


Hidden in Plain View

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By Timothy Holton

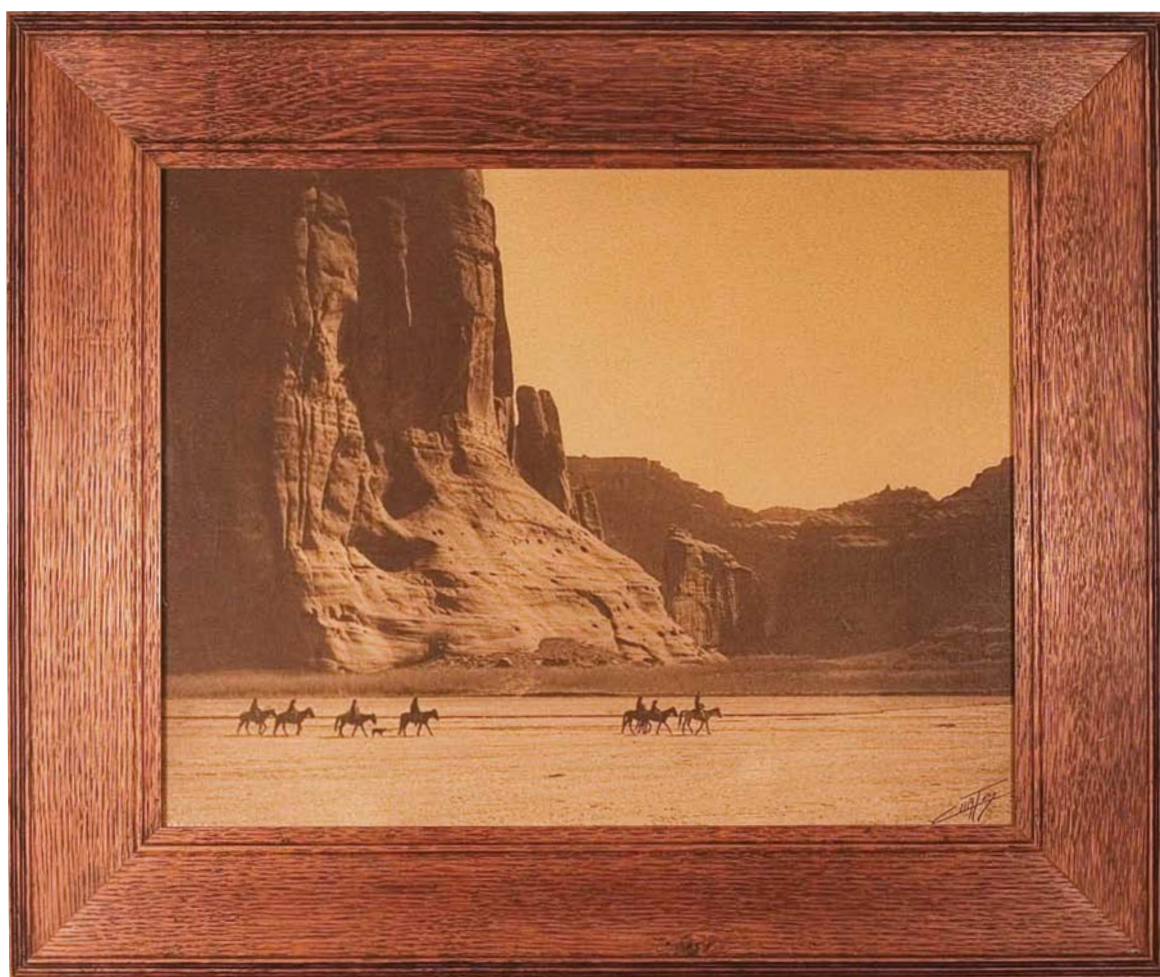


Open any issue of Gustav Stickley's magazine *The Craftsman*, and you are likely to see interiors featuring prints or photographs framed, not in elaborately carved and gilded edgings, but in plain, self-effacing oak. Today, we accept frames of this type as the signature picture treatment of the Arts and Crafts movement, without giving them much thought. Yet they were as reflective of design reform ideals as other, better-known artifacts of the movement, celebrating the vernacular spirit of the popular art of pre-industrial society that William Morris and others found so inspiring. Like the work of British artisans and architects such as Phillip Webb, M. H. Baillie Scott, C. R. Ashbee and Ernest Gimson, these humble frames had roots in the Middle Ages, a time when the vast majority of structures and furnishings in northern Europe and the British Isles were oak. Although it had fallen out of favor by Victorian times, framing in oak enjoyed a great revival at the end of the 19th century thanks to the wide availability of quarter-sawn moldings. The public embraced the effect of a subtly-shaped dark oak frame designed to protect and enhance, not show off and sell, the picture.

Relatively inexpensive, such frames became especially popular for prints, lithographs, and photos—that is, for the more commonplace, often mass-produced pictures found in average homes (though painters as well often realized that dark oak offered aesthetic advantages as a setting for their work). And yet, common as these frames were, their true significance is little understood, and their full story is yet to be told.

