Artists Frames: A Lost History Tracking the Innovations of Discarded Visions

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Artist Frames: A Lost History

Tracking the Innovations of Discarded Visions

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Abstract

By considering the multiple aspects of a picture frame, this thesis paper explores the relationship between the frame and the painting it surrounds. Functioning to both preserve and present a painting, the frame is often a concern of curators, dealers, restorers and institutions. Though neglected, the painters themselves had opinions about the framing of their work. This research centers on the classification of a picture frame as either fine or decorative art. First, the metaphysical and marketing ramifications of the frame will be considered, followed by a concise history of the frame that will focus on the nineteenth century Impressionist painters. Further, specific artists and the frames they preferred will be analyzed, including James McNeill Whistler, Georges Seurat, Claude Monet, Vincent Van Gogh, Piet Mondrian, Robert Ryman and others. Quotes from contemporary interviews with prominent figures in the field are included throughout, leading to a discussion about the possibilities of restoration and the responsibilities of museums in relation to public presentation and education. Although it seems that frames are largely considered decorative, this exploration shows that there is potential for further appreciation and analysis of frames as fine art.
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Introduction

The Importance of Frames

The history of frames is almost as rich as the history of painting, and yet, who walks into a museum and notices these objects that surround the artworks? Large institutions like museums and auction houses make decisions about framing behind the scenes, and discussions about frames are a niche subject compared to that of painting or other fine arts. Trapped in the liminal space between fine and decorative art, frames lack a formal classification. Though both arguments have been made, there is a lack of cohesive clarity on the frame today. This paper will navigate these varied opinions, as well as several primary sources from artists themselves in order to further define whether a frame is ultimately a changeable decoration or an integral aspect of a finished painting.

Many experts say that a good frame presents the work at its best while remaining subordinate to the painting, creating a harmony, or balance between the painting and the frame. Yet the frame ultimately directly affects the experience that a viewer has when they look at a painting, and if there is a true harmony between the two, one would notice the frame just as much as they notice the painting, putting them on equal ground. This type of harmony is rare, and often not the case for the majority of frames around famous paintings. However, this true balance actually occurs in the case of many artist-designed frames. Today, the framing of a work of art is largely left in the hands of curators, restorers, collectors and dealers. Strangely, the only group left out of the framing discussion is artists. Yet artists throughout history often had a hand in framing their work, or have even directly created their frames. In this paper, I will shift the focus to the
artist’s perspective on frames, and how their insights have been neglected or completely contradicted over time. While several groundbreaking books have been written in the early twenty-first century detailing many artist’s preferences, it seems that major institutions are still not truly considering or enacting these now-accessible facts.

Outside the small group of framing experts, people are often completely unaware that many famous artists made their own frames. Growing up, I had always walked through museums looking at the paintings, and the frames were something in my peripheral view, often an annoyance, leaving a shadow over the canvas or creating a glare behind the glass. Once I really began to look, I saw in stark contrast how much of a difference the frame can make in a work of art. Not only that, but they can be highly detailed, and come in many varieties. How did I not notice them before? How can they be so distinct and yet so ignored? Nobody discusses frames in art history or fine art courses, and slide or textbook images show paintings bereft of their frames. Yet, the frame itself has many complex implications, from its physical conception to the psychological effects in the marketing and status of a painting. After my own research, I learned that many artists had ardent opinions about the framing of their work. Simultaneously, I was shocked that these frames were often discarded by those who bought and sold their paintings. Either from old letters, images, or rarely, surviving frames, it is possible to discover what these artists thought and did, even if their frames no longer exist. From these documents, and from the comprehensive research that has been done, it now seems possible to restore these paintings with frames that the artist’s intended.
However, the frame is still considered secondary to their work of art. A simple reason that the frame is given a lower status to the painting, is because at the end of the day, it is a utilitarian object. Regardless of other implications, the frame’s main function is to protect and preserve the artwork. In one of his many books, Eli Wilner (a prominent frame dealer) writes; “whether frame making is an art or craft is a topic long debated, but what is indisputable is the fact that a frame is a structure, one designed to fulfill a specific purpose.”¹ The frame protects the edges of the painting from any damage to the canvas structure that may occur over time. Also, glass can be put in a frame to stop the paint from decaying or being bleached by sunlight. The frame is also a physical ledger of where the painting has been, as galleries mark the back of the frame when the work is included in a show. This is especially practical for valuation purposes when authenticating a work. Before electric lighting, the gilding of a frame was even used to reflect candle light onto a painting.² Because the frame is a useful object that protects the artwork, and because the frame is now regarded as separate and removable, collectors, dealers, curators and restorers have taken it upon themselves to change the framing of an artwork at their will rather than treating the frame as an integral part of the art itself. In consequence, the frame has become a decorative object, and while it has utilitarian use, it is also now a reflection of the collector’s taste, the cohesion of a museum, a marketing device, or the subjective vision of a curator. This paper will inspect the meaning of frames, and question the validity of the frame as a decorative object, when in fact it is so close to the painting itself.

² Ibid, 8.
Although this topic has a wide global and historical significance, in this paper, I will focus on the nineteenth century, when the artist had the largest influence on their individual framing process. The chapters will first explore the psychology and history of frames, transitioning to artist’s opinions and points from current authorities in framing. Further, I will note specific examples of artist frames by Georges Seurat, J. M. Whistler, Vincent Van Gogh, Claude Monet, as well as the twentieth century modernists Piet Mondrian and Robert Ryman. I will then discuss the contemporary implications of technology in relation to the frame as well as the way the internet has changed how art is displayed. Though the frame is hard to place, and often tragically disregarded, the views of the artist may bring the discussion back to the forefront of focus.

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Chapter 1

The Psychology of Frames

To analyze the role of the frame, and to consider its place in the divide between the fine and decorative arts, I will begin by looking at the theoretical aspects of the frame in relation to the work of art that it surrounds. Conceptually, the frame is like a window to the world that the artist has created, it is the mediator between the viewer’s perception and the artist’s vision. Further, the word “frame” can be linguistically defined and used in many ways. Even more directly, the frame has an essential tie to the psychology of marketing, and so this chapter will create a base of ideas that are an essential background to discussions of frames. A painter myself, I have always considered spatial relations and windows integral to my own practice, and as I began to notice frames more and more, it occurred to me that the way I see a painting as the subjective and imaginative reality an artist wishes to depict, the frame around a painting is very similar to a window frame. As a barrier it delineates the borders of an inner and an outer world. Seeing this analogy in many scholarly discussions of the frame, it seems fitting to begin the analysis of these physical and useful objects with more immaterial ideas in order to reach the core of their importance.

Regardless of the style or technique involved in a work of art, the frame around a painting metaphorically acts as the frame of a window. Like a frame, the window is the physical boundary between one's immediate reality and the observed outside world. From windows it is possible to see outside, yet physically, two separate spaces are created. One can’t feel the wind rustling the trees they see down the street, or smell the
smoke billowing from the neighbor’s kitchen. Similar to a painting, one can see shapes and light, imagining themselves to be a part of that view, yet from their vantage point, they are unable to directly step into the other space. As an observer, they are removed from the scene they see. Likewise, the picture frame encapsulates the visual possibility of a depicted space, however it also acts as a barrier that mediates between the world that the artist created and the reality of the viewer. In this way, the picture frame is often considered the bridge between the artist’s canvas and the wall that it hangs on. Speaking about frames, the painter Howard Hodgkin notes “they're where the picture stops and the world begins.” Just like a window, the frame exists in the space between an inner and outer reality. Hodgkin painted his frames in bold colors and patterns, extending his painting out towards the wall, creating a striking effect for the viewer, and further blurring the lines between the frame and the canvas.

