

Museums, Frames and Context: Thinking through the picture frame

Matthew O'Reilly encourages us to think “outside the square”, or perhaps more correctly about the square itself, reminding us that the frames of artworks have their own rewarding history and stylistic significance

APPROACHING THE FRAME

This article emanates from some of the traditional practices, materials and techniques of decorative art, and the study of their histories, though it has its alignment to objects of fine art. It intends to speak to a neglected corner of the histories and practice of fine and decorative arts and of architecture. That is to say, it will speak from the interstices between those various disciplines. I do not hope here to remedy the neglect itself, but in addressing the subject ontologically I hope to give the reader a means to think about it.

The subject is the picture frame, which, in most instances, falls just outside the classification of ‘museum object’; within museums in this country frames are not collected for themselves, even though they are very

numerous. This is perfectly understandable. However there are frames in New Zealand that are several hundred years old, and not many among them are recognised for their antiquity nor yet studied for their attributes or their place in history. Even though the history of frames is as old as that of painting, even though the frame employs techniques and materials that were used in ancient Egypt, even though it has a most interesting stylistic and narrative history that may contribute to the history of art and of the decorative arts, yet the picture frame suffers from its ancillary nature, its marginal existence.

I hope that in describing its functions, its more important formal characteristics and associated historic contexts the reader will be inspired to think about the frames in his/her care, what relation they may have to the paintings they contain, and whether they may hold any virtues that are worth preserving on their own account. To help museum colleagues in thinking through the frames in their care, I will describe some salient factors in the institutionalisation of the picture which impact on the frame.

The formal attributes of frames that I will describe here, while the most influential and essential, are by no means the only ones. Because the subject is wider and more nuanced than this article can examine, the approach is necessarily reductionist. The types are directly derived from classical sources; the forms themselves have survived recognisably since their earliest use, and pre-date Modernism.

Although the story of Modernism itself is well represented in the repertoire of frame style, for brevity I must cut off our story at the point at which the perspectival strategies gave way to Modernism's more radical aspects. It is as well to remember however, that Modernism remains an inevitable influence on the way we see and think about frames of all periods.

FRAMES AND INSTITUTIONS

In some ways picture frames are an analogue for the museum, which inevitably 'frames' the artefacts in its care, yet it is virtually impossible in many areas of collecting to frame in a detached way.

One area in which history favours a greater degree of neutrality is that of works on paper for which tradition has conditioned us to expect standardisation of presentation through the use of uniform matting and framing. We come to view them with certain expectations; when the expectations are met more or less then we are not distracted in our gallery experience.

With paintings, however, the history of their framings is for the most part quite different. Because frames border directly onto the paintings they serve, as opposed to works on paper with their mats, and because they have widely varying sizes they tend to require individualised treatment of scale, form, tonality etc. When we are presented with a collection of uniformly framed paintings from different periods, the distraction and disjunctions caused by the frames tend to alter the viewing experience negatively. The frame is simply too close to be subtracted from the enquiring gaze. It is true that there is a long tradition of gallery framings, but it is also true that the vision that produced them also governed the entire surroundings and asserted a framing strategy of which the frames themselves were only a part. Such strict regimes generally work for the artworks only when the style of the gallery framing, the architectural milieu and that of the paintings are in accord. An interesting case with respect to this issue is the experiment by the Museum of Modern Art in New York during the 1980s, when the director William S. Rubin quite famously had the collection reframed in a very few profiles and only a couple of surfaces. Since this time there has been a steady retreat from this radical position.

MECHANISMS OF EXPRESSION

The following are some of the mechanisms that have dictated the formal expression of picture frames over the course of time and provide clues as to how they work; I also detail some of the compromising features that occur

where the nature of the frame meets historical narrative. These may help to explain why the frame, despite its ubiquity and antiquity, became somewhat invisible in museums, as in the general culture.

- The mechanisms that govern the formal expression of the frame, are themselves ruled by the twin constituent functions of protection and appreciation. For the frame to protect it must have physical substance; for it to have substance it must express itself; for it to remain successful in its role it must appreciate its artwork recognisably.
- Frame history is connected to architecture; in its terminology, its design fundamentals based on structural and functional imperatives, and its relation to patronage. The greater is the investment in a built structure, the greater its potential relation to economic, aesthetic and ultimately political expression. Frames too, even after the separation of painting from wall, have mirrored these same concerns through their design. Successful buildings express an appropriate relationship between internal requirements and the exterior context which ultimately validates them. So too with picture frames.
- The history of painting is closely tied to the relationships of artists to patronage. Besides their influence over the content of paintings, patrons typically expressed some or all of that relationship through the choice of frame – its quality, its formal properties, which might often include signs of belonging, as collection subject (gallery frame). A fundamental sign in the power of secular patronage and therefore of the market, was the shift in the outline shape of paintings from the arched forms redolent of the Gothic and Romanesque church architecture from which it had hitherto derived, to a flat horizontal format (one of the most important formal signifiers of the return to the Greek and Roman model); this was supported by the Medici and other secular patrons. This shift to a squared shape for the boundary of the painting ensured the ease of commodification of painting, as well as the freeing of the painting from its previously integral or engaged relation to its frame.
- Style relates to fashion in a way that is as pertinent to picture frames as it is to furnishings generally; there is an array of stylistic descriptors like Baroque, auricular, Rococo, Victorian, neo-Gothic etc. However the word 'style' itself more deeply signifies a formal language, an aesthetic, which articulates a zeitgeist or a set of values particular to an age, and, if contemporary with



