

A JOINER'S ART: FRAME MAKING AS WOODWORKING

PART 1

Dive into the fascinating origins of picture framing, and discover how understanding this history can elevate your framing practices today.

By Timothy Holton

In 1632, the London Court of Aldermen arbitrated a dispute—essentially a turf war—between the two great trade guilds responsible for things built out of wood. The court laid down what sorts of items each guild and profession was entitled to make. What's interesting is that the primary criterion was how the sorts of products each guild made were put together. The carpenters' realm of wooden goods included those "boarded and nailed together." (They were forbidden from using glue.) The other group held rights over most cabinetry, furniture and finished woodwork. The court's list of items suitable for that trade began with Item 1, bedsteads; Item 2, "chayres" and "stooles"; item 3, tables "made with mortises and tennants"; item 5 included chests and cabinets "duftalled." With such emphasis on the mortise-and-tenon and dovetail joinery that typified the guild's products, these artisans were known as joiners.

What may surprise the modern reader, though, is that number 15 on the court's list of items made by the joiner's guild was "All frames for picturs."



● Trevor Davis with an 8"-wide carved cassetta frame in stained quarter-sawn white oak.

The significance of this history is that it reminds us that before the industrial revolution, picture frames were treated as what we today call fine woodworking, and were made by the same artisans who built skillfully joined and sturdy furnishings. Since they were also making frame-and-panel cabinets and wainscoting as well as windows and doors, it stands to reason that they made the frames to go around pictures. Joiners' work was often quite refined and decorative: item 19 on the court's list was "All carved works either raised or cut through or sunck in..."

This is the tradition frame historians usually call cabinetmaker's frames, but that I prefer to call joiner's frames. Most would regard its pinnacle to be in the ebony and ebonized fruitwood frames of the Dutch Golden Age, but to fully appreciate the tradition, we have to go back the extraordinarily well built and architectural supports and frames used by the early Netherland-



● Mortise and tenon frame in stained quarter-sawn white oak.



● Parts for a rain sill frame modeled after Northern Renaissance master cabinetmaker's frames.

ish painters such as Jan Van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden. Scholars have identified six categories of joint types used in these constructions.

In any case, the first picture framers were those skilled woodworkers called joiners. And because joiners made their frames in relatively small workshops employed directly by the public, their workshops were the first picture frame shops.

We may regard such history as simply a curiosity of little significance today. Looking back on those seventeenth-century joiner's workshops, we may look down on their production methods as obsolete, superseded by our modern machinery, mass production, and sophis-



● The rain sill frame's top corners go together with a classic bridled miter.

ticated distribution systems—all the great efficiencies that we moderns pride ourselves on, and that the framing industry depends upon and takes for granted. Today we make frames faster and cheaper; and as consumers, we have access to moldings and frames from all over the world at affordable prices. Why would we want to go back to outmoded, bygone ways?

The point of this series of articles is to demonstrate that, far from being a dead tradition with nothing to offer today's picture framers, those old roots offer timeless methods that are eternally vital to the art of the frame (as the trees they're made of are eternally vital to human life and civilization). They are not only the historical background of the art, they are the timeless basis



● With a mortise and tenon joint, a side meets the bottom rail, or sill. and source of its vitality. My primary goals are, first, to foster appreciation of the well-crafted hardwood picture frame—the joiner's frame; and second, to encourage those framers with the capacity and interest to develop traditional woodworking skills, and to take up this living tradition of the joiner's frame. This is not easy. But for those able to dedicate themselves to it, I believe a display of well-made frames made in-house can tremendously enhance your business.

Although I'm now in my 50th year as a picture framer, when I started my own business more than 30 years ago, I set it up as a furniture-making wood shop offering furniture as well as frames. Taking the motto, "Reviving the Art and Craft of Framing Pictures," we broke with the conventional modern frame shop model and



● As the heart of the joiner's art, joinery is a natural point of decorative embellishment.

instead returned to the vital inspiration of the joiner's frame tradition, making every frame ourselves, starting with hardwood lumber.

Clearly, we chose to do things the hard way, but it's a choice I've never regretted. Nothing has been more important to the creative vitality of the business than this fundamental approach of frame making as wood-

working. Every job proves to me the veracity of our core principle that a picture can only be well-framed if it's in a well-made frame.

There are three things necessary to the quality and beauty of a frame: The first is the frame's most basic purpose: to serve the picture—to enhance, complement and harmonize with it; and to serve the customer and her home. Nothing we make alone is as beautiful as what we make in service to and cooperation with others.

Second, the well-made frame honors the wood it's made of. The inherent beauty of the wood, treated to enhance that inherent beauty, is subordinate to all shaping and detail we add. Nothing we make is as beautiful as the natural materials we use in our work.

And third, the well-made frame is carefully crafted. Nothing we make is as beautiful as the care with which we make it—the care in handling nature's materials and in forming and putting them together to create the frame.