Both types of frames also have an integral relationship with architectural design. Frame designs are often inspired by architectural elements, or made to fit religious or academic institutions. Over time, frames have been changed and selected to compliment interior designs, both in private homes and in museums. When trying to decide if the frame is a changeable object or an inseparable part of the painting, one can consider the connections between the window frame and the view that it presents, and consider - is the picture frame more related to the painting it supports or to the wall it hangs on? Again, this can be thought about through the lens of a window on a building. Literally, a window frame is part of a building, but when remembering a view, does one often

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5 Howard Hodgkin, Rainbow, 1983-85, Private Collection, figure 1.
remember the window? As people look past the frames around paintings, one looks through windows rather than at them. In the introduction to *Defining Edges*, a concise and rich book on frames, Adam Gopnik writes, “a frame is something seen wrapped around something seen, and it changes the meaning of what it encloses.” While the frame is seen, the viewer’s direct focus is the canvas, and the frame, while influencing the viewer, rather like the cover of a book, is dissimilarly ever present when interpreting the artwork within it. Further, when looking through a window, is the viewer’s vision connecting the frame itself to the view or is the window frame separate, a connection to one’s physical space? While the view is separated from one's immediate sensory environment, the window frame is a physical border, the visual aspect of the removed scene that nonetheless molds into a single image. The window frame and glass separate the indoor and outdoor space. Though often looked past, the frame always remains a part of the view, even if one does not directly notice it. Unconsciously the frame becomes part of the image, part of the memory of the view from the window.

There are many definitions of the word “frame,” and the word can be used in many ways. The definition of the word highlights the various functions between a frame and a painting. In the Miriam Webster dictionary, the noun “frame” is defined as “something composed of parts fitted together and united.” Mediating between the artist’s imaginative space and the reality that the canvas inhabits, the frame is a transitional object, uniting an illusory image with the literal wall on which it is displayed. Among many verbs, the word frame can be used “to plan, to shape, to formulate, to

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7 Ibid.
arrange, and to enclose.” Sometimes more subliminal than literal, the frame can act as a starting point in the initial encounter that the viewer has with a painting. From the frame, one can consider the story of a painting, as well as its current value and context. In this way, the frame can shape, or outline the importance of a painting as well as its historical meaning, giving the viewer an initial “frame of reference” for the painting that it surrounds. Thus, subconsciously telling the viewer where to place the artwork in terms of history and value. When framing a work, the framer plans and arranges the possible reception of the work, sometimes even formulating a narrative for the painting. Enclose also points to the frame’s utilitarian use to protect a painting, and further the word enclose is defined: “to surround something and close it off... with or as if with a fence so that nothing may enter or leave.” The frame contains the space the artist has created within its canvas, and, as Michael Gregory, owner of prominent London frame company Arnold Wiggins & Sons, says, the frame must “crystallize” the painting. This phrase seems to imply that the frame, when added around a painting, not only encloses it, but also freezes the image, containing the edges of the canvas, and further creating a finished, symbiotic object.

Whether we consciously notice the frame on a painting or not, it implies an important function as a marketing device. Emma Crichton-Miller writes that frames “mold the response of the viewer to the work by suggesting the value we should attach to it.” When I went to visit Eli Wilner Gallery, I learned that auction houses will

\[9\] Ibid.
\[12\] Ibid.
sometimes purchase two frames for the painting they are selling. One that is more simple or somehow more tied to the painting’s period, and then one that is more elaborate and gilt. This is because the auction house has different clients, and they will actually reframe the painting depending on the client coming to see it.\textsuperscript{13} They may know that one prefers the look of gilt frames over the aesthetic of the work’s origin. An example of this is a Degas pastel that Eli Wilner Gallery framed for auction.\textsuperscript{14} The work came to them in its original white frame that Degas made for it, but Sotheby’s wanted another frame made as well to show different clients. They swapped the pastel between the white original and the gilt reproduction depending on who was coming to see it.\textsuperscript{15} Bruce-Gardyne, senior international director and head of private sales for old master paintings at Christie’s says that “framing is integral to the process of auction or private sale...in today’s art market, clients expect to see things in a form that is immediately presentable on their walls.”\textsuperscript{16} However, Paul Mitchell, a frame dealer in London, has waged a long campaign against the careless reuse of French 18th-century portrait frames, tipped on their side, for Impressionist landscapes. Stating, “the cartouches and ornamented corners used to focus interest on an important portrait wreak havoc with the very different geometries of these 19th-century paintings.” You can, he says, ‘asphyxiate’ with rococo.\textsuperscript{17} While gilded frames can exude grandeur and importance, they can also overshadow a painting. Take for example this painting by Claude Monet at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.\textsuperscript{18} The

\textsuperscript{14}Edgar Degas, \textit{Resting Dancer}, 1879, Private Collection.
\textsuperscript{16}Emma Crichton-Miller, “Frames in Focus,” \textit{Christie’s.com}.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18}Claude Monet, \textit{Island of Nettles near Vernon}, 1897, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,
landscape is rendered in thick pastel colored brushstrokes, conveying the stillness of the water and capturing myriad refractions of sunlight. Yet its gold frame not only harshly contrasts with the subtleties in color that Monet uses, but also dulls the brightness of the painting’s white light. Moreover, the corner pieces arch over the canvas, producing heavy, dark shadows over the top of the painting, altering the composition and color choices of the artist. This sort of framing can be detrimental, as well as unnecessary, especially in regards to an artist like Monet who is now highly valued regardless.

At the end of the day, framing seems to come down to personal taste. But if the frame is made by the artist, as is the case with many artists from the nineteenth century onward, wouldn’t those frames be considered fine art? On the other hand, frames have several uses beyond being an aesthetic object, and can be used for the utilitarian and marketing possibilities discussed thus far. When it comes to galleries and auction houses who are trying to sell work, it makes more sense why such a filter of glamour would be placed around a painting. Yet, shouldn't museums consider more than the marketing of their paintings? If museums display their collections because they respect the artworks, as well as their importance in the scope of art history and public knowledge, then their framing methods have a much larger impact than they may realize or care to admit. The frames that adorn their paintings, especially in the sense of Impressionist works, misguide the public and collectors alike, while obscuring the vision and historical importance of the artist’s innovations.

For example, Vincent Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo that he did not want *The Potato Eaters* shown unless it was given a warm, bright frame to contrast the

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figure 3.
darkness of the painting, stating it “must not be seen” without the frame.\textsuperscript{19} I went to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam this spring, and not only is the painting now framed in a heavy dark brown frame, it is also hanging on a dark grey wall.\textsuperscript{20} In the letter, he very clearly explains his opinion on the presentation of this painting, and there is nothing ambiguous about Van Gogh’s vision for this now iconic painting:

“It (The Potato Eaters) does not appear to advantage against a dark background, and particularly not against a dull background. And this is because it’s a glimpse into a very grey interior… one must enclose it by placing something in a deep gold or copper color around it. Please bear that in mind if you want to see it as it should be seen.”\textsuperscript{21}

Although the museum’s display creates an environment that mirrors the space depicted in the painting, Van Gogh made it clear that the painting should be contrasted by light in order to further highlight and balance the colors and the mood of his painting. I am sure that the museum has seen this letter, as they are the ones who created this wonderful archive, and are perfectly aware of Van Gogh’s opinion. Museums, if actually concerned with education, should find ways to teach the public about these important developments of art history and artists frames. This reality leads me to wonder, and I will return to this subject throughout this thesis paper, if museums are not thinking about selling the works, then they might be thinking of their own status. Holding the cohesively grand impression of their collection above the artists they display or the public’s education. The museum is then a proponent of this false idea of how the work should be displayed. At Eli Wilner Gallery, I was told that many private clients want their Impressionist paintings framed

\textsuperscript{20} Vincent Van Gogh, The Potato Eaters, 1885. The Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, figure 4.
\textsuperscript{21} Van Gogh Museum, Vangoghletters.org, letter 497.
“like they are in museums.”\textsuperscript{22} And so the museum really becomes the cause of this false aesthetic, and as paintings are acquired and sold, the cycle continues.

Alternatively, there are many experts who say that the frame should blend into the room, and a great frame is one that becomes a part of the interior design, essentially, seamlessly invisible. Unlike artist frames, which become an extension of the artwork, the frame can be seen as a decoration used to unify a collection. And it is true, in many cases it is hard to remember the details of a frame when the focus is the canvas. The Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset, (in his essay “Meditations on the Frame) writes that “if you reflect on the paintings you know best, you will probably not be able to recall the frames they have been set in.”\textsuperscript{23} While this is true, the initial encounter that the viewer has with a work of art, consciously or not, is nonetheless skewed by the boarder around it, molding their experience of the painting in some way. The painter Eugene Delacroix once wrote:

“We see neither the blades of grass in a landscape nor the accidents of the skin in a pretty face. Our eye, in its fortunate inability to perceive these infinitesimal details, reports to our mind only the things which it ought to perceive; the latter, again, unknown to ourselves, performs a special task; it does not take into account all that the eye presents to it; it connects the impressions it experiences with others which it received earlier, and its enjoyment is dependent on its disposition at the time. That is so true that the same view does not produce the same effect when taken in two different aspects.”\textsuperscript{24}

Our subconscious quickly chooses elements from our surroundings, and one never sees every aspect of a scene. All the details of the world may not be caught in a glimpse, yet

one registers the scene and makes judgments nonetheless. In the case of the framing of a painting, the conscious memory of the artwork may not include the details of the frame, yet the overall appearance of the painting in the frame, and the associations a viewer connects to the overall aesthetic of the piece has made a subliminal impression on the viewer. They may not remember seeing it, but the various techniques in the carving, gilding, size and shape of the frame have altered the viewer’s response to the painting.