Strong Ancient Roots

“For ten thousand years oak was the prime resource of what was to become the Western world,” writes William Bryant Logan in *Oak: The Frame of Civilization*. “Through *Dru-Wid*, ‘oak knowledge,’



Alon G. Burch

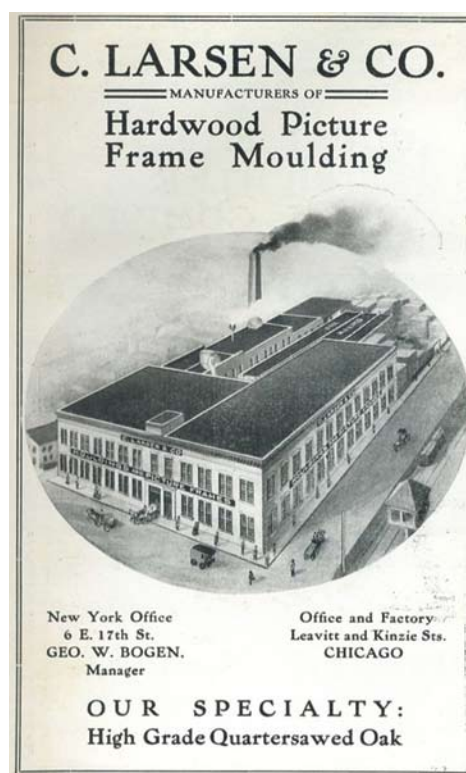
Above Edward S. Curtis, celebrated for his photographs of Native Americans, chose unadorned oak frames for his pictures such as *Canyon de Chelly*, 1904.

Right This 1906 molding manufacturer's ad suggests the popularity of "High Grade Quartersawed Oak" frames.

Opposite top Fine beading and other elements were often used to accent the broad, plain expanses characteristic of turn-of-the-century oak frames. *Photo by Timothy Holton.*

Opposite bottom In the turn-of-the-century oak frame, overall forms, like the ogee profile here, are typically flattened out and pleasingly subtle. *Photo by Timothy Holton.*

humans learned to make homes and roads, ships and shoes, settles and bedsteads, harnesses and reins, wagons and plows, pans and tunics, swords and ink... [T]he oak wood was the sustainer of people's lives." It was also likely to be the material from which they built. The first picture frames were not the applied decorative edgings we know today, but structural oak posts and beams framing murals that decorated the plaster between these timbers.



Timothy Holton.



Above top Wide oak frames were often used for prized family photos.

Above bottom Contemporary painter Robert Flanary uses period oak frames as settings for his oil landscapes.

