudens Master Sculptor* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1985), pp. 122–124.



Pl. XVIII. Masque of Pandora, by Arthur Mathews, c. 1915, in a frame made by Arthur and Lucia Mathews. Signed "Arthur F. Mathews." at lower left. The painting is oil on canvas. The frame is carved, incised, painted, and gilded wood; opening size, 51¾ by 47¾ inches. Oakland Museum.

¹⁰ Quoted in Charles C. Baldwin, *Stanford White* (New York, 1931, reprinted New York, 1976), pp. 373–374.

¹¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 350.

¹² William A. Coles, *Hermann Dudley Murphy: An Introduction* (Graham Gallery, New York, 1982), pp. 10–11.

¹³ See *Exhibition of the Society of Arts and Crafts Together with a loan collection of Applied Art* (Boston, 1907), p. 90.

¹⁴ Hamilton Basso, "Profiles—A Glimpse of Heaven, II," *New Yorker*, August 3, 1946, p. 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 34. The Lawson frame is now in storage at the Terra Museum of American Art in Chicago; the whereabouts of the eighteen insurance company frames is unknown. The frames of Charles Prendergast were explored in an exhibition entitled *The Prendergasts and The Arts and Crafts Movement* held at the Williams College Museum of Art in Williamstown, Massachusetts, between October 1988 and the end of January 1989, and in the symposium papers published in conjunction with the exhibition, W. Anthony Gengarely and Carol Derby, *The Prendergasts and The Arts and Crafts Movement: The Art of American Decoration and Design 1890–1920* (Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1989). Nancy Mowll Mathews, Prendergast Curator at the Williams College Museum of Art, is presently preparing a *catalogue raisonné* of the work of both Charles and Maurice Prendergast. See also Richard J. Wattenmaker,

The Art of Charles Prendergast (Rutgers University Art Gallery, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1968).

¹⁶ For a discussion of Prendergast's and other frames in the Barnes collection, see Violette De Mazia "What's In A Frame?," *Barnes Foundation Journal of the Art Department*, vol. 8 (Autumn 1977), pp. 48–64.

¹⁷ This biographical information was provided by Clarence Thulin, Walfred's son, in a letter to Eli Wilner and Company dated April 29, 1987.

¹⁸ See Bernice Kramer Leader, "The Boston School and Vermeer," *Arts Magazine*, November 1980, pp. 172–176.

¹⁹ This information was imparted by Dewey Imig, who was employed by Newcomb-Macklin for several decades beginning in 1922. "Gleanings from the conversation held with Mr Dewey Imig . . . on the 13th of December, 1984" was made available by the Thanhardt Burger Corporation.

²⁰ See Peter Keenan, "Art & Artists," *New Hope Magazine*, vol. 1 (September 1933), pp. 6–7.

²¹ Harer's legacy is evident in the frames made by Ben Badura (1896–1986) and Francis Coll (b. 1884), also of Bucks County.

²² See Harvey L. Jones, *Mathews, Masterpieces of the California Decorative Style* (Santa Barbara, California, and Salt Lake City, Utah, 1985), pp. 66, 83, 88–91.

The Magazine

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