A relevant psychological study was completed in 1999, where scientists Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons created a video of several people throwing a ball to each other.25 They had participants watch the video and count how many times the ball was passed between people in white shirts. During the short video, a man dressed in a dark gorilla suit walks slowly through the center of the crowd. The fascinating result of the experiment was that only half of the people watching and counting noticed the gorilla.26 Because they were focusing on the white shirts and the ball, the people dressed in black and the gorilla were completely separated from their conscious vision. This study relates to frames because when a viewer looks at a painting, they might notice the colors, the objects, the emotions in the painting, yet the frame is rather like the gorilla. It is physically there, and it is obvious if you look for it, but if you are looking at “a painting” you may not consciously consider the structure around it.

The majority of experts that I spoke to consider the frame first as a piece of decorative art, and in extraordinary cases of craftsmanship, able to stand on its own. The question of artist made frames is currently a much smaller portion of the market, and

26 Ibid.
although many admire the skill of some of the great artisans of antique frames, artist frames are often seen as something the artist made because they could not afford more expensive frames. This however, disregards the evidence that they had their own personal philosophies. In the early twenty first century, these long lost opinions were laid out in several comprehensive publications, although there seems to be no further action. The question of the frame as a part of the art or the interior still leans towards the latter. But what is the meaning of a frame without a painting inside? What is a window frame without a view?
Chapter 2
Frames in the History of Art

The history of frames is in many ways connected to the history of art. Even the former director of the National Gallery, Nicholas Penny stated that frames are “not a marginal consideration in the history of art.”27 By looking into the use and the development of the way paintings were framed over time, the role of the artist frame that is hidden between the lines of art history books will come to focus. In this rather broad overview, major developments in European art history will be summarized, linking together the role of the frame within each period.

From the Middle Ages to today, the frame has changed along with artistic styles and movements. Initially, the frame around a work of art was not a changeable decoration. In fact, it was an inseparable part of the painting. During the Middle Ages, many frames were permanently attached to the canvas or board, as in religious altarpieces or physical parts of a church.28 As part of the architecture of religious institutions, the frame acted as an extension of the building, creating a window to the spiritual realm depicted on the canvas. Painters then were mainly commissioned to create devotional images for patrons and places of worship. Over time, the frame maintained its architectural role, as part of the interior design of a patron’s house, and as a way to make an art collection cohesive.29 Even in the Renaissance, as paintings became more mobile objects, their importance lay in portraiture, and personal religious practice. The frames

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
were very often a reflection of the interiors they inhabited, and as painting was itself considered more decorative or akin to a photographic record, so too frames would blend with their surroundings, a border for a portrait or a window to a religious scene.

By the eighteenth century, the Salons of France and England had become the most prominent venues in Europe for artists to present their work. When photography was invented, the purpose of painting altered as well. No longer the only way to record one’s physical presence on this earth, painting genres became more experimental and varied. From allegory to still life to landscape, painters began to expand their work. With this expansion came a “hierarchy of genres.” No longer reliant on religious patrons, artists would work towards a place in the Salon exhibitions. However, to exhibit their work they had to adhere to strict rules, including that every painting be framed in a gilded French style frame. These frames were meant to unify the show, enhancing the grandeur of the art works, and further increasing the reflected light in the exhibition hall. This uniform display did not give any autonomy to the works, as each painting was regarded as just another example worthy of the space. The paintings were placed side by side, covering the walls of the room, with only glistening gold borders in between each canvas. In this way, the frame remained a utilitarian function of the architecture. As time went on, and as various new styles developed, artists began to rebel against the

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31 “The hierarchy of genres, established by the French Royal Academy, was based on the notion of man as the measure of all things. Landscape and still life were the lowest because they did not involve human subject matter. History was highest because it dealt with the noblest events of human history and with religion.” Tate Museums, Terms: Genres, Tate.org.uk, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artterms/g/genres (accessed October 27, 2019).
Salon for its narrow hierarchy of genres as well as their strict, uniform, and arbitrarily subjective standards.

In the nineteenth century, “the frame, as a third element between the work and its surroundings, was given its greatest opportunity.”\textsuperscript{33} This opportunity was to become something separate from the artwork, an important object on its own. As painting began to be regarded as an individual creation rather than as a religious or academic function, artists began creating new work, and new ways to display it. Although collectors and the academy continued to favor the grandness of gilded frames, artists began to experiment and to form their own strong opinions about the framing of their work. They also began constructing their own frames, extending their work to the edges of the canvas, and often painting on the frame itself. People also started to see the artwork as a singular object of beauty, and put more emphasis on subjectivity in relation to viewing art.\textsuperscript{34} One of the first disruptions in the academy’s power and influence was Caspar David Friedrich’s \textit{Tetschen Altar},\textsuperscript{35} which is considered to be “the first nineteenth century painting given an artist-designed frame.”\textsuperscript{36} Returning to the architectural and religious roots of painting, Friedrich created a blend of ideas, presenting the beauty of a natural landscape as divine. By integrating a devotional frame with a Romantic landscape painting, Friedrich began to break down the boundaries between the hierarchy of genres.\textsuperscript{37} This upset and inspired many people, and by crossing sacred and established boundaries, Friedrich paved the way for many new innovations. With this disruption of the accepted hierarchy, there also

\textsuperscript{35} Caspar David Friedrich, \textit{Tetschen Altar}, 1808, figure 6.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 14.
came a surge of radical new ideas, mainly an increasing attention to the “lower” genre of landscape painting. The evolution of which was seen from the Barbizon school to the Impressionists and further into Modern art. As noted by Wolfgang Kemp, “It was the artist’s themselves who radically transformed the contexts in which their work was seen.”

There are many artists over time that have created their own frames or written about the importance of the display of their work. However, it is especially strange that the most well known and reproduced paintings of the present day once had frames that the artists considered integral to their presentation, and people generally have no knowledge of what the artists had intended for their work. Sparks of surprise and intrigue light in people’s eyes when I mention that many artworks now in museums have frames that the artists disliked and rebelled against in their time. The Impressionists were especially passionate critics when it came to the display of their work, and these artists would often fabricate their own unique frames. Many artists, such as Degas, rejected the gilded frame as a symbol of the traditionalist academy and all their prejudices against the new innovative work that was being created. He also believed that his work is best presented through simple and crisp white borders. The Impressionists were famous for using an excess of white paint in their works, but it is little known that they extended their color theories to the wood around their canvas as well. Many people are also unaware that the majority of paintings from this period that we know and celebrate today were originally framed by the artists themselves, often in discrete and modernistic

38 Ibid, 18.
frames. The artists preferred a minimalistic approach to framing their work, allowing the canvas to stand out on its own. If one were to present a universally known Monet with a simplistic white frame rather than the highly ornamented gilded frames they often hang in today, the effect would be shocking to the general public. The simple frames now considered “contemporary” are actually rooted in the innovations of the nineteenth century.

