

Picture Framers Guild of Australia Incorporated

The Frame

Development of the Frame

The development of the frame began in the ancient classical world where frames were made mainly from mirrors.

The Romans and Greeks painted frescos directly onto walls without frames. The Oriental civilisations developed their own distinctive attitudes towards painting. The Chinese and Japanese artists painted their works on folding screens, used to divide rooms. They also painted on scrolls, which were hung on the wall without frames. In Medieval times, artists painted on slightly hollowed surfaces of wooden panels and the raised edges of these panels, often decorated with separate motifs, gradually developed into a formal picture frame.

Frames were frequently part of the solid piece rather than existing in their own right, and the first separate frames were imitations of their original architectural surroundings. Often these were ornate and ecclesiastical copying the grand architecture of the day.

The real breakthrough for the picture frame came in the late 15th and early 16th century when painters began to see themselves as artists in their own right and not simply servants of architecture. They required frames to set their paintings apart from their surroundings. Frame makers began moving towards a more restrained style and the frame became more harmonious with the picture within. Art was by this stage no longer merely for public display and became a product that increasingly needed to be transported; and so picture frames became a practical necessity.

As painters became more in demand they had little time to make their own frames. This work was passed on to their apprentices and to outside specialists and so frame making became a skilled craft.

Whether a gilded border of ornate decorations or a simple band of metal, the frame plays a major role in the total visual impact of artwork, enhancing or seriously distorting the overall effect of the image.

A frame is normally needed to act as a boundary – without its limits the whole idea of a composition becomes meaningless and the shapes in the picture merge into the surroundings. The frame also prevents the 'escape' of the colours from the artwork into the surrounding room. A block of colour in a picture will 'jump out' if there is a similar colour nearby and the picture is not framed. The frame defines the extent of the artwork and stops this subconscious action of the human eye.

On a more practical level, the frame protects the artwork from damage. It guards against general wear and tear and against accident when the artwork is being handled.

The Profile of the Frame

Just as important as the finish on a frame is the profile – the shape of the moulding in cross section. In the simplest terms there are three basic frame formats.

- The most usual is a frame shape that leads into the picture, whether directly by means of a sloping bevel, or gradually by a curve inwards, known as a “spoon” or “hollow” frame.
- The second includes those frames which extend on a level plane out from the painting. This can be a shallower design of plate frame in which the outer rim is not noticeably higher than the inner rim.
- Then there are frames which fall away from the picture, either steeply or in a curve which may be concave (a reverse hollow) or convex.

Within the three basic frame formats there are numerous variations. There are no absolute rules about which type of profile is going to be most appropriate for a particular painting.

However there are some general guidelines that can be helpful.

- Landscape paintings where the perspective is important generally benefit from frames that lead into the painting – as do portraits where there are background details such as a room interior or view through a window.
- Works that have no perspective element can work well with a reverse profile – this is often successful with flower paintings, still life’s and portrait heads.
- Flat-effect frames are often suitable for modern works - their simplicity and lack of reference to historical styles suit those who favour a clear uncluttered effect.

An important additional element in the profile of the frame is the slip. This is an inner frame or flat section, usually smaller than the main frame, which produces a visual break between the frame and the artwork. Slips can be gold or silver or may be painted or covered in linen, canvas, velvet or other fabrics. Slips are most often used to introduce a lighter or plainer element next to the artwork.

They can also serve to introduce colour that refers to an element in the artwork that needs emphasising. A slip can also perform a structural function by introducing an element of perspective such as a bevel slip with a reverse profile frame

Another factor to consider is whether the overall look of the frame is to be angular, hard-edge or severe or, rounded and softer in its overall effect. For instance a formal portrait may well be best served by a frame with an angular, slightly architectural moulding

An informal or contemporary artwork with fluid lines in the composition will sit better in a frame with a more rounded profile.

While there are no absolute design rules – the right choice of frame is an important consideration to the finish of the artwork. By paying attention to the shape of the frame, and the clues in the artwork, a frame design can be chosen to compliment the work.

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