

Beautiful Surroundings

The Frames of The Frick Collection

Some of the most remarkable carving in The Frick Collection frequently goes unnoticed by casual visitors to the museum. Skillfully executed and usually finely gilded, this carved work embellishes many of the frames that adorn the paintings in the galleries. Frames are often viewed as simple accessories to the pictures, but there is increasing interest in the museum community in frames as objects in their own right and the varied roles that they have played in the past. Seen together, the frames on the paintings of The Frick Collection illustrate five hundred years of changing tastes.

The frames original to the paintings purchased by Henry Clay Frick were most likely as diverse as the pictures themselves, coming, as they did, from all across Europe. For Frick and his fellow Gilded Age collectors, however, creating a unified interior—not preserving a work's original frame—was the primary concern. Frick preferred his paintings to be surrounded by gilded frames and thus reframed many of the works that entered his collection. For example, *Portrait of a Young Artist*—thought to have been a Rembrandt when Frick acquired it in 1899—came in a simple black Dutch frame of the seventeenth century. In 1905, Frick had it

refitted with a reproduction of an elaborate gilded French Régence frame. Over the years, he would reframe all his Dutch portraits and most of his landscapes—regardless of provenance—in a similar fashion. For his English portraits, Frick preferred Maratta frames, a simple neoclassical design named for the Italian baroque artist Carlo Maratta and favored by British collectors. In making these choices, Frick followed the advice of the art dealer Charles Carstairs from Knoedler and Company, who had sold him many of his paintings. Some of the replacements were antique frames, but most were reproductions made in Paris or London during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Since Mr. Frick's death, in 1919, the Collection has acquired several paintings in their original frames. The earliest of these dates to the late fourteenth century, a time when most frames were either part of the painting or permanently *engaged* (attached). The *Virgin and Child* (opposite page), by an unknown French artist, was most likely painted around 1400 and acquired by The Frick Collection in 1927. The central panel and its frame are made from a single piece of wood and serve as a rare existing example of the collaboration between a Renaissance painter and a carver. The carving and gilding of the meandering grapevine border were completed prior to the painting of the Virgin and Child, as evidenced by a consistent gilded surface that covers the carving and extends onto the flat panel, on top of which the figures were painted. Vines of this sort, carved of wood or stone, are found on Romanesque and Gothic

architecture in the Burgundy region of France, an area known for its many vineyards. In this particular work, grapevines provide more than a simple border: in the New Testament, Christ is referred to as the “true vine,” and the grapes’ Eucharistic implications account for their frequent use as a motif in depictions of the Madonna and Child.

A second engaged architectural frame in The Frick Collection is found on Gentile da Fabriano's *Madonna and Child, with Saints Lawrence and Julian* (below), which was acquired in 1966. Tabernacle frames of this type drew inspiration from the portals of Gothic buildings, as evidenced by its pointed

RIGHT:

Gentile da Fabriano (c. 1370–1427), *Madonna and Child, with Saints Lawrence and Julian*, painted about 1423–25, tempera on panel, The Frick Collection. The detail shows one of three thistles painted on the panel's base, which help link it to Gentile's celebrated *Adoration of the Magi* of 1423.

OPPOSITE PAGE:

Virgin and Child, by an unknown French artist, probably Burgundian, c. 1390–1400, oil and tempera on panel, The Frick Collection



arch, acanthus-leaf decoration, and twisted columns. An inscription on the base of the frame identifies the two saints who kneel at the feet of the Madonna and Child. Several details of this frame provide important information about its early history. Three small thistles painted adjacent to the names of the saints (see detail) link this work to Gentile's celebrated *Adoration of the Magi* of 1423, which has identical thistles painted in the same location. The *Adoration*, now in the Uffizi Gallery, was made for the sacristy of Santa Trinita in Florence at the request of Palla di Onorio Strozzi, an influential banker and philanthropist. Stylistic similarities in the paintings help date the Frick picture to the same period. Moreover, the thistles and the style of the inscription strongly suggest that the Frick's *Madonna and Child* was another Strozzi commission for Santa Trinita. Because Saints Lawrence and Julian are associated with caring for the sick, it is believed that the work originally hung in the chapel of Ospedale (hospital) della Santa Trinita, adjacent to the church.

By the late sixteenth century, frames had, for the most part, become independent elements that were added to paintings by the artist or the client. This allowed for much greater flexibility, as frames were no longer an integral part of the painting and therefore could be changed with shifting tastes. The role of the frame thus became that of a border used to set works of art apart from adjacent objects. Isolating his painting from its surroundings was Nicolas Poussin's concern when he instructed his patron Paul Fréart de Chantelou in 1639 to furnish a recently acquired painting with a "little" frame so



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that "the eye is held by what is depicted, not distracted, its glance muddled by the pell-mell intrusion of other neighboring objects."

A hundred years later tastes had once again changed, and frames—like other decorative arts of the eighteenth century—became much more exuberant. In France, carvers and gilders developed new techniques that pushed their materials and the effects achieved to new heights. A step was added to the gilding process, in which the

carving was "recut" after the application of the gesso, resulting in much crisper details. Also, sections of the gilding were highly polished to create a play between matte and burnished areas, giving greater depth to the surface. Architects and *ornemanistes* (ornamental designers) provided complex designs. Highly carved corners and central cartouches became increasingly connected and evolved into almost continuous ornamentation. Naturalistic vines draped from



cartouches and wrapped volutes in patterns that allowed no rest for the eye. With piercing and deep undercutting, these sculptural frames were much more three dimensional than the frames of previous eras. The frame on François Boucher's *A Lady on Her Daybed* of 1743 (above) is a beautiful example of the type of ornate frame so popular during this period. Although the frame is not original to the painting, it was made around 1750, shortly after Boucher executed the canvas. They were acquired together, in 1937.