An essential figure in the rise of the Impressionist artists was the French dealer Paul Durand-Ruel. Described as “a politically conservative but aesthetically adventurous dealer,” he handled a wide range of artists, including many of the Impressionists. He helped these artists by buying and exhibiting their work, as well as selling it. What people do not often discuss is how essential frames were in this matter. As the Impressionists were creating work that was often criticized as merely “an impression,” their paintings were not seen as high art at the time. Their focus on color and everyday subjects as well as their abstracted and vivid painting techniques were not popular then as they are now. Many of these artists who are so well regarded today were largely rejected by the academic authorities, and had trouble selling their work. Advised by his longtime friend, the prominent landscape painter Charles-François Daubigny, Durand-Ruel began to invest in the work of young Claude Monet. Durand-Ruel soon became a major

45 Frances Fowle, Daubigny and Impressionism. (National Galleries of Scotland, 2016), 15.
patron to the newly emerging group of Impressionist artists. The exhibitions he staged of their work went off with varying levels of success, but one way that he increased sales for his new friends was through the framing of their work.\textsuperscript{46} Although the Impressionists were clear about their dislike of the ornate gilded frames of the academy, these frames were respected by many buyers at the time. Durand-Ruel worked with the artists to create what are now called “compromise frames.”\textsuperscript{47} The grandeur of a gilt frame would make a buyer think the artwork was more valuable, and the aesthetic would blend a bit better with whatever collection they already have. Durand-Ruel convinced some of these radical artists to put their work not in handmade and simple frames (that in tandem with their work, was all too radically innovative for their time, and perhaps even for today), but to frame them in simplified versions of the gilt frames that were popular. In doing so, he created a new, less ornamental version of the Louis XVI frames that were prevalent at the time. They were a compromise between what the buyer would want to purchase and what the artist had created. In one way, this allowed him to sell these works and keep the Impressionists on their feet, yet in another, it began to displace the frames that the artists considered an important part of their work.

By the early twentieth century, exhibitions began to give each artwork more space, eventually leading to what is called the “white cube” gallery style.\textsuperscript{48} In tandem, minimal white frames began to be popular. While some artists began making paintings so big they did not bother with framing, others often preferred a simplistic black or white border. With these changes, paintings began to be seen differently as well: “unlike salon-

\textsuperscript{47} Camille Pissarro, \textit{The Effect of Fog}, 1888, Philadelphia Museum of Art, figure 8.
style hangs which emphasize the ensemble, white cube installations focus the viewer’s attention on each work of art as a self-contained aesthetic object, implicitly suggesting that each work is a masterwork.\footnote{Ibid.} Now well known and highly celebrated, artists such as James McNeill Whistler, Georges Seurat and Vincent Van Gogh made extraordinary frames for their work. These frames were an essential element of their finished paintings, and were meticulously planned and painted by the artists themselves, extending their work beyond the canvas. Although the majority of these frames are now lost, their paintings are widely marketed and exhibited today in major institutions. However, because their frames were disregarded and thrown away by successive dealers and collectors over time, the museums now show these artworks in whatever frames they choose. In many cases, this still means traditional and ornamental French style frames. The opulence and status of gilt frames within institutions has not altered over time. Now-iconic paintings that people know so well today are rarely shown as the artist intended. The replacement of their frames with the styles of the time have created a gap in art history, and although we now accept simple or white frames with modern and contemporary works, the innovative paintings from the nineteenth century still remain in inappropriate frames. The question is, however, does this matter? Is the frame meant to be separate from the work of art? And should it be up to curators, collectors and institutions how a painting is presented? Perhaps a frame is a work of decorative art, a changeable addition to the painting that is meant to be the choice of the owner, much like the interior design of their home. Or perhaps the frame is another element to the artist’s
creation, and is so close to the work that it is an extension of the artist’s canvas? Should artists always consider the edges of their work as an integral part of the finished painting?
In the nineteenth century, a particularly revolutionary and independent American artist named James McNeill Whistler was holding his own shows in London. In addition to designing his own frames, he would also design entire solo exhibitions. From the furniture to matching the fabrics and the colors of the walls, he even had special outfits made for the guards. The entire space was constructed and planned to show his abstract paintings in the most authentic way. For Whistler, the display of his paintings was as essential as the canvas itself. The frame, designed and painted by him, is an extension and an integral part of his creation. Using the transitional space between the painting and the wall as another element of his work, his custom made frames unify and condense the scene within the canvas and the outer edges of reality as one inseparable object. In a letter to George Lucas, Whistler wrote “You will notice...that my frames have been designed as carefully as my pictures-and thus they form as important a part as any of the rest of the work- carrying on the particular harmony throughout.”

When designing his frames, Whistler would use simple patterns, such as reeding, and when gilded, his designs let the wood grain show through the thinly applied gold. Although his paintings were often met with stark criticism, Whistler’s frames soon became quite popular, and many frame makers of the time would create forgeries of his work. This upset Whistler, who took great pride in his innovative frames, treating them with as much care as the

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artwork itself. In 1875 he wrote of his frame designs: “‘Tis is of course entirely original with me and has never been done... I wish this to be clearly stated in Paris that I am the inventor of all this kind of decoration in color on the frames, that I may not have a lot of clever little Frenchmen trespassing on my ground.”

Unauthorized copies of his moldings with parapet reeded lines found their way into the marketplace, and eventually frames that borrowed from his aesthetic became known as “Whistler-style frames.”

Whistler’s frames were so important to him that he did not always sign his paintings, deciding to sign on the frame instead. For a signature, he would paint a butterfly symbol on the frame, which would act as a copyright symbol for his designs as much as a signature for his work. On the frame he made for Variations in Pink and Grey, a red butterfly is seen prominently on the frame, and also mirrored on the canvas itself, appearing as a symbolic system created to match his work with his frames. Like many artists from the nineteenth century, of all the frames he had made, only a few remain with his work today. One of these surviving frames is hanging in The Frick Collection in New York. This frame also bears his signature butterfly symbol on the lower right side of the frame. The canvas depicts a serine landscape, and also bears no further signature save for the butterfly. The frame itself has his signature reeding as a main design element. Over the wood, ink-like lines are painted in bold black patterns on

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52 Ibid, 17.
58 Ibid, figure 11.
various levels of the frame.\textsuperscript{59} The meticulously mathematical lines descend from a pattern of three to a pattern of two, leading the eye into the painting. On the main surface of the frame is a Japanese inspired decorative motif of semi circles that seem to suggest the water that is depicted in the painting. The frame is gilded, yet more matte than traditional examples, likely applied with a thin layer in order to leave the wood grain showing through. Another innovation of the period, this subdued golden wood nicely highlights the grey-blue tone of the water without overpowering it. A butterfly is painted in the lower right corner of the frame, more simply rendered than on \textit{Variations in Pink and Grey}'s frame, and likewise another butterfly is painted into the adjacent canvas. This ghostly form seems to float over the sea, yet is clearly within the painted scene, as one corner is covered by a leaf in the foreground. Here, Whistler seems to be using the butterfly symbol as a way to connect the world of his painting to the space of the viewer. The dual butterfly symbol creates a subtle relationship between the landscape depicted in the canvas and the frame’s presence in the viewer’s reality. By placing the butterfly in the painting behind the leaves in the foreground, it is completely immersed in the image itself. More than a signature, it is an object in the painting itself. However, the other butterfly on the surface of the frame brings the symbol out into the space of the viewer’s reality. The butterfly in the painting is a negative cut out image, its body consisting of sea water. The butterfly on the frame is the opposite, its simplistic and solid form is a positive rendering of the cut out. Perhaps this is a way for Whistler to convey the butterfly as the symbol for his work as a whole, and it alone is able to travel between the inner world of the canvas and the outer reality of the viewer, binding the two objects of

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid, figure 12.
canvas and frame while bringing the two worlds together. Therefore, to have a Whistler painting without its intended frame is like having only half of the artwork. When considering the artist frame, it is not only a consideration of the object itself, but also the care and weight that the artist placed on the display of their work as well.

Another example of an artist who cared deeply about the presentation of their work was Georges Seurat. Among others, he is considered an important proponent of “pointillism.”60 This painting theory and technique relies on color theory, and although Seurat is known for his carefully painted canvases of tiny pointillist dots, it is not as well known that he also would paint his frames. Like many artists of the time, there is evidence that he enjoyed a simple white frame around his work, and just as Seurat painted his canvases with tightly knit colored dots, he would occasionally expand these dots to the frame as well.61 Painting over his frames entirely, these dotted borders became the space between the painting and the wall. These frames were often flat pieces of wood in which he would continue his dots in contrasting colors.62 Take for example what is likely his most famous painting, La Grande Jatte.63 There is a record of this painting in his studio, as seen in this painting by the artist.64 Inspired by the Impressionist’s use of white, this painting shows La Grande Jatte surrounded by a minimalistic white wooden frame. One can also observe that the edges of the canvas itself has a “thin, multicolored band,” creating a colored frame on the canvas within the

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60 “the practice of applying small strokes or dots of color to a surface so that from a distance they visually blend together.” Encyclopedia Britannica, “Pointillism,” https://www.britannica.com/art/pointillism (accessed November 16, 2019).
61 Georges Seurat, , Le Crotoy, Upstream, 1889, The Detroit Institute of Arts, figure 13.
63 Georges Seurat, La Grande Jatte, 1884, Art Institute of Chicago, figure 15.
64 Georges Seurat, Models, 1888, Barnes Foundation Museum, Marion, figure 16.
white one, and acting “as a bridge between the image and the frame molding.” W. H. Bailey remarks how important the Impressionist shows themselves were, stating:

“We have now become so accustomed to the sparsely hung art gallery that it is difficult to believe the Impressionists’ presentation was revolutionary at the time. The frames chosen by the artists were radically different from traditional forms and would never have been accepted by the official Salon. It must have been exhilarating for Seurat to see unusually simple frames, painted in white and gray, some even in bold colors, surrounding freshly conceived, brightly colored paintings.”

