

# Time Frame

compiled by Mark Guthrie

*Editor's Note: The history of the picture frame and the craft of framing is as diverse as it is long. Each issue, PFM will explore that history as we feature a prominent person in our industry and their discussions with Mark Guthrie about the period styles, artistic movements, innovations, and frames they find most significant. Topics will run the gamut in terms of era or impact, and it is our hope that "Time Frame" will broaden the understanding of the role of fine frames in history.*

Post-WWII demand for fine frames was met with reproductions (like these, a Louis XV-style and 18th century English style from Abe Munn Picture Frames) created with the then-recent technology of the multiple-head spindle carving machine. (Photos by Eric Miller.)



*Jake Munn, President of Abe Munn Picture Frames, Inc., Long Island City, New York, talks about the multiple-head spindle carving machine and the changes it brought to the manufacture of fine frames.*

**MG:** Jake, you've chosen to discuss the effect that this machinery had in bringing the antique reproduction picture frame business to the US. When was the multiple-head spindle-carving machine invented?

**JM:** The multiple-head spindle carvers we have in our possession were all built in the late 1940s to early 1950s; however, the machinery was developed much earlier, in the 1900s, for the furniture industry. Basically, they were used then (and still are today) for any carved wood components: legs, curved fronts, stretcher bars for chairs—anything that has to be carved in the round with multiple dimensions to the detail rather than done on a lathe.

**MG:** Take a moment to explain the difference between spindle

carving and lathe carving.

**JM:** On a lathe, there is a rotary motion of the item you want to create. There are copy lathes where you have a pin (or arm) following an original that you are duplicating, but the object being carved is spinning. In the case of the multiple-head carving machine, the wood is stationary and a spinning carving bit cuts through it.

**MG:** So what are the details of set-up and production?

**JM:** The machines are, basically, duplicating carving machines. A model (or original) is put into the center. Historically, models were hand-carved out of maple or another very hard wood. The blanks (or blocks of raw wood) are put on either side of the model. We have machines with 16-head or

24-head carvers, each head representing one cutter; they produce 16 or 24 copies of the model. There are machines that have as many as 60-head carvers, but those machines are either in the Carolinas (serving the High Point trade) or in Minnesota (where a lot of woodworking is done).

**MG:** So the machine is a pantograph—it has a mechanism to follow, and then copy, the original pattern.

**JM:** Yes. And similar machines usually have the ability to enlarge or reduce the detail. Our machines don't necessarily do that, although one of the machines can be rigged to make the exact opposite of what you are carving. If, for instance, you had a chair leg that was curved to the left, this machine could

carve eight legs left and eight legs right. We don't have it set up for that—we have it set up for picture frame pieces. But we could, if we needed to, set up for half the arc of a mirror frame that was the left side of an oval and then generate the right side. We don't generally do that because of the volume necessary to warrant it—but we could.

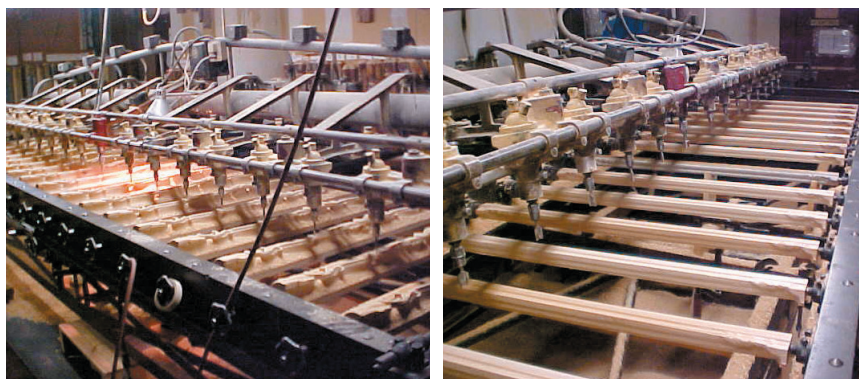
**MG:** I have seen these machines in action many times and I'm always impressed by the fact that it is still very much an early 20th-century, Industrial Age, process. Have there been advances in technology?

**JM:** Sure. Some of the newer machines from Italy are computerized. But most of those machines are not used in the picture frame trade.

