

Style Snapshot

A look at a frame, its characteristics, and history

By Peter Werkhoven

What style frame is this? An Impressionist painted frame.

Where is it from? Van Gogh made use of a local carpenter in Arles, France, to carve the profiles he wanted to encase his paintings. This carpenter would cut and assemble the frames, and then van Gogh would paint the frame himself in order to create what he saw as a perfect balance between painting and frame.

What time period is it from? This painting and its frame was made in 1887.

Who and what was instrumental in developing this style of frame? Around this period, painters were becoming more involved with the way their artwork was to be presented. The pointillists Paul Signac and Georges Seurat, artists whom van Gogh admired, became especially noted for their painted frames, sometimes even beginning the “frame” on the canvas itself. The picture here shows a sketch of how van Gogh wanted two of his famous “Sunflower Paintings” to be framed.

A letter by van Gogh clearly shows how deeply involved he was with the way his paintings had to be framed. Regarding his painting “The Potato Eaters” he wrote to his brother Theo:

“...Again, one has to border the painting by putting something around it that has a deep gold or copper color. If you want to see the painting the way it should be seen, please think about this. This gold tone also provides clarity to parts of the painting one would never assume and takes away the marbled aspect that it would get if you would place it against a grey or black background. The shadows are painted with blue and the gold color cooperates with that.”

In this case, in addition to his concern with the coloring of the frame, van Gogh made use of an angled profile that emphasized the window effect.



“Still life with pears and lemons” was a study of colors that didn't stop at the edge of the canvas: The frame was part of the entire image.



“When you put La Berceuse in the center of the two Sunflower paintings, it becomes a triptych. La Berceuse gets a red frame, the Sunflowers only four painted strips nailed to the stretcher...”

...if a picture shows to advantage in a simple frame, why put gilt around it?”



By using this profile, it created the illusion that the viewer was peeking in to see what was happening in the room.

What are the defining/common characteristics of this style? This was really the era where the artists took over the presentation of their works from the art dealers. When Gauguin visited van Gogh in Arles, they both began to experiment more and more with framing. Strong colors like red, blue, and dark brown were used to define the image, but simplicity of form was an imperative. To clarify this a little more, van Gogh wrote to Theo:

“We find it very easy to make frames with plain strips of wood nailed on the stretcher and then painted. Do you know that Gauguin is really partly the inventor of the white frame? But the frame of four strips nailed on the stretcher costs less than 5 Centimes and we are certainly going to perfect it. It does very well, because the frame has no projection, and is one with the picture.”

Additional comments and/or anecdotes Van Gogh painted this still life in 1887. He was not really con-

cerned with the fruit as the subject; this was all about the color study.

In this case specifically it was all about different shades of one color. The composition is built up from related hues of yellow, ochre, and brown, with sporadic touches of red, green, and blue.

The frame itself was painted with the same yellow and ochre tones. However, the frame has not always been entirely yellow. Originally it had a red inner edge, and remnants of red paint are still visible. At some point van Gogh apparently decided that the frame had to be executed completely in yellow tints in order to create a perfect harmony.

Sadly, this is the only original painted frame by Vincent van Gogh that has endured. ■



Peter Werkhoven is co-owner of Aedicule Fine Framemaking in San Francisco. Mr. Werkhoven is originally from Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and moved to the U.S. a few years ago. His frames can be found in the Rijksmuseum, the Van Gogh Museum, as well as in the homes of many European collectors. He can be reached at pwerkhoven@comcast.net.