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art today, a study for La Grande Jatte is seen in a gold frame. The rubbed gilt surface half reflects the light, creating a distracting and unrelated relationship between painting and frame, as well as leaving a shadow over Seurat’s painted edges. He created his colored borders in order to enhance his color theory effects, and a white frame (as he intended), would allow this border to have more of an effect on the viewer’s vision. The painting itself is also rather matte, again in contrast with this frame. This dull gold color interferes with the viewer’s focus, clearly separating the canvas from the frame, and thereby reducing the effects of Seurat’s carefully placed dots of paint. In his theory, Seurat believes that the way to create a more pure color is to allow the colors to mix in the viewer’s vision rather than on the canvas. The gold frame preemptively acts in contrast to the red and blue dots, jarring the viewer with a stark opposition of broken purple and gold rather than the bright purple one is meant to see up against the white.

Another very distracting effect of these ornate frames is how they interact with the lighting of the room they are in, as the top of the frame often leaves a shadow over the

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66 Ibid.
top section of the painting. In this case, this shadow is doubly intrusive to the work, as Seurat’s complimentary border is almost completely hidden in the shadow. If one does notice the border itself, it appears as though it only goes around three edges of the canvas, again interfering with his intended composition. By introducing a large amount of gold into the composition as a whole, (a color that does not appear in the work itself) the frame is unsettling the balance of color relationships as well. Yellow and gold compliment and highlight the blue tones in the painting, thus changing the dynamic, here of of red and blue, that Seurat intended. Upon seeing his work shown, critics had various responses to his frames. For example, when Seurat exhibited Le Grande Jette at the Salon des Independents of 1888, the painting was “surrounded first by a polychrome interior frame and closed off with white exterior moldings.” According to critics at the time, this frame “helped increase the intensity of the colors.” Additionally, some less admiring critics said that “the artist insists on implying his silly theory and dots it too, with orange or blue, depending on whether the sun is behind or in front of the viewer or whether the frame is in sunlight or shadow; the frame, even though it remains white, becomes… absurdly real.” The frame becoming real is akin to the frame becoming a part of the world of the painting, no longer a decorative bridge from the artist’s imagined world to the interior wall, but a solid statement that brings the world in the canvas further into the viewer’s present space. In an instance like this, the frame molds with the painting, becoming as much a work of fine art as the painting itself. Though many frames are

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68 Ibid, figure 18.
70 Ibid.
beautiful, ornate, or add to a painting, it is the artist frame that truly alters the classification of a frame from a decorative object to a work of fine art.
Chapter 4

Radical Ideas

Perhaps an artist designed frame makes a painting appear too radical, too odd, or too real. Durand-Ruel and some collectors of the Impressionists who ended up discarding the artist’s frames or hanging them in compromise frames may have done so for a variety of reasons. One is that the decorative frame caters to the buyer, taming the painting to fit in with their existing collections. Even today, curators focus on keeping up narratives and cohesion rather than the artist's intention. The director at the Center for Curatorial Leadership, Elizabeth Easton, said to me in an interview that a frame “does not exist without the art, and shouldn’t draw too much attention to itself, rather, the frame should honor the art.” Easton’s use of the word honor hints at the use of gilt frames to make paintings appear more important. Artist frames generally draw attention to themselves, and their relationship with the painting is rarely subordinate. A very direct example of this is what Vincent Van Gogh wrote about frames in many of his letters. He wrote to his friend Gabriel-Albert Aurier that he was making frames in complementary colors to his paintings, in order to create various dynamics between the canvas and frame: “I have noticed that a very simple flat frame, bright orange lead, creates the desired effect with the blues of the background and the dark greens of the trees. Without this there would perhaps not be enough red in the canvas, and the upper part would appear a little cold.” Van Gogh describes how the warm rust orange of the frame will offset the

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71 Elizabeth Easton, interview by Isabella Kapczynski. Interview New York, (October 17, 2019).
cooler colors of his landscape, here referring to his work *Cypresses* from his now well known series of paintings.\(^{73}\) Coupled with his sketch of the frames he was making, one can imagine what the rust colored frame may have looked like.\(^{74}\) If another example of his *Cypresses* paintings, *Wheat Field with Cypresses* was framed this way at the Metropolitan Museum, it certainly would shock people.\(^{75}\) Not only that, it would stand out among their collection of Impressionist works, as most are framed in gilt frames.\(^{76}\)

When I spoke with Suzanne Smeaton, (an expert on frames and a successful advisor, dealer, and former director of Eli Wilner Gallery), she told me how important cohesion is in a museum, and that even the Metropolitan may not have the budget to reframe a painting in their collection, noting that they would have to reframe every work, or the display would be too varied. When talking about the Impressionist wing specifically, she laughed and said she “loves to hate” the way the museum has their collection displayed.\(^{77}\)

Although the paintings appear very grand placed in elaborate and ornamental frames, and although the frames themselves are great examples of craftsmanship, they are often exactly the opposite representation that many of the artist’s would have wanted. Shouldn’t the goal of a museum be to display works of art for public benefit? To educate us on the innovations of artistic movements, and the talented artists that they house?

Unlike auction houses or galleries, they are not in the business of selling their works- or are they? As stated earlier, their concern seems not to be individual artworks or representations, but like the European Salons, to create an overall aura of grandeur and

importance. The gilt frames, as seen throughout history, play an important part in creating this image. If the paintings were reframed as the artists had in mind, the museum would look like a thrift shop, each painting might require a room to itself to be properly presented, and the sheer variety would resist the academic classifications of period and style that art history creates.

When it comes to display, the auction houses change so often that they can reinvent their galleries much more frequently than a museum. In a recent sale at Sotheby’s, an example from Monet’s *Mules* (Haystacks) series was bought for a total of $110,747,000.00 this May, 2019. Monet sold the majority of his work through Durand-Ruel, likely with the compromise frames mentioned earlier in this paper. In this case, the painting had a direct provenance from Durand-Ruel’s gallery. When I went to the preview to see the painting in person, it was very clearly staged for it’s importance and the auction house’s hopes for a record price. The painting was all off on its own in a smaller, completely separate space. The lighting, (unlike the crisp bright white of the rest of their new large gallery spaces) was dimmed, the wall it hung on was painted a deep navy, almost ultramarine blue, and the painting was centered with a bright spotlight on it. The gilt frame shone like a halo around the simple scene depicted on the canvas.

Although I contacted multiple people at Sotheby’s, my questions about this frame must go unanswered for the time being. However, it is certain that the frame here makes quite an impression, not only pointing to the presumed value of the work, but also to the

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79 Ibid.
importance of the frame in the staging of these sales. It would be so interesting to find out how that specific frame was chosen, of all the variations in gilt frames, as well as if the buyer actually bought the frame with the painting, or choose a new one for their vision of the work. In this case, the frame may have overshadowed the painting, but the goal was to make it look as expensive as possible.

Interestingly, the many examples of Claude Monet’s work at the Metropolitan Museum are also displayed in a variety of gilt frames throughout their Impressionist collection, and many complicate the subtleties of the works themselves. Another example from his *Haystacks* series is displayed, unsurprisingly, surrounded by a highly ornamented frame. Casting grey shadows over the pastel hues of the sky and competing with the textures of Monet’s thick brushstrokes, this frame does not compliment the painting, rather it overtake it, the thick scrolling corners extend from every edge of the thick frame, distracting from the central focus of the painting. When at the museum, I often take a picture of the painting and crop out the frame to compare the effect the frame has on the image in relation to what the artist initially created. Here, the painting itself shines with cool pastels, the depicted shadows of the looming grain stacks are bolder, and the subtle lines in Monet’s thick brushstrokes can be seen separate from the ornate carving of the contrasting frame.