Figure 1. Cassetta frame, original for or contemporary to the painting. Detail: Giovanni BELLINI, *Madonna and child*, (Rogers Madonna,) late 1480s. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, ROGERS FUND, 1908 (08.183.1) – Detail IMAGE © 1996 THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

it, is figured formally and subjectively in the art that the frame encompasses.

- The advent of the discrete object known as the picture frame took place as the international Gothic style gave way to the rebirth of Classicism. Of the many style languages beginning from the Renaissance on, the ones I enumerate below are those whose formal values have survived and influenced frames to the present day. It is no coincidence that the figures they employ come almost exclusively from the Classical canon; this is testimony to the fundamental role played by that impulse on the vision of collectors through history.
- Particularly since Michelangelo's radical architectural departures and up until the advent of Modernism, an important function of picture frames has been to support the creation of illusory space or to comment upon it.

FORMAL MEANS

The following formal strategies were the most commonly employed historically up to the Modernist period. From the Romantic period at around the beginning of the 19th

century fashion increasingly dictated references to past styles, rather than inventing new formal language, in increasingly eclectic mixes.

1. Strategies include the most typical Renaissance one of minimising the depth and emphasising the relation between the picture plane and that of the wall by the use of a flat broad frieze between two relatively low mouldings, the frieze often containing decorative elements with classical architectural or textile-like references or, not infrequently, the insertion of some relevant text. This frame type is known as the cassetta or 'little box' which relates it to one of the most important kinds of Renaissance furniture. The wedding or dowry chest was known as the *cassone* or 'big box' – the 'little box' and the 'big box'. Implicitly each carried something of great importance (*figures 1 and 2*).
2. Beginning in the mid 16th century it became the norm to consider the aperture of the frame as a necessary support to the credibility of illusory space, i.e. pictorial recession, particularly through the provision of actual physical recession, which helped the eye to infer spatial recession on the picture plane. Thus paintings, which intended to show deep pictorial space, were

helped most in their illusion by frame profiles that slope down and inwards (*figure 3*) towards the painted surface.

3. A contrary condition in which subjects were to be perceived as inhabiting the viewer's space forward of the picture plane, as for example in much figure painting, were aided by a frame in which the picture surface was projected forward by the frame whose principal slope was outwards and back to meet the wall (*figure 4*). In either of these forms the mitred corner became a dynamic and expressive aid. The illusory mechanisms for both of these painting types were most richly demonstrated in the language of the Baroque period, its most enduring figure that of the ogee, *cyma* or s-curve in which the radius changed constantly promoting a sense of dynamic restlessness, disposed so that transgressive channels were created for the contents of the painting to invade the surrounding space.
4. One further type associated particularly with the neo-classical period mediates a strong un-angled element perpendicular to the wall and picture planes through a *scotia* (a term of Greek origin from classical architecture meaning an approximately half-circle concavity, originally around the base of an Ionic or

Corinthian column: this shape was later commonly used to mediate the right angle between wall and ceiling, giving rise to its more common meaning today) to finish at more or less the same plane as the painting surface. The decorative embellishments where present are strict and geometrical with few diagonal lines, creating a rigorous and "detached" window for the work (*figure 5*).

I add here three further expressive mechanisms to round out those described under the previous bullet points. While they too are important they are less germane to the descriptions contained in the 'formal means' section – though an examination of the illustrations may help to explain what I am getting at with each one.

- Ideal framings act in sympathy with the local environment and simultaneously mediate it with the artwork for which it acts as agent. The perspectival programme has the power to concentrate consciousness within self-defined boundaries. The effect of this is to exclude from itself the extraneous – whatever is not required for its completion. Whatever is excluded is therefore unconscious to it and invisible. The frame in its form clearly defines the zone of exclusion whilst simultaneously expressing its harmonious intentions.



