

# 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. Each issue, 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 of the role of fine frames in history.*



Above: The selection of high-end frames at the South Royal Studios showroom. Right: Tim Killalea (left) and his colleague Mark Endahl with some samples of frames they've modified. (Photos courtesy of Lowell Endahl.)

**Tim Killalea owns and operates South Royal Studios in Washington, DC. It is one of the area's upscale retail framing establishments, catering to museums, galleries and upper-end clients. I got to know Tim while serving as a vendor to his business, and I admire his understanding of the clientele he serves. The interview was conducted at his showroom.**

**MG:** Normally, I allow my interview subjects to decide their topic. This time, I'm not going to be as fair—I'm making the "important moment in frame history" the development of businesses like yours, high end retail custom frame shops. Why did you choose this market? How have you accomplished your plan?

**TK:** Well, thanks. But I can't say that the plan has been fully accomplished yet.

**MG:** Can you give me a sense of the progression from your original frame shop to what we see now?

**TK:** About 25 years ago, the frames and mouldings we carried were far more humble. But, from the beginning, we had a core

commitment to the highest standards of preservation and to being as "pure" as possible in the handling of art. Having that in place, it was almost as if we couldn't avoid growing into the upper-end. I guess that's what opened the door, for us—our skill in handling art and our knowledge of art and art history.

**MG:** So a building block of the business was "care for the art."

**TK:** It's the keystone. And then the [high-end] framing became a natural progression that grew the business exponentially. I mean, it really started flourishing. I can remember that as I got started in upper-end frames, I used to think it was a big deal to make a

moderate alteration—maybe changing the color of a panel on a frame. Now, everything is subject to alteration.

**MG:** Do you make changes frequently?

**TK:** All the time. But there are fewer jobs overall. My experience is the reverse of what many people would call a success story. There was a time when I had eight to 12 staff members. We were doing what would be considered, by most people's standards, to be upper-end framing. But [it was] nothing like today.

Now I've got two staff members. We see fewer projects, but at higher prices. It's much more manageable. I call it "downsizing to success." People could take that the wrong way, but it's my way of saying that this business has exactly what it wants and needs. We have arrived. When you make a decision to go this route, you are guaranteeing that you will

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have attrition to your client base.

**MG:** You're also controlling the clientele.

**TK:** Definitely. We are a destination. Anyone who really cares will seek us out, call ahead, make an appointment. This all works hand-in-hand with the shop, too. If we are really bogged-down with work, we'll pace the week's appointments to allow more shop time.

*At this point in the interview, a customer came into the showroom. With an 11"x14" ready made framed photo in hand, she obviously needed to have her broken glass replaced. Tim rose to greet her, complimented her picture, and asked a few questions. He then apologized for not being able to assist her and directed her toward a neighboring frame shop that would likely be able to handle the job quickly. She made an admiring comment regarding his showroom, thanked him, and left.*

**MG:** She's an actress you paid to come in on cue, isn't she?

**TK:** That was interesting, wasn't it?

**MG:** You just said "no" to money. Not much money, but still money.

**TK:** Not at all. It's not cost-efficient to take that kind of job. For me to make money on the job, I would have to charge a figure that would have blown her mind. So the best thing to do is to politely sidestep the whole issue.

**MG:** You're managing the business and your customers, instead of letting your customers manage the business.

**TK:** Finally, after all these years. For the first 20 years [of business], my customers dictated how my business

ran—and how my life would be run. Now I still have the "urge to please," but [I've learned] that's not how you run a business. It's liberating, but it's not for everyone. You have to be realistic; you have to look at your demographics. If we were in a mall, we wouldn't make it.

You have to develop an ability to read potential: See the art; ask a few questions. Did you hear that I asked [the woman who just came in] how had she heard about us and if she had worked with us before? Well, when she said she hadn't done business with us and just stopped by, I knew what kind of customer I was dealing with. Most of our new customers are word-of-mouth referrals from other clients.

**MG:** What advertising do you do?

**TK:** We don't do any.

**MG:** You're off the beaten path and a little hard to find. Given your success, that says a lot. What I see is that you have built your business, client-by-client. And since you rely on each client for the next client, you have to get each transaction right.

**TK:** Sure. Look, we're not going to be famous. We don't have a high-visibility location. We just have a great reputation with a solid group of clients. But here is something that I consider critical—something that many people just don't understand. We often get asked, "How do your prices compare?" and my answer is always, "We don't have what other people have." Even if we take an existing frame, by the time we're done with it, it's nothing like

what's out there. We've put it into a category that's not even on their [the competition's] price list.

**MG:** What about the competition?

**TK:** I wish there was more. Look at it this way: It's much harder to drive to a nice restaurant that's hidden away somewhere than to an area known for being a restaurant district. I would love for there to be a handful of upper-end frame shops in this neighborhood. That way, most of the really great frame buyers would know that this is the place to come. The other thing is that they would be able to better distinguish between each framing business. They could easily see who is the framer and who's the "sample-hanger."

**MG:** A great term.

**TK:** That's what I could never be.

If you're going to sell the upper-end, you better know how to work with it. When I started selling fine frames, I quickly noticed that they were coming in a little darker or lighter—just different. I had to decide, "Am I going to bail out or am I going to learn how to work with these?" So I learned how to repair and refinish. But one thing is certain, after starting on this path of selling fine frames, I couldn't live without them. I just love them. Maybe I could have made more money by selling low-end in volume, but I don't care.

**MG:** It is fun to be around truly beautiful things, isn't it?

**TK:** I get a little disappointed when my clients don't get as excited as I do. But it's what keeps me coming back every day. ■



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