

Style Snapshot

A look at a frame, its characteristics, and history

by Mark Guthrie

Tabernacle Frame

What style frame is this? Normally termed in our industry as the tabernacle frame, this configuration is more precisely identified as an aedicule, or an aedicular form. The term aedicule roughly translates as “little house” or “little building” and the term aedicular simply means “referring to the aedicule.”

Where is it from? Earliest known examples of aedicular frames are seen in Byzantine altarpieces. However, the structure and decorative elements of later Italian altarpieces more closely resemble, to our eyes, the tabernacle frame.



Reproduction of the Italian Renaissance tabernacle frame.

What time period is it from? Constantine I's Edict of Milan in AD313 and the Nicene Council, convoked in AD325, legitimized and sanctioned Christianity within the Roman Empire (then centered in Constantinople, or modern-day Istanbul). The resulting religious, political and mercantile freedoms allowed Christians to erect and adorn cathedrals throughout the empire. These cathedrals housed the earliest sacred altarpieces, which were decorative panels depicting champions and doctrines of the faith. By our understanding, the execution of these surrounding frames may seem naïve. However, those artists instinctively crafted designs using the vocabulary of architecture. Therefore, it should be noted that picture framing was borne from architecture and continues to be more connected to architecture than to art. In many respects, the artworks were “housed” by a composition that mirrored the larger ecclesiastic structure.

By the late 13th Century within the Lombard region of Italy, aedicular altarpieces had developed into



Gothic tabernacle frame with incised perspective base.



An example of the architectural aedicular form.

All photos courtesy of Aedicule

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considerably more sophisticated structures. Continuing throughout the Italian Renaissance (into the 16th Century), innovations in art and architecture inspired many diverse expressions of aedicular framing.

What design departures might be seen on some frames of this style? During the High-Italian Renaissance, the aedicular format opened to secular usage. No longer was the application exclusively ecumenical.

One of the most famous stylistic derivations is the "Sansovino" frame. The artist and sculptor Jacopo Sansovino (1486-1570) was captured by the sensibilities of Mannerism: an artistic style characterized by the exaggeration and the distortion of scale and perspective. The frame designs that carry his name are clearly architectural, but the stretched and contorted elements seem an attempt to mask the underlying rectangular structure.

Echoes of the aedicular form surfaced and re-surfaced throughout history. Prominent examples are the Palladian, or "Kentian" frame of the 18th century, containing the hallmark columnar component as well as frame designs by the architect, Stanford White, who in the early 20th century helped to revive the form. It appears that the primary motivation behind using the aedicular form is to project a visual sense of grandeur,

balance and stability.

Another significant design departure has little, or nothing, to do with the appearance. Earliest examples of aedicular framing are known as "engaged." Simply put, the art and frame were two parts of one unit. The panel containing the art and the surrounding frame were attached. Both art and frame were conceived and executed at the same time for a specific purpose, for a specific location—never to depart. When the need arose for art to become "mobile" (moving from location to location), the "detached" frame emerged.

What are the defining/common characteristics of this style? Architects define the aedicule as:

- An opening framed by two columns, an entablature, and usually, a pediment, placed against a wall, often containing a statue or iconic image.
- A framework surrounding a window opening.
- A means of visual access.

For those of us in the framing industry, this description not only evokes an image of the "little house" that we call a tabernacle frame, but it seems also a rather poetic definition of the craft that we all produce. The duty that the aedicular frame, the genesis of all picture framing, was meant to serve is no different than any frame produced today—a means of visual access. ■



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