For hundreds of years, oak remained the wood of choice to protect and honor pictures—even after the rise of easel painting, when pictures, no longer an actual part of the wall, were framed in decorative moldings. Then came a surprisingly specific turning point: before 1630 most frames were oak; after 1630 most were made of other woods, notably ebony and ebonized fruitwoods, but also exotics like mahogany. The reason was the commercial revolution of the early 1600s, which produced

an urban middle class that began purchasing and commissioning easel pictures. For them, oak represented a backward time and a peasant class from which they wanted to distance themselves. The status of owning paintings could be enhanced by framing them in woods that were both more expensive and finer in grain, allowing for more refined carving and detail.

Frames became increasingly showy. Increasingly they were gilded. Yet like the oak frames that had preceded them in popularity, they continued to be constructed of moldings specially made for each picture and joined using mortise-and-tenon joints, lap joints and dovetails. Today, in fact, such joined frames are known as “cabinetmakers’ frames” in recognition of these techniques and of the fact that they were made by furniture-makers along with their other goods.

With the onset of industrialization, however, frames were less and less often made by real woodworkers. The booming Victorian market for picture settings encouraged the use of production molding and nails instead of joinery.

Turn-of-the-Century Revival

The pre-Renaissance oak cabinet-makers’ frame was the product of an age celebrated by Ruskin, Morris, et al, as a time in which the arts were unified, before painting and sculpture became “Art” and all the other arts mere “crafts.” Because cabinet-makers’ frames had been made by the same craftsmen who provided furniture and architectural fittings for homes and public buildings, they blended effortlessly—and helped pictures blend effortlessly—with their setting. Simple and self-effacing, yet expressive of an infinite variety of shapes and patterns, and always reflecting the craftsman’s



Photograph by Timothy Hallon. Courtesy of Richard Peiler and Wanda Westberg.

Above This period painting by Maurice DelMue is perfectly accented by a quartersawn oak frame. The green stain is unusual but not unknown.

natural affection for the beauty of the wood itself, these old frames exemplified the Arts and Crafts ideal of art as an integral aspect of everyday life, not the isolated and precious trophy of the wealthy.

At least to some Victorians, oak cabinetmakers' frames made a clear statement about the troubled condition of the arts. In a time when gold was a deeply-entrenched convention, a frame made of a peasant wood clearly

conveyed a rebellious message. "It would be interesting to inquire," grumbled late-19th-century architect M. H. Baillie Scott,

how far the art of picture painting is coincident with the decline of Art in its widest interpretation, representing the last stronghold of the artist driven from the service of life behind the gilded pale of the picture frame, where he dreams in a little shadow world all his own.



Photograph by Timothy Holton.