Outside of large New York museums, many smaller museums choose to reframe their paintings when they have enough finances. Last year, an article was published from

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the Minneapolis Institute of Art, where they have a very good example of Monet’s *Haystacks* series in their collection. The article is about the reframing of their painting due to funds from the Dayle and Mary Olsen frame acquisition fund at their museum.85 The existing frame that came with the painting when it arrived at the museum (and which it has stayed in for over ten years), is ornate and gilded, yet is slightly dulled and has intricate and busy carvings throughout the body of the frame. Senior curator of paintings at the museum, Patrick Noon, decided that the frame was “distracting because you couldn’t see the picture for the frame.”86 Noon began to look for a new frame for the Monet. Working with the London frame dealer Paul Mitchell, they found a frame that was made a hundred years after the painting, yet was chosen for its similarity to the compromise frames that Durand-Ruel used.87 Although I can only analyze the two frames from the images provided in the article, the before and after, as far as I can see, are strikingly different.88 It seems as if they are two different paintings, the colors completely altered. Initially, the painting seems to have many subtle hues of blue and pink, yet in the new frame, the background appears much brighter, and the blue has become a murky green, overpowered in favor of brown and pink hues. The image of the new frame however, seems to be enhanced to portray the new version in a better light. It is very difficult to assess them from just images, but I must say I am not a fan of either. Again, a gilt frame was traded for another gilt frame. Yes, the new one is more similar to a compromise frame, but why choose one that is so much older than the painting itself? Is

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
it even authentic in the way the museum wants in this case? In the middle of the article, there is an image of the painting outside of any frame, portraying the true colors of the work.\textsuperscript{89} The shadow is clearly more pronounced, and the foreground crackles with myriad colors depicting the wheat scattered in the field. It would be very interesting to see one of Monet’s paintings framed in the white Impressionist frames that many of his peers championed, perhaps then the intricacy of his paintings only seen when looking past the frame can come to focus.

The general perception is that Van Gogh’s work, like Claude Monet’s, belongs in a huge gold frame, as that is how it is presented to them. However, Van Gogh made extremely beautiful frames for his works, frames that enhance and harmonize with his paintings better than any other frame could. Van Gogh was one of the major innovators of his time, creating various styles of frames for his paintings, and his many preferences and experiments are laid out in an unprecedented and thorough archive of his letters between his brother and other friends. In eighty three of his letters the word “frame” is mentioned, occasionally referring to the phrase “frame of mind, yet often referring to ideas about the display of his work.\textsuperscript{90} There are several important references to the ways he framed his work, what the frames had looked like, as well as specific preferences about color and presentation.

A tragedy, of the many works that Vincent produced, only one original frame survives intact. This existing frame and painting is in the Van Gogh Museum in

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid, figure 29.
Amsterdam.\textsuperscript{91} It’s humble radiance perfectly compliments his work and vision. Painted a glowing ochre hue, the frame is a slightly deeper shade than the yellow background of the canvas. Bold black and white marks evoke shadow and light in this still life, one that would overflow with bounty from the canvas into reality if not for the frame. The color of the fruit makes it look like they may be gourds, even more still and permanent than real fruit. While they lay in a rather disorderly heap they evoke a harmony through their uniform color and simplified shapes. The yellow fruit seems to sit on golden hay, creating an ebullient still life that is full of latent energy. Glaringly white grapes hang over the left side of the painting, while deep yellow fruits have fallen in different directions, a day’s harvest laid out in a barn. Fanned brush strokes create this movement, with highlights in bold white jots of paint. A frame of a specific wood or gilding would mark a break between the canvas and the wall-but here it becomes more complicated when the frame is an extension of the work itself. The middle ground is blurred to become even closer to the painting, and makes the jump to the wall much more jarring. However, Van Gogh planned these colors so well that the frame seems to melt between and into this liminal space. Rather than being the mediator between the canvas and the wall, the space where the painting’s world ends and one can transition back to reality lies-this frame just barely holds in the exuberance from this fantastical realm. With Van Gogh’s frame, the imaginary world of the still life calmly encroaches, slowly seeping into the wall. Far from fading as it radiates out, the colors and the emotions from this painting become only more saturated in his deep golden ochre frame. Further, the frame has many strange lines throughout, possibly evoking the Japanese writing around prints that he was

\textsuperscript{91} Vincent Van Gogh, Quinces, Lemons, Pears, and Grapes, 1887, The Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, figure 30.
so taken by.\textsuperscript{92} To write, or to evoke writing in this case, on the frame itself adds another irreplaceable trace of the artist’s hand in the work, and is integral to understanding the artist’s complete vision for the artwork.

Many wonder if Van Gogh’s lack of funds was a reason for him to turn to making his own frames, yet it is clear from his letters that he preferred making his own, and felt very strongly about the display of his work. In a letter to Theo, he wrote “the frames I use cost me 5 francs at the most, while the less solid gilded frames would cost 30 or more. And if the painting looks good in a simple frame, why put gilding around it?”\textsuperscript{93} He also noted that a frame he made “serves very well, since this frame doesn’t stick out at all and is one with the canvas.”\textsuperscript{94} Eliminating the cast shadow of a frame, he also created frames that mirrored the humble and simple scenes he chose to render on canvas. Aside from colored frames, Van Gogh used white frames and wooden frames as well, trying every new idea being considered at the time.\textsuperscript{95} Explaining the loss of all but one frame, Louis Van Tilborgh writes that as soon as the paintings become more popular, so too did collectors see fit to alter the frame around the works. “The flat, colored frame preferred by Van Gogh gradually disappeared in the early twentieth century, when his reputation began to soar. There were almost as many new frames as new owners…who were naturally influenced in their choice of frame by the interior decoration of their home.”\textsuperscript{96} At the same time, there was a “growing pressure to make the frames reflect the higher

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid, letter 718.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid, letter 834.
status and value of the paintings in the twentieth century.”97 When his work was beginning to be displayed in these ornate frames, several people who knew him were upset with the change, such as the son of Van Gogh’s friend Paul Gachet, who stated: “It is an act of moral barbarism to put gold frames around Vincent’s canvases, that simple, humble man who, out of modesty, did not even sign his canvases. The art-lovers who did not know the man venture to frame his works in different ways.”98 Although these records exist, the institutions of the present day continue this false representation of the works of many revolutionary, and now popularized, artists like the Impressionists.

97 Ibid, 178.
98 Ibid.
Chapter 5

Simplicity and Time

Today, when one thinks of simplicity, both in artwork and in display, the movements of the mid twentieth century such as Modernism and Minimalism generally come to mind. Although many artists had minimalist ideas throughout art history, some of the most well known examples are twentieth century painters such as Piet Mondrian, and Robert Ryman. Though their work is not known for being framed, they too had many ideas about the presentation of their work. Although the Impressionist’s simplistic white frames have been lost, (literally and figuratively) many modernist works, if framed at all, are encased in simple white frames, which are now considered the contemporary choice for paintings made in recent decades.99 The floater frame has become especially popular, where the painting seems to be suspended within a thin black or white border.100 By looking into these artists, the influences of the past as well as the contemporary state of frames can be examined further, as the Impressionist’s rejection of academy frames comes to fruition, and some artists choose to abandon them altogether. Piet Mondrian had a complex vision and a varied career, his now iconic grid compositions that he created in the twentieth century are staples of Minimalism in our current culture. This relates to frames, not only because again, this shows that artists

seem to prefer their work framed in simple ways, but also because Mondrian made his own frames as well. His main innovation was to use a flat white board, and rather than enclosing the edges of the canvas, he mounted the canvas on top of it. Rather than confining the canvas within a transitional border, his frames push the painting out into the viewer’s space. Speaking of his frames, Mondrian said “so far as I know, I was the first to bring the paintings forward from the frame, rather than set within the frame...In this way, I brought it to a more real existence.” Once again, the concept of reality in a painting is directly related to its framing; either bringing the painting further outside it’s canvas, into the viewer’s space, or further inside itself, to separate and to enclose it. Mondrian’s ideal was to make his painting a piece of the everyday, a “fusion between art and life, between the depicted space and the beholder’s space.” For example, one can consider this image of his painting in an empty dance studio. In the photograph, the light from the windows reflect onto the walls, and the painting, with it’s subtly of line and form, seems to mirror the effects of light coming through the window, melting onto the room, while also maintaining itself as a permanent shadow, a permanent beam of light, a still depiction of the constant movements of nature. The painting has become a part of the most basic environment that it is hung in, and its frame lifts it slightly off the wall, as if the canvas, like the light, is part of something farther away, a shadow, a suspended entity, touching the wall, yet hovering between the viewer’s reality. In this way, the

101 Piet Mondrian, *Composition C; Composition III; Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue*, 1935, figure 32.
frame is an essential aspect of his minimalistic abstract paintings. A catalogues was
made for Mondrian, and it records every detail of the paintings that Mondrian completed
over his lifetime, even including details about and images of the frames he used
whenever possible.105 This is rare and meticulous dedication to his work, a
comprehensive view into the development of his paintings and how he chose to display
them throughout his career. Mondrian wrote, “to move the painting into our
surroundings and give it a real existence has been my ideal since I came to abstract
painting.”106 The frame is therefore not only an element of his work, it is an irrevocable
aspect of his goal as an artist.