**MG:** What brought about the use of these machines?

**JM:** The multiple-head spindle carver was brought into the picture frame industry and into Abe Munn Picture Frames primarily because of the need for frames after World War II. If you remember your history, you know that the Nazis occupied much of Europe during the war, and they were notorious for confiscating art—not just from private collectors, but from museums and the governments—wherever they went. In many instances, they didn't want to carry the frames back to Germany, so they would cut the paintings out of the frames or off the stretchers, roll them up, and send them off by the trainload. After the war, many of

these paintings were found in the mines and tunnels of Germany along with thousands of other valuables. When the art was recovered from Germany, it was as if it had been orphaned; the art became available for purchase. And at the end of World War II, you had the US coming into its prime, and fine art goes where the wealth is. There were a number of dealers in the US that were European-born and had emigrated just prior to the war; others had been born here a generation earlier. They had connections



*Two views of the multiple-head spindle carving machine. It allows numerous frame sides to be carved at once by following one original.*

in Europe and served as the conduit for the movement of this art into the United States. The art was easier to move than the frame, so the antique frames stayed in Europe and the paintings ended up here, primarily in New York. They needed to be restored, re-stretched, and framed. And if you are talking about a painting worth many thousands of dollars, you want to have a frame that, aesthetically, looks like it belongs to the art. This created a demand for better frames.

**MG:** Antique frames or reproduction frames?

**JM:** Antique frames were available, but they were expensive. For collectors and museums at that time, there seemed to be a certain

limit—even when it came to reframing old masterworks. Once you've invested in buying a painting, and then invested in restoring that painting, your budget is less concerned with the value of the frame. The thinking at the time was that it was probably just as good to put a reproduction frame on—at a substantially lesser cost. This created a demand for reproduction...

**MG:** ...which brings us right back to the machine.

**JM:** Right. Traditionally, a master would carve a reproduction frame from a block of wood, from scratch. The spindle carving machine allowed for a different approach—you needed to carve only one master, or to take an original antique frame and

use that as the master—and put that in the machine to create 16 duplicates of one side. The same craftsmanship was there, but the machine allowed a number of opportunities to replicate all of the Louis', many of the Italian, Spanish, and English styles, and some Austrian-type frames as well. It allowed you to make four frames [from the 16 sides].

**MG:** Four square frames.

**JM:** All 16 pieces would be the same length; yes. Now you would have to take those and alter them to the appropriate size. Alteration wasn't a big secret—frames had been altered for 200 or 300 years. If you go into any good museum you'll find antique frames, and if

you look very closely, you'll see cut marks, usually where the designs don't quite match up.

**MG:** How did this technology reach the average framer?

**JM:** Most of the framers of the early 1950s did not own their own machine. There were freelance factories with one or two of these machines

that serviced not only the framing industry but also the furniture industry. They were job shops; they would carve out whatever was necessary. Most framers needed one or two styles once in a while. Only the better shops needed to have a more readily available source for carved product. Of those shops, some owned their own machines or owned their own company to produce the carvings. The capacity of their "factories" was devoted, almost exclusively, to their own production.

**MG:** Can you list some of those shops?

**JM:** Well, APF had their own machine; I don't know if they still have it. The Julius Lowy Company, with my father [Abe Munn], bought a company that owned two machines.

**MG:** They acquired the company jointly? What was its name?

**JM:** When acquired, it was renamed Carved Frames, Incorporated. There was a guy in upper Manhattan who owned a production house and had a number of models. (We know that they were doing other work because we have some of their old models and



*Repeated passes allow for greater detail to be carved each time.*



product that have nothing to do with picture frames—some furniture parts, some sculptural parts.) The owner of Julius Lowy at the time was Hilliad Shar (father of Larry Shar, the current owner). He and my father, Abe, had been working together since about 1957, 1958. Both of their business has been using this production house to supply them with parts. When they heard that the owner was going to close-up shop and retire, they bought the business, formed the new company (sometime in the late 1960s) and moved it across the street from Abe Munn Picture Frames, on Broadway.

