

Time Frame

compiled by Mark Guthrie

Editor's Note: The history of the picture frame and the craft of framing is as diverse as it is long. Beginning this month, PFM will explore that history as we feature a prominent person in our industry and their discussions with Mark Guthrie about the period styles, artistic movements, innovations, and frames they find most significant. Topics will run the gamut in terms of era or impact, and it is our hope that "Time Frame" will broaden the understanding the role of fine frames in history.



An angular profile and a copper-wrapped sight edge are two unique—yet characteristic—design elements of this artist-designed frame.

Suzanne Smeaton, Gallery Director at Eli Wilner Picture Frames in New York City, discusses an artist-designed frame by Arthur Dove and its place in the history of picture framing.

MG You've chosen to discuss the artist-designed frame movement and, specifically, a design from the American artist Arthur Dove. Let's place them on a timeline.

SS In America, the movement generally spans the first 50 years of the 20th Century, although it can be traced back to [James McNeill] Whistler in the 1860's and 1870's. Whistler, working in England, was taking his cues from the Pre-Raphaelites who were themselves exploring frame design. Arthur Dove lived from 1880 to 1946 and this particular work, "Alfie's Delight," is dated 1929.

MG In regard to the artist-designed frame movement, what was being accomplished?

SS As is often the case, it was a reaction against current conventions. This time it was against the

ubiquitous, commercially-made, heavily "compo-ed" framing of the day. Artists, prior to this movement, would probably go to a framer and select from a repertoire of elements in catalogues and say something like, "Let's have this kind of profile. And add this kind of fluted cove. And instead of leaf and berry, I want to use some sort of flat, geometric pattern in the corner..."

If you looking at these 19th century frames, there really are only five, six, or seven different kinds of design elements. And if you look at fluted coves, for example, you can see 15 or so, variations of that form. So I think that there had been artist participation before this movement, although they were limited by a vocabulary of molds and profiles.

MG Where can we point to as the moment when the existing framing design vocabulary was replaced by these radically different, artist-designed concepts?

SS That would, absolutely, be the shift from applied ornament to carved at almost exactly the turn of the century. We know that [Herman Dudley] Murphy was making frames in the late 1890's, but the first "Murphy frame" (and they are all dated) is 1902. He started doing them for himself and then later worked with [Charles] Prendergast. Remember that the Industrial Age had taken hold in the mid- to late 1800's, allowing for the mass-production of these "tawdry frames."

MG Back to this example from Arthur Dove. What in this design speaks to you?

SS In the profile there is a simple elegance about Dove's preferences. They are really spare. As opposed

continued on page 135

to bolection mouldings [semi-ogee] in common use at the time, his might have a 45-degree angle and then a 90-degree angle, not just an “L”. There is something sophisticated about this angularity that is then finished with a specific and intentional surface treatment. I think that this is where you begin to see other profiles evolve having geometry and angularity.

MG You see this as the beginning of a new trend?

SS With artists generally departing from scoops and curves? Yes.

MG What about Dove’s choice of surface treatment?

SS Dove regularly utilized non-conventional materials. This frame’s inner element is copper-wrapped. There are numerous paintings where Dove chose to use copper because its warm, rich color resonates with the palate he’s using. And I like the idea that it’s metal; it’s not just a gilded surface and it’s not all wood and it’s not compo. It’s also part of that increasingly machine-oriented, Twentieth-century mindset, with the idea of Deco versus Nouveau.

MG It sounds like you’re talking about a reversal in thinking. We just discussed the art and frame community’s departure from frames that were produced by mechanical means, and here the concept of industrialization is accepted, maybe even glorified.

SS Sure. Let’s call 1890 as the moment in time where everybody was clear that there had to be something else, something better than these mass-produced frames. The new designs were produced through at least 1925. So [in between] you have over three decades—huge decades, when you

think about all that occurred during that time. There had to be a period of absorption for the culture, an acceptance that the machine here to stay and it’s not, altogether, a bad thing.

MG Since the tonality of the copper was so essential, how was it preserved?

SS It must have been sealed with some sort of lacquer or shellac. You’re right, tonality was very important. I have a copy of the text from some of Dove’s writings. They’re not too long, but they’re fascinating. This one is dated August 9, 1930: “I have an idea that this is true 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 varnish ground, so that the same frames have twice the speed. Have taken out one of the large frames that was left and redone it with the leaf. One of these professional yacht-letterers told me he could not do a gilding job with the commercial size. The frames have more the same feel as the painting. It makes, as you probably know, an amazing difference. Should like to take a few of them and re-do the frames. They look so much more brilliant.”

Dove was fundamentally concerned with the marriage of art and frame. I love that he wants to get the frames back so he can change them because of the impact they have on the artwork. He was developing techniques using metal leaf not because of its lack of expense, but for its tonal qualities.

MG You’re saying that metal leaf actually has a place of honor in framing history?

SS Metal leaf is usually attributable to mass-produced framing of the mid-19th century and forward. I was also a bit surprised to learn that it also has been specifically applied to hand crafted frames and not the result of a bad re-finishing job.

MG Was this experimentation with frame tonality a new concept?

SS It was new as a widespread concept. One of the fun facets of artist’s participation in their frames was that there was a lot more attention to the subtleties of the gilding process—to the impact of tonality on a picture. All sorts of surface treatments were used.

As for Dove, you can hear that if he didn’t know what he was doing, he knew where he wanted to go. I think that’s the sweetness of his writings. He was saying, “Sorry, but I’ve had to learn this inch-by-inch”. He had a lot of failed experiments.

MG And Dove wasn’t alone in the experimentation process.

SS Right. There really was a whole spectrum of artists that were intimately concerned with the presentation of their works. Strictly speaking, “artist-designed” would refer to the sketches by [Frederic Edwin] Church or John Marin, for example. But overall during this time, you begin to see frames that are extensions of the composition.

MG With all this innovating, there are still some holdovers from the past, in regard to both profile and surface treatment.

SS Well, sure. The Murphy frame is based upon the same 15th century, Italian cassetta profile that

you can find throughout frame history, with new decorative interpretations.

However, the point I like to make is that as we look at the historical progression of frames, we cannot underestimate the impact of lighting on frame design. Candlelight was not optimal lighting, but the deep cove worked to capture and draw in light toward the

picture. As light became brighter (with gaslight then electricity), that brighter light created shadows and so a moulding that was flatter or a moulding that sloped away from the picture surface made more sense.

The cassetta profile may have occurred before, but not in this way and, certainly, not for some time within America or Europe. To reintroduce the cassetta profile within

the 20th Century was a big deal. If you look at photographs of salon exhibitions in the 19th century, the cassetta profile is nearly non-existent. You could say that this period we call the artist-designed frame movement is really just one more phase in a long (and continuing) series of recycling and re-interpreting the past to suit current values. ■



Mark Guthrie, CPF is a 25-year veteran of the framing industry and owner of ÆDICULA in San Francisco, CA. He provides consultation services to industry manufacturers and retailers, and has served as V.P. of Sales for Abe Munn Picture Frames in New York City. His background also includes management of multi-store operations and ownership of Guthrie's Picture Framing in Houston, TX. He can be reached at emguthrie@yahoo.com.