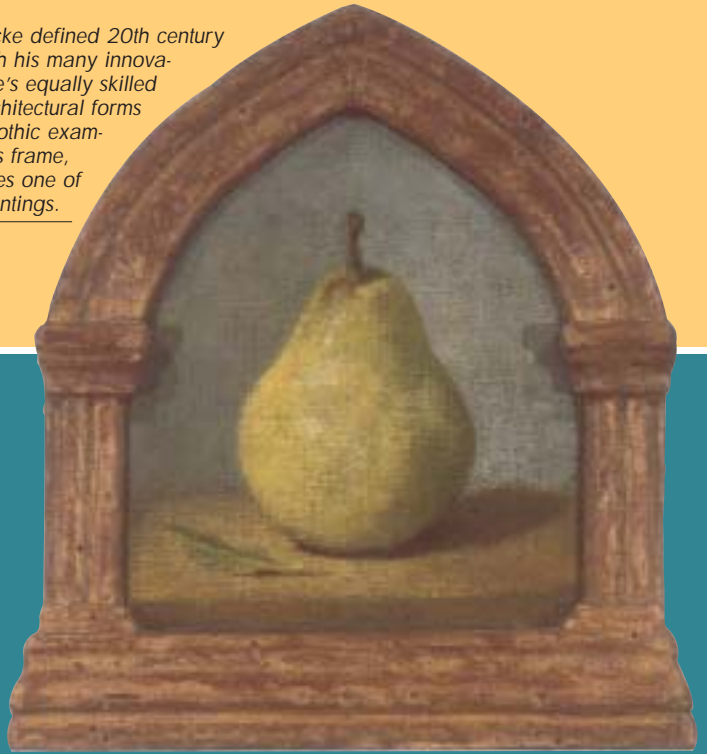


Time Frame

compiled by Mark Guthrie

Robert Kulicke defined 20th century framing with his many innovations, but he's equally skilled at using architectural forms to create Gothic examples like this frame, which houses one of his own paintings.



Editor's Note: The history of the picture frame and the craft of framing is as diverse as it is long. Over the past year, PFM has explored that history as we featured a prominent person in our industry and their discussions with writer Mark Guthrie about the period styles, artistic movements, innovations, and frames they find most significant. Topics have 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. This month marks the last installment of "Time Frame." Many thanks to Mark Guthrie and those who have participated.

The name Robert Kulicke has already appeared in this column a handful of times. Jakob Guttman credited Mr. Kulicke for the revitalization of frame making in America. Marty Horowitz referred to his observation of the similarity between 17th century French and 20th century American frame styles. Paul MacFarland mentioned his views on current trends within the industry.

If you aren't already aware of Robert Kulicke's numerous writings and framing innovations, and of the incredible contributions this gentleman has made to all of our working lives—then just consider this: If you have ever assembled an aluminum frame for a poster, framed a painting in a float frame, or fit a photograph into a Plexiglas box, Mr. Kulicke was there first.

As we began our discussion, he was proud to report that he is nearly 80 years of age and now devotes much of his time to his first love, painting. He has apparently turned toward reflection as well. The truths that he shared with me are musings from his lifetime of painting, frame making and designing, from his personal and business experiences—all in an honest reflection of his achievements and regrets. We are fortunate to have such a thinker in our midst.

Robert Kulicke: The role of the frame designer is to use the forms of the architect to serve the painter. The single function of a picture frame is to present a work of art in the most sympathetic possible manner.

Each period and school of painters produced its own correct and wonderfully logical frame designs. Consider the frame designs of Renaissance Venice. Venetian painting of the 16th

century is characterized by a primary concern for shimmering color and light. Venetian frames reflect this: they are multi-faceted carvings, gilded and polychromed so that the light reflecting off of the carved gold surface shimmers and harmonizes with the painting. At the same time, the gold and the architecture of the frame both contrast and contain the painting. There is, in every successful frame design, the duality of both

harmony and contrast.

Modern frame design began with the so-called Mondrian Platform Frame, a masterpiece of presentation design. No artisan could have designed this frame, no painter either; even the great Piet Mondrian was incapable of the objectivity required to arrive at this simple architectural concept. It was the Swiss architect Le Corbusier who designed the frame for Mondrian around 1920.

It consists of a strip element and a platform element. The strip is butted, post and lintel (not mitred), and protrudes about 1/8" to protect the painting. It is nailed to the stretcher. The platform element—four or so inches wide—is mitred and joined, then attached to the painting from the back by screws going into the stretcher.

The frame appears to be white, but it is actually off-white to contain the pure white of the painting. The function of the strip is to protect and delineate the picture; the function of the platform is to surround the picture with a completely neutral island to force the eye inward to the painting. This was necessary in the Twenties because most interiors were either paneled wood, dark colors, or decorative wallpapers.

After World War I, the younger painters of America and Europe began nailing strips of lumberyard lath directly to their canvas stretchers, painting the strips white or gray. They thought they were eliminating the picture frame, but they were actually inventing the principle element and basic form for all mainstream 20th century frame designs for non-realistic paintings.

When I set up my shop in New York in 1951, I began

working with the painters of the emerging New York School, the Abstract Expressionists, and developing for them the water gilded and furniture wood shapes and various gold and fine wood band frames. In 1953, I designed the float frame (as it is now called) for Knoll Associates in New York.

After the many forms of parcel gilded walnut and mahogany strip frames, and the band frames, I began to realize that the classic 20th century picture frame would have to be welded, polished metal. Abstract Expressionist paintings needed a frame elegant enough, narrow enough, and strong enough for the powerful art of Franz Kline, William DeKooning, and Robert Motherwell. Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell especially were insisting on narrower and narrower mouldings for their work and I decided that only welded aluminum would be strong enough and light enough for the job.

As I experimented with this problem, Porter McCrae of the Museum of Modern Art [in New York City] contacted me about developing a welded metal frame with Plexiglas for their travelling exhibits. Such a frame would satisfy their aesthetic requirements and at the same time control their escalating insurance

costs. For the next year and a half, I devoted most of my time to this project.

I finally succeeded in designing and developing a welded polished aluminum frame of which I am still enormously proud. It is aesthetically based on Mies Van der Rohe's Barcelona Chair of 1928, a masterpiece of 20th-century design and craftsmanship in steel and leather. (Van der Rohe's chair was designed in 1928—my frame not until 1960—an indication of how behind the architect the frame designer can be.)

Six months after I introduced my frame on the New York art market, I received a letter from Van der Rohe's assistant conveying "the Master's congratulations on [my] beautiful frame" and ordering more than two hundred for a building he was doing. I shall never forget walking home at night and feeling like I had just been awarded a Doctorate by Mies Van der Rohe himself. ■

This month on the PFM website, you can find information about: Robert Kulicke's Lucite Box frame design, his thoughts on eclectic framing and on painting, as well as images of the Lucite Box frame, the Barcelona chair, and another Kulicke painting in a Kulicke frame.



Mark Guthrie, CPF is a 25-year veteran of the framing industry and owner of ÆDICULE in San Francisco, CA. He provides consultation services to industry manufacturers and retailers, and has served as V.P. of Sales for Abe Munn Picture Frames in New York City. His background also includes management of multi-store operations and ownership of Guthrie's Picture Framing in Houston, TX. He can be reached at emguthrie@yahoo.com.