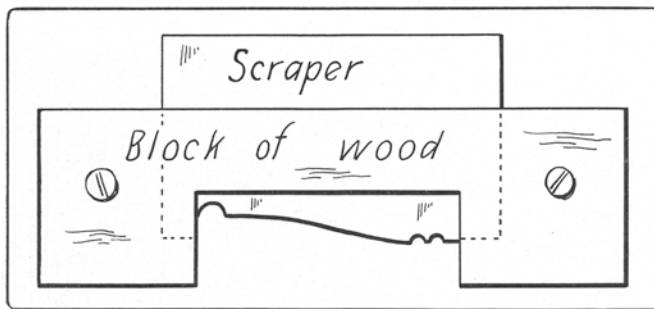
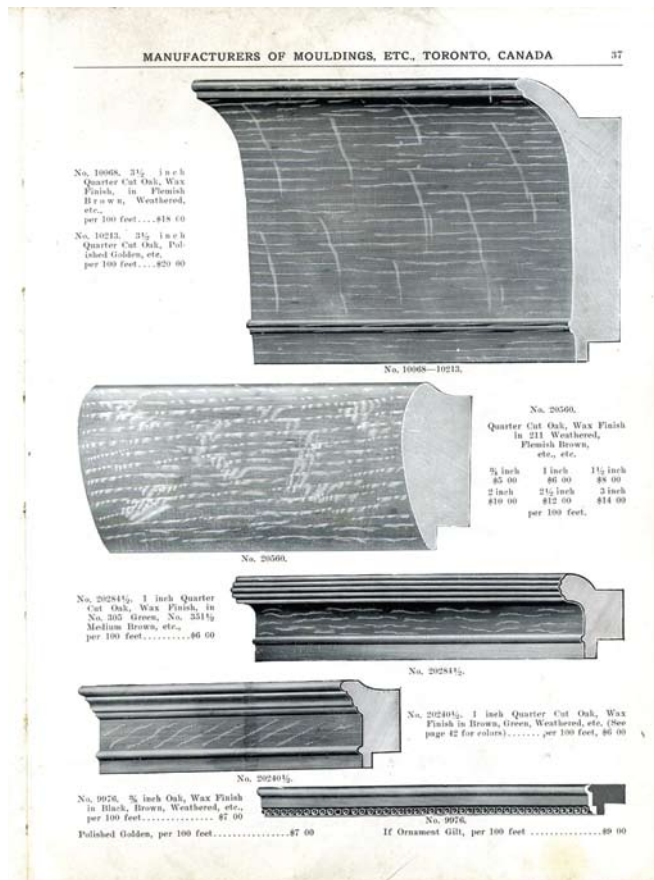


Fig. 91. Improvised molding scraper.

Above left Period frames were distinguished by the complementary use of fine details and broad plain forms. This subtle reverse “cushion” profile is embellished only by the delicate raised cove at the sight edge. **Above center** This compound (composed of 2 moldings) is particularly sensitive and nuanced. **Above right** This simple profile is exceptionally bold and angular for the genre, but is equally vernacular in feeling. *Photography by Timothy Holton.*

Left This illustration from a woodworking manual demonstrates that moldings were not always machine-made and mass-produced, but might be individually produced in craft studios.

Below left A catalogue page from the Phillips Company, Toronto, 1912.



Collection of Timothy Holton.

He argued that oak frames, inspired by the same English vernacular that his houses were, could help bring pictures back to earth, back to their original relationship to architecture and the other arts:

[I]t must be our aim to make the picture merge into the wall surface and appear a part of it. The frame thus becomes the connecting link between it. On a wall panelled in dark oak, for instance, dark oak becomes the best material for the picture frame in most cases.

Presumably, oak would be his wood of choice in a room with oak trim as well.

Being an architect, Baillie Scott was a fervent advocate of the reform tenet that architecture is the mother of all the arts. But his thoughts on framing were also informed by his beliefs about art in relation to life: “The True place of Art is in the service of every-day life, and...should be found fulfilling its function in the home rather than crowded in the museum.” As a type, the humble oak frame—made to connect art

to life, not isolate it—served primarily the home, not the exhibition hall, museum or commercial gallery. Reform-minded artists also recognized that the irregular grain of oak suited the brushwork and often the rustic or natural subject matter of their paintings.

A Tradition Reborn

In the United States, oak furnishings of the Middle Ages represented for manufacturer/designers like Gustav Stickley a deep well of inspiration. Clearly, commercial manufacturers of frame moldings rode the same wave of revived interest in a deeply-felt tradition. The market must have been substantial, judging from the catalogs that survive and the vast number of molding designs they display. Among them are stand-out examples which suggest the hand of exceptional (though so far unknown) designers with genuine and informed appreciation for the richness of the old frames.

Frames from factory moldings were almost always nailed together by the frame shops that ordered them, not joined, as their ancestors were, with true woodworkers' joints. Nevertheless, as at least one manual arts text demonstrates, these profiles could be shaped by hand, and, with a little skill, joined and finished to become true works of handcraft. Unfortunately, market and industrial realities seem to have conspired against any frame-maker who wished to do justice to the cabinetmakers' frame tradition. Framers trying to succeed in business did so by nailing together production molding; framers eager to be taken seriously as artists in their own right followed the path of least resistance and made carved and gilded frames.