**MG:** Who ran the company?

**JM:** Abe was the partner-in-charge. Eventually, the company was dissolved and both companies divided up the equipment, with one machine going to each. My understanding is that Lowy rarely used their machine. Around 1980, we acquired a lot of the manufacturing capabilities from Lowy—bought the other machine from them, brought it here, and continue to operate it today. Since that time we've purchased two others, so now we have four

multiple-head spindle carvers: one 24-head and three 16-head machines. **MG:** What's involved in becoming proficient in the operation and maintenance of these machines? **JM:** First of all, the parts for these machines are virtually non-existent. If there are parts available, they are hard to come by. We fabricate our own replacement parts. In terms of the operator, the

gentleman who retired only a year and a half ago, Tomas, was hired by my father when he acquired the original company. He was with us for about 38 years; he had been trained by the foreman of the old company. He trained my father in the operation of the machine and has, down the years, trained other people. It takes about a year; you need to be a fairly good woodworker with lots of upper-body strength. The first carving bit, called the "hogging-head," takes out the major portion of the wood, rendering the basic shape of what you are trying to carve. Multiply that by 16 and you have to be pretty strong to keep things steady. **MG:** How long does it take to completely carve 16 pieces? **JM:** First there's the set up: pulling the lumber, cross-cutting it, ripping it, dressing it, gluing it up, measuring it properly so that it can go into the machine, then getting it into the machine. Sixteen individual blocks of wood have to be set into the machine, all exactly in the same position, so that when the cutters go over them, they are cutting in the same place. That takes about eight hours. A good

carver, in an eight-hour shift, should be able to “hog-out” 16 pieces. Then you go to slightly smaller cutters and repeat the whole operation—another eight hours. One last time (if you’re lucky) with a still smaller bit—another eight hours. In total, you’re looking at 32 to 40 hours to produce 16 “rough-carved” pieces that are ready for re-sizing, gessoing, re-cutting (i.e. repairer), gilding, and finishing.

**MG:** Maybe this will help explain why it can take so long to get a carved frame produced.

**JM:** We try to inventory carved pieces in quantities that anticipate demand. That way, we can get frames out in three to four weeks. But if we have to start from scratch, it could take from six to eight weeks.

**MG:** When you talk about “rough carved,” it really is just that—roughly carved.

**JM:** If you take an antique Louis XIV period and wash off all the gold and gesso and get down to the raw wood, you’ll find that the carving isn’t very fine. They weren’t foolish—they didn’t want to waste their time; they knew what the process was. They did a rough carving [in the wood], then progressed to the gesso and repairer carving [with finer detail]. We are being faithful to the original process when we carve the wood out in a rather rough way, then gesso the frame and re-carve it by hand.

**MG:** I wonder if you have ever made a full count of the models that you have—individual styles you can carve.

**JM:** I made a count at one point—we had to determine a replacement value for insurance purposes. I don’t remember the number, but it was over 1500 models.

**MG:** How do you replace them?

**JM:** We can’t. But one of the things we do is maintain the models and the

molds of the original carvings in different locations or floors in our building. Our building is an eight-story, concrete structure with sprinklers throughout. When you add up the molds and models, we have a lot to keep track of.

**MG:** And the molds are for...?

**JM:** We have carved wood models; these are the oldest. They wear very quickly during the carving process because a metal stylus must pass over every bit of detail at least three times in each production run. What we do now is to take a mold of an actual antique or one of our own carvings and make a plaster cast of it (because of its tendency to shrink is less, therefore maintaining a truer copy). We then create a working model in resin, which

holds the detail better and has a longer life span than wood. This is a cumbersome process, but we find it keeps the end product looking consistent, like the original. [The alternative is to only] work with wood models. The result is that as your wood model wears out, you can only replace it with a copy. And when you make copies of copies, pretty soon the detail and proportion are nothing like the

original. We are always going back to the original. In my freshman year of architectural school, I was given a project: I was told to draw a house. So I began to draw, and the professor looked over my shoulder and said, “Oh, Frank Lloyd Wright.” And I said, “Who?” Well, he stopped me and told me to go to the library and get

a couple of books on Wright. When I got the books and came back to my drafting table, I saw the similarities. His words were, “If you’re going to copy something, copy the original.” He was referring to all the tract builder homes I had seen in my youth. He was right: if you want to copy correctly, you always go back to the original.



*Just a few of the original models in the inventory of Abe Munn Picture Frames used in their multiple-head spindle carving machines.*



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