Figure 2. **Cassone.**
North Italian, 1490-
1520. Courtauld
Institute of Art Gallery,
London. Detail.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:
COURTAULD
INSTITUTE OF ART.
PHOTOGRAPH:
MATTHEW O'REILLY

- The profile of a frame must include reconciliation of the forward projection of the painting with the parallel plane of the wall, because the frame (and painting) has its own thickness and because the painting has its own subjective demands to occupy space. This last may be related to the illusory project mentioned previously but is not tied to it, since abstract art may also make similar demands that a frame may mediate (if in a very different manner). The variety of forms and rules of proportion in the repertoire of classical architecture have been the main means to express the transition of forces from the wall plane to its perpendicular and the angles in between that are inhabited by the viewer's line of sight.
- It is possible for the motifs of form or embellishment employed in a frame to resonate in empathy with the particulars of the painting, its subject and detail of composition. This may happen in individualised framing approaches, even to some extent when the approach is a house style, but it might be said that the greater the degree of institutionalising of the frame, the less the empathy between the artwork and its frame, and therefore the less protection from the encroachment of the surrounding milieu is afforded to the painting.

DISJUNCTIVE NARRATIVES

The following series of observations recognise the disjunctive forces at play through the history of the picture frame. Although there can be no regret, those effects were and are real, continually affecting and sometimes clouding our perceptions, obscuring the insights they may facilitate to relations between the various arts and social history.

A variety of external factors influenced the evolution of the frame, from market forces to practical considerations in both the home and the gallery.

- At the moment when paintings became truly portable, the Renaissance, they became tradable commodities. The development of canons, status and connoisseurship ensured relatively stable art markets and sometimes very high values. Released from its origins as a unitary object in which frame and painting were literally inseparable (unless one had a saw!), the now unengaged painting could be given a new frame at the whim of an owner, and frequently was, often at the moment of acquisition, or perhaps upon change of décor or removal to a different location.



Figure 3. French frame, late Louis XIV-early Régence, made for the painting, c.1710. Detail: Nicolas POUSSIN French 1594-1665, worked in Italy, *The Crossing of the Red Sea* c.1634, oil on canvas, 155.6 x 215.3 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Felton Bequest, 1948

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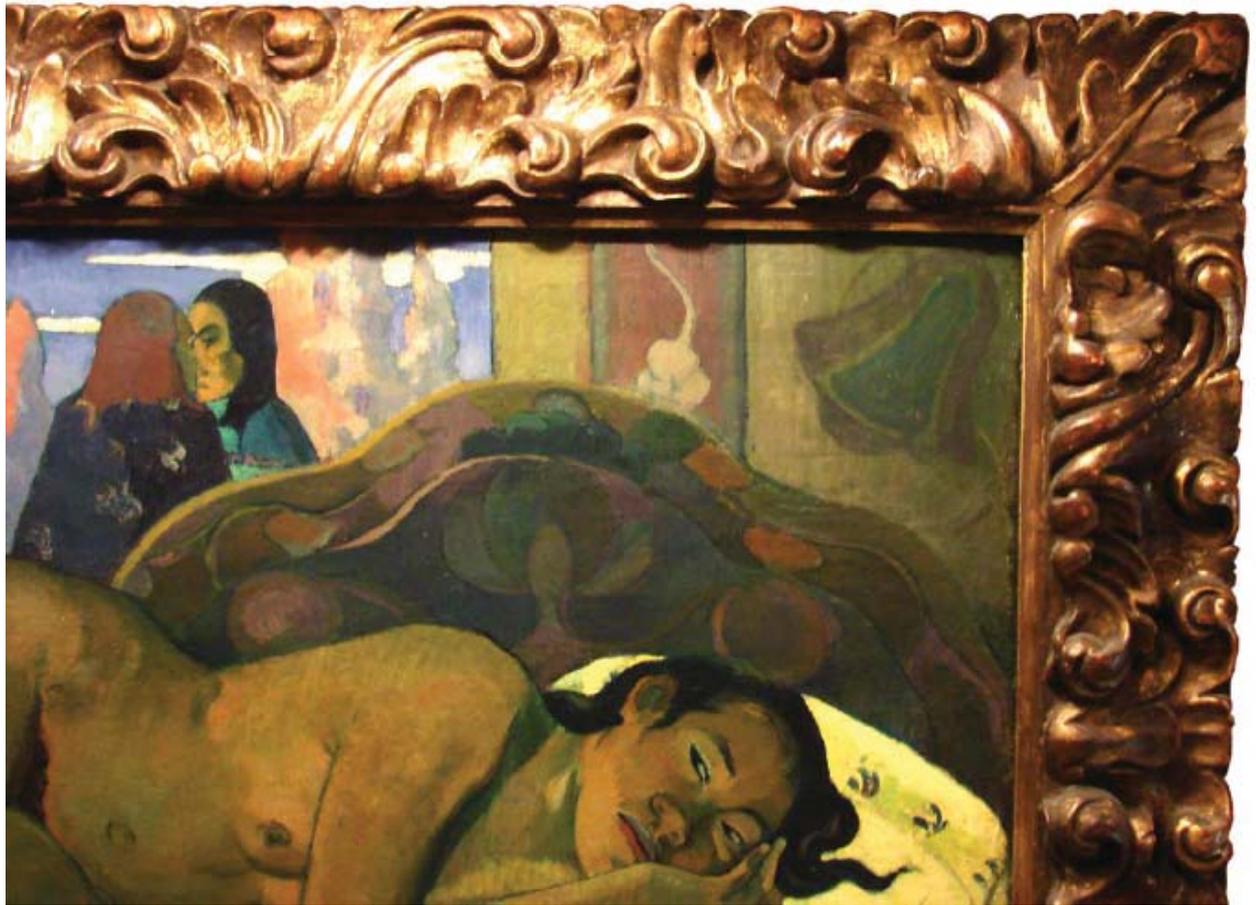