In this century, many artists also experimented with more conceptual ideas about
the framing of their work, and though many also created unframed works, they had strong
opinions about the space that their art existed in. Although it seems not to be framed, a
painting on steel by Robert Ryman is discussed in an interview with the artist.107 In this
painting, Ryman said that “the meaning of the work is inseparable from its structure and
its relationship to its surroundings. It lacks a frame but has integral brackets that screw
into the wall...without it’s brackets (the work) would certainly be considered
fragmentary; yet it would be equally defaced by the addition of a conventional frame.”108
Ryman considers these brackets as a frame, and states that the work would be fragmented
without his intended choice of presentation. The industrial surface of the steel is
contrasted by the thick white painted surface of the work, the duality of which would be

105 Yve-Alain Bois, Joop Joosten, Angelica Zander Rudenstine, and Hans Jansen Piet Mondrian: 1872-
106 Louis Veen, Piet Mondrian: The Complete Writings, Essays and Notes in Original Versions (Leiden:
108 Andrea Kirsh, and Rustin S. Levenson, Seeing Through Paintings: Physical Examination in Art
completely lost if the steel was hidden beneath a frame. Ryman speaks passionately about several other artists of his time whose work is often altered in ways that the artist would never have wanted. Talking about the presentation of Mark Rothko’s paintings, Ryman said:

“I’ve seen Rothkos with plexiglass in front and even frames. Of course, he would never have allowed that. Any time his paintings are exhibited in public, they should be exhibited the way he painted them, and not with any additions. And that holds true for painters like Ellsworth Kelly, Yves Klein, and myself…The frame isolates our experience from the wall. But that’s part of the realism of the painting: it is affected by real light, and the real presence of where it is.”

For Ryman, the artist’s plan for the display of their work is essential to the work itself, and not to be altered, even for utilitarian conservation reasons, such as plexiglass. For the most part, artists from the past century have been more thoughtfully represented in museums, yet artist opinions are often cast aside for curatorial visions, especially when the artist is no longer alive to protest. Another painter, Edward Hopper, had specific frames made for his work as well. Hopper’s wife Jo asserted the importance of the frame, protectively stating that her husband’s paintings are “destined to outlive much of the dense fog of ignorance and arrogance that has come to gain ground in our day. You will do well to guard a relic of the spiritual yet unobtrusive whose value belongs to time and history. You have a responsibility, and do not change it’s frame!” Not only did Hopper design his frames, it is clear that they were important to his work, especially since his wife makes such an adamant point about them. In addition, a lot of post war

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and contemporary art is assumed to be in its original state, such as Jackson Pollock’s work, which is always unframed or in a floater frame. However, photographic evidence shows that he too framed his work.\textsuperscript{112} As seen in this image from his studio, where one of his drip paintings is framed in a thick white frame, much like the one Seurat depicted in his studio painting.

Through the research I have conducted thus far, it is clear that the artist, when asked, advises a frame, and one that is not elaborate, unless it is made by them and melts into the world of the painting. And although one would expect history to progressively become more open about framing choices, as early as the seventeenth century, artists were trying to influence the framing of their paintings. Even one of the most traditional and academy-approved artists, Nicholas Poussin, preferred more modest frames on his work, as seen in a letter he wrote to a collector who had recently purchased one of his paintings. In 1639, he wrote: “once you have received your painting, I beg you, if you think it a good idea, to adorn it with some framing… It would be very fitting that the said frame be gilded quite simply with matte gold, for it unites very sweetly with the colors without clashing with them.”\textsuperscript{113} Carefully trying to influence his patron without insulting him against whatever frame he may have been planning for the work, Poussin makes it clear that his painting looks better without the elaborate and shiny gold surface that was popular in his time. The buyer, M. Chantelou remarked in a later letter, “M. Poussin always requests that his paintings be given quite simple frames with no burnished

\textsuperscript{112} Matter, Herbert. Jackson Pollock, ca. 1947 Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

In the National Gallery, a painting by Poussin is framed in an elaborate French frame, and Nicholas Penny, a former director of the museum considers this frame in his book *A Closer Look at Frames.* Though he describes the frame as “spectacular,” he says that the frame is “not at all what Poussin intended,” as the frame “upstages the dancing Israelites” depicted in the painting. Even in the seventeenth century, when there were little alternatives, artists were trying to avoid the overpowering effects of gilt frames. Jean-Claude Lebensztejn (an art history professor at the University of Paris) wrote that “A frame always serves as physical evidence that the painting is never self sufficient,” further quoting the painter Jean-Jacques Rousseau who noted: “the crudest drawings are kept in the most gilded and pompous frames, while the better ones need only a simple black one.” This possibility that the painting can not represent its own importance without another object to prop it up embodies the popular impulse to put expensive paintings into expensive frames. This quote however, suggests that the elaborate frame is actually an insult to the artist. Implying that the painting is not whole in itself, not good enough on its own, and unable to assert its own importance. Yet, we expect frames around famous works of art. The frame can hide the imperfections of a canvas, covering any rough edges or paint that may have spilled onto the sides. Without the frame, the painting looks more raw, less ideal.

Similar to the way a painting is painted over in restorations to support a timeless image, when a painting is placed in an elaborate frame, it is immediately elevated to an

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idealized status. The frame preemptively asserts that the work is important, a task the painting itself might not be able to perform on its own. Though eager to replicate these traditional elaborate frames, which are important examples of craftsmanship and decoration in art, every curator and frame maker that I have spoken to thus far has been adverse to recreating researched copies of artist frames. Their argument is often that they might be “committing forgery,”¹¹⁸ or “unable to recreate the exact pigment that they might have used.”¹¹⁹ I find these arguments to be strange, not only because the frame industry is based on creating copies of frames, but also because of the technological advancements and resources people, such as restorers, use today. Their concerns might be valid, if these concerns weren’t already true in painting conservation. When it comes to curators and conservators, famous paintings are already painted on, over and repaired as if the original work of the artist is less important than the idealistic condition of the work after all these years. Protecting the work from decay, especially iconic museum examples, is a worthy cause. But how far can one go before these concerns of authenticity and pigments are related to the canvas as well?

Many paintings are already restored by specialists who scientifically match and create paint like the artist would have used, and then literally paint over the original canvas in order to upkeep the image of the work. If society allows this to occur, one would think that painted frames would seem comparatively less invasive. In a video made by the National Gallery of Canada, one can see a specialist shockingly painting on top of the Monet, and many times, conservators have to undo what others have done at

various time periods due to advances in scientific knowledge. However good the intentions are to keep a painting in ideal condition, if institutions have accepted the audacity it takes to paint over a masterwork, then why are they so opposed to framing a painting like the artist would have ideally wanted? Perhaps it all comes down to the client. If a curator or a client wanted an authentic representation, it would likely be possible to make something close to the artist’s intentions.

Uniting a famous painting with its originally intended frame should be a function of restoration, especially in museums. Reproduction frames are always marked as reproductions, so there should be no confusion about authenticity in institutions. And while people aim to upkeep an artist’s work, by painting on it, they are already jeopardizing the painting’s authenticity. Similar to a signature, a Monet is original if done in the artist’s hand, and once Stephen from the museum’s conservation department has added to it, its value is inherently less direct, though the image remains in pristine condition. Since the concern is to maintain the artist’s initial creation, then showing the work with an original frame that was essential to the artist’s initial creation could be a part of this process.