In a 1916 book on woodworking, William Noyes opened a chapter on making frames with the sage advice that:

"The first thing to do in making a picture frame is to select the picture, because such details as the use of a mat, the

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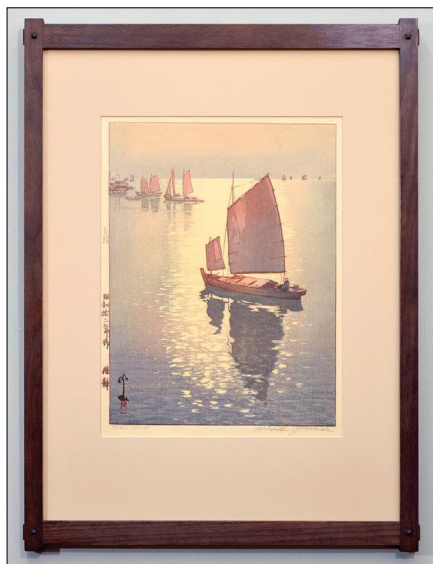
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size, proportion, tone and decoration of the frame, all depend upon the character of the picture. Furthermore, the picture should be one well worth framing. To select a picture that is not beautiful, is but to honor what should be ignored. To be able to frame good pictures well, then, is the ideal to be kept in mind in learning to make picture frames."

In addition to endorsing good craftsmanship in the frame, Professor Noyes underscores our first necessity: that a frame is an empty thing, and that its sole purpose is to serve the picture, and that every element in its design should be justified by the picture and the frame's purpose of enhancing and complementing it. But he also calls for a respect for the sacrifice of labor that goes in to framing a picture well—and that it's not a sacrifice to be wasted on unworthy pictures. There's no need to stray into the treacherous territory of what makes a picture worth framing. The point here is that, with the possible exception of the novice woodworker looking for any old picture that gives him an excuse to try his hand at frame making, we frame those pictures that are worthy of the sacrifice of the careful, intelligent effort required to make a frame well.

Among all things people create, the most worthy pictures—the ones we're most likely to frame—are extraordinarily worthy. That is precisely why people have honored and exalted them with extraordinary architectural settings—frames that are nothing less than architecture at its most refined. The special significance pictures embody is what makes the art of the frame worthy of our best efforts. So as we start out on this study of the art of how to frame a picture, understanding that our first duty as frame makers is to serve the picture, we're wise to frame the question, just



● A fine walnut mortise and tenon frame houses a woodblock print by Hiroshi Yoshida.



● A splined-corner frame for a print by Aleutian artist Thomas Stream.



● The model's hair in Paul Jacoulet's "Chagrin d'Amour" inspired the corners of this frame.

what is a picture? And what makes a picture worthy of the intelligent effort—the craftsmanship—that goes in to the well-made frame?

Pictures are the purest representations of our values, of matters that matter most—things we most care about. They embody the quality that makes perceiving different from simply seeing. Innumerable things pass before our eyes, but we only perceive those things we stop to give our attention to. The attention of the plein air painter driving through the countryside is caught by something that she's moved to capture on canvas. It says to her: "Consider this—this matters—attend to this." And then, through her own sensibilities and artistic powers, she paints a picture that re-presents for the enjoyment and edification of others the same truth. The pictures and their subject matter that we choose to display in our homes to look at every day, for our children to grow up seeing every day, matter—matter as things worthy of attending to in our lives.

But they only truly matter if the relationships we create with them matter—relationships of care. Those relationships we materially express and embody in the architecture of the well-made frame.

The tradition of joiners' frames—frames soundly crafted with traditional joinery and other tried-and-true woodworking techniques—speaks directly to the whole reason we frame pictures. The frame embodies the wider world's attending to the picture. We honor those matters we care most about by giving them thoughtfully and carefully made, substantial, architectural place in our lives, upholding them before our eyes so that we may attend to what they represent.

A picture, born of an artist's ephemeral mental images—based on observations, memories, and dreams—and then given a visible, tangible expression on paper or canvas, is not complete until it finds a real place and a real relationship to the world. There it has a chance of effecting the world. That substantial, architectural place is provided by the frame. It is, appropriately enough, the joiner's art that lets the picture join the world.

Frames have frequently been used to separate pictures from their surroundings. It's only coincidence that the tradition of frames that best corrects this misguided treatment of pictures in the modern world was established by workmen called joiners. But that fortuitous coincidence is there to remind us, as we explore frame making as woodworking, what makes the art worthy of our time and effort.

As woodworking goes, hardly anything is easier to make than a basic picture frame. A frame can be as simple as you like—a plain, flat molding joined with (splined) mitered corners—but as long as it meets our three criteria it will be pleasing and beautiful and at-

tract our attention and, most important of all, cultivate our care for pictures and their subjects, those matters that matter most. Naturally constrained by love of the inherent beauty of wood and good craftsmanship, the joiner's frame tradition is a humble one, suited to the proper, subordinate role of the picture frame; an art of serving pictures, helping them serve our daily lives.

In any case, let there be no doubt that the art of the joiner's frame is an art in the truest sense. I refer any skeptics to the Merriam-Webster dictionary's entry for the word "art," which tells us that the word is "originally from the Latin *ar-*, to join, fit together." **PFM**



Timothy Holton

Timothy Holton is the owner of Holton Studio Frame-Makers in Berkeley, CA. A native Californian inspired by the art and architecture of his home state, Tim began his career in framing at Storey Framing in 1975. After earning a history degree and a brief career in live theater, Tim returned his attention to framing, honing the joining and carving skills that distinguish his work. After the Oakland Museum's contemporary artisan gallery displayed his work in 1993, he was spurred to open his own business, which now specializes in hand-carved hardwood frames built entirely in-house. Tim lives in Berkeley with his wife, Stephanie McCoy. They have an adult daughter, Ella.





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