Figure 4. Frame style: Italian 2nd half 17th century. Detail: Paul GAUGUIN, *Nevermore* 1897. Courtauld Institute of Art, London. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: COURTAULD INSTITUTE OF ART. PHOTOGRAPH: MATTHEW O'REILLY

- When paintings were removed over long distances, a number of strategies were possible. To keep the painting safe, the frame may have borne the vicissitudes of the voyage and arrived in too poor a condition to remain visually acceptable; Victorian composition plaster frames whose decorative “compo” mouldings had a visually disastrous tendency to fall off when exposed to extremes of humidity or dryness, could have fallen victim to this circumstance, and certainly did in the poor environments of colonial housing, storage and local movements. The original frame if large and cumbersome may have been removed and discarded for the journey, to save on weight, space and money; this did happen with some frequency to paintings sent home after acquisition on the Grand Tour, and it may have occurred during the migrations to New Zealand.
- Such were the numbers of old discarded frames to be found around the world later in the 19th century that they came to be used by the more radical artists for whom the market had not provided the means to pick and choose; or who chose such frames deliberately for political or aesthetic reasons as happened among the Impressionist and Post-impressionist painters.
- Some dealers, such as Duveen, as a matter of marketing policy used particular styles, either original old or reproduction frames, as branding – sort of logos.
- The onset of Modernism, the stripping back of the signs of privilege represented in the frame, together with war and depression disconnected the knowledge, craftsmanship and connoisseurship from the tradition. The traditions associated with frame making and repair suffered neglect all over the world from around the First World War until about 1985.
- A lack of materials, artisanship or the lower level of wealthy patronage in the mid-century meant that many frames produced in New Zealand especially were of inferior design and technique.
- Insufficient depth in commercially produced mouldings meant that frames (in museums particularly) may have had build-up extensions added to the verso in order that the painting might be better protected, and that glazing be added for the same reason. These are less obvious but real changes in which the reception of the painting may be altered in an unintended manner.



Figure 5. Frame style: late neo-classical English, made for the painting, Te Papa, Wellington, 2001. Detail: George DAWE, *Genevieve*. (From a S.T. Coleridge poem entitled 'Love'.) 1812. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: REPRODUCED COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF NEW ZEALAND TE PAPA TONGAREWA

The wider context of picture framing traditions and styles can offer new insights into the history of individual artworks, their provenance and prevailing fashions, as well as the history of frames as a separate genre within the decorative arts. It offers food for thought when assessing current frames on older works and encourages renewed consideration when framing new works or reframing existing collections, whether the motivation is their display, safe storage or transit.

While some frames will merit retention as objects in their own right, providing evidence of the framemaker's art and earlier taste, I would emphasise the importance of documenting any frame if it is to be discarded prior to a reframing. The study of picture framing may be in its infancy in New Zealand, but we owe it to future scholars of art history, visual culture and design to record how New Zealanders have viewed paintings over time.

Matthew O'Reilly grew up surrounded by Modernist New Zealand paintings. His work at Te Papa as Framer of Paintings has fed his interest in the means by which paintings and their histories are delivered into our view and survive through time, and has enabled him to make a serious study of the frame in New Zealand. He is shortly to embark on a systematic survey of the existing historical frames in major New Zealand public collections. He maintains a particular interest in the complex traces of Modern art with respect to boundary or limits – which includes the frame you have when you don't have a frame.

SUGGESTED READINGS ABOUT FRAMES

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WEBSITE PAGE WITH COMPREHENSIVE FRAME BIBLIOGRAPHY

<http://www.npg.org.uk/live/framebiblio.asp>