Michael Gregory once stated that "The frame is the only thing you can change about a painting, once you've bought it, that is the only way you can personalize it." Which leads me to wonder, why does one seek to own or to display a painting in the first

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place? Often the answer is because it resonates with them personally. Even if purchasing art for status, the buyer chooses to spend money on a specific work of art for a variety of personal reasons. A painting is internally personalized, and has everything to do with an individual’s taste, regardless of the canvas or the piece of wood surrounding it. The world that the artist created on these materials is what one connects to on a very subjective level when they see a work that they want to own. If a painting needs to be “personalized,” it is nothing but a disposable product itself. For museums, they have their own specific agendas as well, and the paintings they acquire (hopefully) are valued individually as important works of art. Just because a frame can be removed, does not mean it should always be done. The above quote from Mr. Gregory, one of the most prominent fame makers today, directly points to and supports Mr. Lebensztejn’s thought that the frame is for the purpose of enhancing a work of art. Further, when I spoke with the manager at Lowy, a famous framing company in New York City, they again confirmed this thought, as their slogan is “Art Improved.” There, I was told that frames can be considered as “enhancements” and “validations” for an artwork, and that they are “the decorative arts vessel which completes the artwork package.” Again, it seems that the divide between the fine and decorative in frames slants towards the decorative because this is the function that the majority of the most influential people (gallery owners, curators and museum boards) prefer. The lack of fluidity between the two classifications influences the restorers, the private clients and the public, completing this unchanging cycle, where the frame becomes merely a function of status. In this way,

125 Brad Shar, interview by Isabella Kapczynski. Interview: Lowy New York, New York, (September, 2019).
the frame becomes rather invisible, and neither the quality of carved antique frames nor the innovations of artists over time are properly acknowledged.

When an artist considers the frame as part of their work, then anyone who respects their canvases really should consider their frames as part of the painting itself; not as a changeable object, but an element as important to protect as the paint on the canvas. If one classifies the frame as a decorative object, then it would make sense that the successive owners of the painting would make the decision how to frame it. Much like a chair, the frame would be part of the furniture, a decoration that can be admired as part of the overall interior design, but is not created to match the painting on the wall. The artist’s frame would be considered as another eccentricity or specificity of the artist such as the color of walls or lighting choices they might have preferred for their works. However, if the frame is to be considered fine art, shouldn’t the artist’s point of view become as essential as their paintings? Unlike a chair, the frame is in direct contact with the painting, and therefore effects it’s overall aesthetic more than a nearby chair might.

Edouard Manet once said, “without the proper frame, the artist loses one hundred percent.”¹²⁶ Now, one can get lost in what Manet might mean by “proper,” however, the core message of his statement is that as an artist, he finds the frame to be an integral part of his painting. To those framing a Manet, as with the other artists discussed in this paper (and countless more), the frame should be taken as seriously as the canvas itself. Any notes or records of how he liked his work framed should be considered with the same respect that one gives to the colors and the brushstrokes on his canvas. Any alteration

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would then be akin to painting blue over his green because one thinks that it suits the composition better.

Perhaps we have all become used to these gold frames, and they make it easy to distinguish what is commonly accepted as a masterpiece. At this point, it is likely that paintings in museums would look extremely odd if taken out of their gilt frames. One of the first things I noticed about these frames is what happens to the painting when you change or remove them. Would taking the frame off of an old master painting do anything to the painting? Would this removal make the painting look like it could be a contemporary knock off? Strangely, museum websites crop the frames off of their paintings in their online archives. Though the paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art are framed in elaborate gilt frames, the works reproduced online are cropped, lacking frames. Why is this? What does this say about the way museums regard frames? If they are so necessary then why do they crop them out online? Perhaps because they do see frames as an interior decoration, and online, their collection is not displayed in a physical space, it is fragmented, each artwork can be searched and viewed separately, without other examples in the room. In the Louvre, a portrait by Ingres is exhibited in its original rectangular arched frame, yet the official photographic section of the Paris National Museum has it represented in a “normalized” state.\textsuperscript{127} This altering of the image not only removes the frame, but also changes the shape of the painting, completely contradicting Ingres’ composition. Though the frame is seen by many to be an addition, a support, or an enhancement, the moments where the frame is “emphatically non-neutral,” for better or worse, reveals the intricacies and the history of the painting in a way that the painting

would not convey on its own. Decorative or fine, obvious or not, the frame is part of the work of art that it surrounds, and should be treated and acknowledged as such. As the physical object separating the artist’s inner world from outer reality, the frame should be seen in all its possible implications, a spectrum of considerations, both surface and subliminal- from marketing and status to craftsmanship and unique creation. When all aspects are taken into account, a more direct and varied framing process may be able to emerge. Perhaps gilt frames will always remain the choice of institutions, but with a recognition of frames there would be an increase in opinions as well as in possibilities for framing and reframing important works of art.

Conclusion

Frames in Focus

Through education, more people could benefit from knowing the implications of frames, and the myriad effects they perpetrate on paintings. Though there is no “correct” or overarching way to classify frames, it is essential that they are further discussed and considered so that people can make more personally informed framing decisions. The best way to do this would be through museums. If the museums would discuss framing further, create more daring exhibitions, or promote this lost information on their websites, people could learn about these important elements of paintings.

Today, the focus of the frame business lies in copying and reproducing original frame styles. Although frames are currently classified as decorative art, they should be respected, both as skillfully crafted decor, and as objects that can complete an artist's composition. The revolutionary frame designs by artists throughout history are important elements of their paintings and their practice. Yet looking through a huge gilded frame, looming over the canvas with encrusted shiny gold, and leaving shadows that distort the hues that the artist applied, one would never know. Is it not the responsibility of museums, at least, to accurately represent the artists that they venerate and show? Frames are often used as a selling tool, and gilded ones especially give off a sense of grandeur and importance, yet they are often untrue to the artist’s vision. Perhaps frames are also less widely discussed because they so often are used to manipulate buyers, and
can be so closely related to commerce- a topic largely avoided by those participating in the art world. For galleries and auction houses who are trying to sell an artwork, it makes more sense why such a filter of glamour would be placed around the painting. But when it comes to museums, this framing represents an unfaithful veneer of grandeur that not only changes the painting, but also can alter the artist’s intent to such a degree, it is as if the canvas is shown in an incomplete state. Due to the research that has been done in the late twentieth century, museums have many resources for how the artists in their collections would have finished their work. If it is too costly, or somehow impossible to reframe works in the physical museum, I would suggest that these institutions use their online presence to educate people about these artist’s creations.

At Eli Wilner Gallery, I asked if new technologies have influenced the company at all, and though they still construct their frames with old techniques and a team of highly skilled craftsmen, they have found an important resource in online renderings of frames. In this way, they can accurately create multiple images of a client’s painting framed in several different styles online, so they may better compare before they choose one to be made. Museums could create a similar forum, where information about artist frames could be shown to the public, and examples could be created to give people a sense of the artist’s intentions. This could be done with a digital rendering of the online image with a frame mock up based on research from artist images and writings. There is a perfect opportunity for this, as the works are already clipped from their frames on museum websites, and if, whenever research permits, the museum would digitally render the artist’s frame (or comparable example) along with the work in their online

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collections, this would become an effective and worthwhile project for educating the public and preserving an almost lost history. Further, art history courses and textbooks show only cropped images of the artworks as well. Though the painting may have had several frames over time, I have never seen framing included in an art history course. In frames, forgotten or ignored elements of history can be rediscovered and tracked.

When we look at the world we see it in a frame, our own frame of vision. One pinpoints details and moments, focusing on specific elements of the world around them, mentally framing space. The frame around a painting focuses the eye on the image within it, outlining the space where one is to look. By further analyzing frames, one can even have a better understanding of the way they see, the way they perceive details and why. Many things in life are framed a certain way, from advertisements to news stories, to literature, and looking for a metaphorical or linguistic framework can change the decisions and moods of one’s daily life. Artists create or choose frames to add to or to contrast with the visual message of their paintings. When taken out of these original frames, the painting can then be, in a sense, appropriated by anyone who chooses a new frame for it. The frame can alter or enhance the artwork, yet the original intent of the artist is always essential to seeing the painting clearly.
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