Nailed construction aside, however, turn-of-the-century mitered oak frames are well worthy of attention. Much of their beauty lies in the counterpoint between the wild activity of the wood grain—the distinctive ray flake of quarter-sawn white oak—and the restrained though intriguing shapes. Conventional 19th-century frames were based on geometrically correct and rigid forms (coves, ogees, ovolos) and embellishments such as acanthus leaves, typical of the Renaissance interpretation of Greek and



Courtesy of Richard Petlier and Wanda Westberg.

Above California watercolorist Lorenzo Latimer was among many fine pictorial artists who bucked the gilt frame convention and favored oak frames.

Roman classicism. In contrast, the simpler oak frames seem to partake of the Gothic tradition favored by Arts and Crafts adherents like Ruskin, which emphasized a free adaptability that was individual and also harmonized with the adjacent arts. For example, while a classical cove or torus molding element is built on a perfect circle, the turn-of-the-century oak moldings are flattened out to suit the flat surface of the picture. Overall forms are usually very subtle—often so much so that it takes close scrutiny to discover an ever-so-slight slope, ogee, cove or “cushion” (convex) shape. Relatively delicate beads, reeds, ridges, coves and steps are used sparingly but sensitively to complement these plain, smooth expanses.

These austere beautiful moldings reflected the new appreciation for unity and simplicity in framing. As a 1913 *School Arts Magazine* article opined,

With the figured wall paper, gaudy carpets, festooned curtains, and fussy upholstered furniture have gone the ornate frames with diagonal crosspieces at the corner, whips and horseshoes, dog's heads, and mariner's compass decorating a portion of the frame and presumably



giving the keynote to the picture. A few of these may still exist, but there is a more and more thoughtful consideration of the harmony of frame and picture. In all cases it is essential...to aim for unity of design in the complete object.

This concern for unity could be expressed not only in the frame design and the way it fit in with the uncluttered, Mission-inspired interior, but also by framing “close”—that is, without the separating element of matting. A 1906 manual for professional picture framers instructs that “Frames for...photographs...are now principally made of [black and brown stained] oaks...used in most cases close up to the picture without mats.” *House Beautiful* advised in 1902 that “Large photographs...may be framed in broad flat oak or gold moldings, without any mat or margin... [T]he width of the frame makes up for the mat.”

Although a close-framed picture in a wide oak frame is practically a hallmark of the American Arts and Crafts interior, period molding manufacturers have so far escaped serious study, and the designers who worked for them remain largely unknown, talented as many of these designers obviously were. Though easily overlooked, on closer inspection the deceptively-plain turn-of-the-century oak frame becomes an art form in its own right—a product of industry, affordable to all, yet rooted in ancient tradition and the reformist spirit of the Arts and Crafts.

A framer for more than 30 years, Timothy Holton carries on the oak cabinetmaker's frame tradition as owner of Holton Studio Frame-Makers in Emeryville, CA. He would especially like to thank Robert Flanary for assistance with this article.

Above left This 1900 photograph by Edward S. Curtis is believed to be in the original frame Curtis chose for it.

Left In 1913, *School Arts Magazine* advocated framing close in dark oak frames, and showed as an example a photograph by Wallace Nutting.

GOOD IDEAS

FROM EVERYWHERE

mony in tonality between frame, mat, and picture, and to aim for unity of design in the completed object.

For a most pleasing effect the pictures in a room should relate to the background, or the other way about. A plain side wall is vastly preferable to a figured one. The figured paper is a picture in itself, and when we hang pictures upon it we are simply hanging one picture upon another.

The wood for the frame may sometimes be chosen to harmonize with the color scheme of a room, being either dominant or complementary, that is, provided it will also harmonize with the picture, and in such case it is necessary to think of the color of various woods. For example, mahogany and cherry are red violet; antique oak is red orange, very neutral; Flemish oak is blue green; golden oak is yellow orange; bird's-eye maple and maple are yellow neutralized, or yellow orange.

