

# Style Snapshot

A look at a frame, its characteristics, and history

By Peter Werkhoven

**What style frame is this?** A picture frame can be defined as a boundary between what is to be seen and what is to be bracketed; in other words, between what is art and what is not. The boundary of a painting, whether it is a frame or a border, acts to focus and isolate our sensations and sensibilities from their normal engagement in the commonplace world. The painted border around the artwork serves as the first frame in the famous painting “A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte” by George-Pierre Seurat. The outside frame is wide white moulding.

**Where is it from?** Post-impressionist painter Seurat (1859-1891) created this canvas between 1884 and 1886. He painted the border a few years later in 1889 and then added the white wide moulding.

**What time period is it from?** France in 1884-1889.

**Who was instrumental in developing this style of frame?** Artists, from all periods and societies, have employed a variety of structures to order and control this movement. Thus, the act of reading a painting becomes a deep and unifying experience in which one's whole being, thought, emotions, and muscular equilibrium, is engaged.

Throughout centuries, different artists have explored the convention of the frame in different ways. While many artists were involved—even obsessed—with the framing of their works, few actually painted their own, as Seurat did. But Seurat was determined to leave nothing to chance in the construction of his paintings, and he carefully planned every step of the entire composition. Often he exhibited a work for a period of time and then returned to the piece, sometimes years later, to add finishing touches in the form of a frame. This was the case with “A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte.”



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He added borders by painting an extension of the painting onto a wooden frame, or by actually stretching the canvas to allow for an extra few inches of room in which to paint the border.

**What are the defining/common characteristics of this style?** Seurat exhibited the completed painting in 1885, but it took him four years to add a border. To do it, he stretched the canvas two to three inches on each side of the painting. He was experimenting, trying to create contrast not only within the painting itself but also between the canvas and its frame. Seurat applied dots of paint to the outside edges of the painting, creating a harmony between that which lies inside

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and its surrounding boundary. These borders were also clearly intended to offer a contrast to the landscape in the painting itself. Opposite the green grass, he painted with more of a reddish hue, while he bordered the blue sky with orange dots.

What design departures might be seen on some frames of this style? The original frame for "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte" was plain white, with a profile approximately 35 centimeters wide. You can find the original frame for this painting in the background of another of his works, "Les Poseuses," painted in 1887.

Seurat glazed all his paintings as an alternative to varnishing them, ostensibly to prevent the gradual yellowing of colors that varnishing eventually causes. This may be one of the reasons why the frame was so wide.

Additional comments and/or anecdotes Seurat truly believed that the artist's choices and use of color had the possibility to create predictable emotions and states of mind in the viewer. Different colors were capable of

inspiring "gay, calm, or sad" emotions according to their character.

Moreover, he was convinced that elementary rules of harmony could be established in painting, just as such rules were ingrained in musical composition. For painting, the rules would be based on the emerging knowledge of perception and optical laws. Seurat declared that the manifold elements of painting could be simplified and codified into "tone, tint, and line." Descending lines, dark tone, and cold tints produced sadness, while rising lines, luminous tone and warm color engendered happier feelings. Seurat's color theory directed every work of art he produced. ■



**Peter Werkhoven** is owner of Aedicule Fine Framemaking in San Francisco. Peter is originally from Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and moved to the U.S. a few years ago. His frames can be found in the Rijksmuseum, the Van Gogh Museum, as well as in the homes of many European collectors. He can be reached at [pwerkhoven@comcast.net](mailto:pwerkhoven@comcast.net).