Elaborately carved frames from this period were sometimes considered independent works of art, outshining the paintings they surrounded and serving as important indicators of a collector's taste. Their cost could exceed that of a painting, and artists would frequently use frames to enhance the value of their work. In 1733, Pierre-Jean Mariette, an important publisher and

ABOVE:
Detail of a carved and gilded frame by an unknown artist, French, 1740–50, The Frick Collection

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:
Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805), *The Wool Winder*, 1759, oil on canvas, The Frick Collection

Detail of a carved and gilded frame by an unknown artist, French, c. 1760, The Frick Collection. The frame surrounds Greuze's *The Wool Winder* (opposite).

art collector, complained to the Italian collector and art historian Francesco Maria Niccolò Gabburri that “the magnificence of the frames that adorn these paintings... has caused [the rich] to purchase them at unreasonable prices.” After attending the Salon of 1753, the art critic Abbé Le Blanc noted that often “the richness of the frame attracts more of the viewer's attention than the painting.”

The comparatively sober frame surrounding Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *The Wool Winder* (opposite page) exemplifies the *goût grec*, or Greek style, which came into fashion during the third quarter of the eighteenth century, following the rococo period. It is appropriate that this frame, constructed in France in the 1760s and purchased by The Frick Collection in 2008, be united with a painting by Greuze, as the artist was a member of a small circle that was among the first to embrace the *goût grec*. At the center of those championing this new style was the great collector Ange-Laurent La Live de Jully. Greuze painted La Live de Jully's portrait in 1759 (the same year he painted *The Wool Winder*), showing him seated on an armchair in the Greek style, which had been designed a few years earlier by Louis-Joseph Le Lorrain. Le Lorrain's severely rectilinear

designs were a radical departure from the highly ornate rococo style that was then popular. Angular forms with repeating patterns, swags of laurel leaves, and applied rosettes and trophies—all borrowed from antiquity—provided the perfect means for an inspired designer and forward-thinking collector to move beyond the increasingly passé swirls of the rococo. Scholars have argued that the inclusion of Greuze's *Portrait of La Live de Jully*—surrounded by a frame in the new style—in the Salon of 1759 helped to popularize the *goût grec* among fashionable art collectors who subsequently influenced the taste of a broader public.

When selecting a suitable antique frame for Greuze's *The Wool Winder*, Frick curators were aware of a small drawing made in 1761 by the French artist Gabriel de Saint-Aubin that documented another painting by Greuze, *The Laundress*, along with its gilded Greek-style frame. In annotated Salon sales catalogues, Saint-Aubin left one of the best records of how contemporary paintings were framed in Paris between 1753 and 1777. His detailed drawings of paintings on display at the Salons of previous years rarely included the frames, but his Salon catalogue of 1761—the year he documented *The Laundress* and its frame—included depictions of

numerous frames, all in the *goût grec*. It is reasonable to assume that it was the startling new profile of these frames that attracted his attention. Most of the frames illustrated by Saint-Aubin in that year were, like the frame of *The Laundress*, rectilinear and topped with trophies, with an upper rail draped with swags of laurel leaves. *The Laundress* (now in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles) and *The Wool Winder*, paintings that each captured a young woman at her chores, were painted within two years of each other at a time when Greuze was closely associated with *La Live de July*. Most likely, the works were framed in a similar fashion. *The Wool Winder's* original frame was lost before 1943, when the painting was purchased by the Frick. When it entered the Collection, it was framed in a provincial example of a loosely rococo style. The recently acquired frame is doubtless more consistent with the style of the painting's original one.

The paintings of James McNeill Whistler are among the latest in date of all of the works represented in The Frick Collection. Just as the unknown Burgundian painter of the *Virgin and Child* had a hand in the making of that frame, Whistler was responsible for the design and decoration of many of the frames on his paintings. Asian objects

heavily influenced his earliest designs; for example, he often borrowed motifs from Japanese and Chinese porcelain. By 1863 he had befriended Dante Gabriel Rossetti and other Pre-Raphaelite artists and had adopted their practice of incorporating decorative roundels and inscribed verse into their frames. Whistler paid great attention to even the minutest of details and had strong opinions about every aspect of the frames he designed. He generally preferred the cool appearance of pale green (low-carat) gold for the gilding and sometimes specified that it be applied directly to the wood without a preparatory layer of gesso, allowing the grain to show through. "You will notice," he wrote in 1873 to his patron George A. Lucas, "that my frames I have designed as carefully as my pictures and thus they form as important a part as any of the rest of the work." Henry Clay Frick must have appreciated the successful union of frame and painting created by Whistler, for, of the five canvases he acquired by the artist, he retained all of Whistler's frames.—*Joseph Godla, Conservator*

The Frick Collection is grateful to the Institute of Museum and Library Services, which provided a generous grant to fund a yearlong survey of the more than 150 frames in the museum's permanent collection. Together with experts in the fields of frames and gilding, members of the Frick's conservation department examined and documented the materials, gilding techniques, and construction methods of each frame.



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