After a picture is well framed its effect may be marred by improper hanging. Pictures should be hung flat, with the screw eyes not far from the upper molding, so that they become a part of the wall upon which they hang instead of standing out at an angle. Unless a picture is hung with screws put directly into the wall, so that no wires show, two picture hooks should be used so that the wires are parallel with the sides of the picture instead of focusing at an angle on the picture molding. Begin by twisting the wire around itself just below one of the picture hooks, carry it down through one of the screw eyes, back of the picture, through the other screw eye, and up to the second hook, and fasten. If the process is started at the screw eye instead of at the hook it is very difficult to adjust the height of the picture and to keep it

standing. In class-rooms this cannot be done. There they should be hung as low as possible, but should never rest upon the upper ledge of the blackboard. About two inches above it is a good



A California Oak, a photograph from nature by Wallace Nutting. A strong, rugged frame is demanded by the rugged, massive tree.

distance. In kindergartens, if there are blackboards, it is well to cover them with burlap and hang the pictures upon this background, where they can be more easily seen by the little people.

Most pictures are at their best under a side-light, but of course all pictures cannot be hung where they can receive this. The more advantageous light would better be given to those which are filled with detail or have subtle gradations and delicate tones of light and shade, and leave to the less fortunate spaces the pictures having large, simple masses and strong contrasts. A picture



"The Canterbury Pilgrimage," by Edwin A. Abbey. A pleasing way of breaking a long panel picture. A narrow frame because of small figures.

level, and besides this the wire will pull the picture hooks toward each other. Pictures should be hung as nearly as possible opposite the level of the eye of a person when

with a marked effect of light coming from one side is most effective where the actual illumination corresponds with that represented in the picture. The size of the wall space should be carefully

Framing Close

Early-20th-century art magazines advocated framing “close”—that is, without a mat that would visually separate the picture from its frame. At that time, however, mats were used—or not—for strictly aesthetic reasons. Today, we know mats also help preserve artwork by 1) separating it from the glass, thereby protecting it from any condensation, and 2) allowing us to crop down to the portion of the artwork we want to display without cutting or folding the borders, preserving the integrity of the entire work, and therefore its value.

To frame close and still use a mat, you need to hide the mat by taking advantage of the generous width of the two-to-four-inch frames generally used in this approach. The rabbet of the frame is simply cut wide, allowing for a narrow mat—called a “gasket” mat—to be hidden underneath it, with the bevel of the mat used in reverse from its conventional orientation sloping down to the picture. Most often we make the rabbet one inch wide to accommodate a 7/8-inch-wide gasket mat, but the rabbet can be any width as long as it leaves enough substance to make a strong joint at the corners. (Beware that some moldings are thinner an inch from the sight edge, so that cutting a one-inch-wide rabbet might cut through the molding.) For additional protection, line the rabbet with frame sealing tape, a metal tape which buffers the paper from acids in the wooden frame.

Top right Framing “close” (without a mat), in oak, and without showing a border, became the distinctive look of the circa-1910 period. That look is replicated here with a modern frame, a Mountain Hawk Prints limited-edition photogravure of Edward S. Curtis’s 1904 photograph *Canyon de Chelly*, and a hidden mat to protect the artwork.

Middle right Separating a picture visually from its frame, either with matting, or (as here) by showing margins, interferes with a sense of unity of the artwork with its setting and produces a very different effect from the approach used above.

Right The effect of close framing can be achieved with modern moldings by using a hidden or “gasket” mat to buffer the art from the glass. The rabbet is cut wide to accommodate a slightly narrower mat, and sealed with frame sealing tape to insulate the print from acids in the wooden frame.



David Belda



Timothy Holton.



Timothy Holton.