

FRAMING THE FRAME

**Family Education and Activity Guide
Proposal for the Harn Museum of Art Committee
April 20, 2011**

Exhibition Seminar Final Project
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Framing the Frame is an exhibition organized by University of Florida Museum Studies graduate students. This exhibition focuses specifically on the ways in which frames influence visitors' perceptions of art in museums. The history and critical theory of picture frames is integral to the development of art, as the frame has been a component of the art viewing experience since the brink of man's artistic endeavors. Because the traditional frame is now familiar, its presence is often received with little consideration from the general public, if not dismissed entirely as being insignificant. It is when one questions the reason for frames that the persuasiveness of this device is revealed.

The *Framing the Frame* exhibition invites visitors to critically engage with the role of framing by drawing attention to the various types of framing methods used within an art museum. This guide outlines the framing methods addressed in the exhibition, and provides historical information, key terms, and writing activities to enhance your child's educational experience at the Harn.

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1. Introduction

- **Why discuss frames?**

The term “frame” is both a noun and a verb, indicating that action is bound within the physicality of a picture frame. Because a frame is both a structural border and the process of devising a plan, the dual definitions suggest that frames influence the ways we see and ultimately understand visual art. A frame can either enhance or impair the aesthetic aspects of the image it surrounds, and will always impact the viewing experience even if the viewer is unaware of the frame’s effects.

- **What is the focus of this exhibition?**

In this exhibition, the importance of frames’ influence will be analyzed. Frames play integral roles in ways people understand art, yet their directive qualities are frequently underestimated in lieu of the artwork they display. *Framing the Frame* brings the picture frame to the forefront and entices visitors to critically engage with its function. This exhibition will also extend the definition of frame to include other methods of display applied in art museums. We ask visitors to think of the implications involved in framing: How does a picture frame change the way a work of art looks? Do museum displays present art from different parts of the world equally? Can an art museum be an example of a frame that influences what the public calls art?

- **How are the functions of frames applicable to my child?**

Frames are devices that can influence the ways people understand art. Informing children of discreet persuasion is an important lesson that can be applied to various situations. This exhibition promotes critical thinking skills, and encourages visitors to engage with works of art beyond an immediate glance. By using frames as a starting point, we can learn the different ways museums display objects, and discern how these methods shape our individual understandings of art.

2. Glossary

The following is a list vocabulary words that address aspects of framing. We encourage you to introduce these terms to your child as you discuss the different frames throughout the exhibition and museum.

Arabesque: A scrolling decorative pattern that can consist of geometric designs.

Back Edge: The outermost section of the frame.

Cartouche: A decorative panel with scrollwork resembling a shield or crest.

Gesso: A liquid mixture of chalk, glue, and water. Several coats are applied to wood to prepare the frame for gilding.

Gilding: The process in which gold or silver leaf (thin sheets of gold or silver, similar to the thickness of paper) is adhered to the wood surface of a frame. **Molding:** The shaped outline of a frame.

Patina: The natural or artificial discoloring of a surface.

Punchwork: A surface decoration made with a shaped tool or stamp

Rail: The place where the top edge of the frame curves in from the edges.

Replica: When a period frame is duplicated, the craftsman works directly with the original frame.

Reproduction: When a frame is copied from sources other than an original period frame.

Rope Twist: An ornament carved in a twisted form to resemble a rope.

Running Pattern: A decoration that runs continuously around a frame.

Sight Edge: The innermost section of the frame that borders the artwork.

Top Edge: The element of the frame that projects farthest toward the viewer.

(Definitions taken from the glossary of *The Gilded Edge: The Art of the Frame*, edited by Eli Wilner, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000. Please visit the end of this guide for more outside reading suggestions!)

3. A Background for Frames

Cave Paintings

The discussion of frames can be traced to the beginning of art. Although the earliest types of art known as cave paintings (dating back to pre-historic periods like the Stone Age of 30,000-2500 BCE) did not employ physical frames, we can identify the foundations of framing methods to artwork from this time. Cave paintings such as *Lascaux* in France were composed of natural earthen dyes, and depicted images of early man hunting large animals. The compositions were similar to murals, and utilized entire walls of caves. The arrangement of the animals and humans appears to depict a type of narrative, and suggest the borders of the cave wall are a frame for the image. Below is an example of a pre-historic cave painting. Notice how the ridges of the cave wall act as framing devices that guide our eyes around the painting so that we understand how the different animals in this painting relate to each other.



Hall of Bulls, Lascaux Caves, France, 15,000-13,000 BCE

Neolithic Structures

Structural designs such as Stonehenge from the Neolithic Period (7000-1700 BCE) reveal elements that are very similar to the structure of traditional picture frames. Even though the design is cruder than architecture of today, this mysterious structure uses the same outline for frames that recur in the visual arts and architecture throughout history. Below is an image of Stonehenge, located in England. Notice how the stones are arranged to form three-dimensional rectangular shapes on the land. Why are the stones arranged in this way? Are they trying to frame the aspects of the landscape, sun, moon, and stars? Archeologists believe this structure was created for ceremonial purposes, although the specific use of these stones is still a mystery.



Stonehenge, Salisbury Plain, Wilshire, England, 2750-1500 BCE

Ancient Ceramics

More traditional methods of framing can be seen on ceramics from across the globe. As you visit the different galleries of the Harn museum, take a moment to look for and discuss the different types of rectangular frames artists designed into their visual compositions. Please keep in mind the time periods and geographic locations of these objects. Were people from different parts of the world using similar visual techniques in their art? If so, how are they similar? How are they different? Do you think any similarities reveal communication between the different cultures? How does creating a border around the images affect the way you concentrate and/or pay attention to the other imagery on the ceramic vessel?



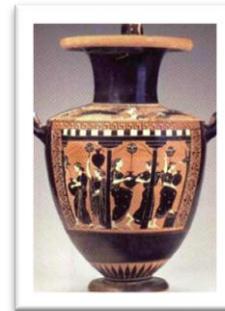
Iranian Beaker, 4,000 BCE



Chinese Neolithic Vessel, 2300-2000 BCE



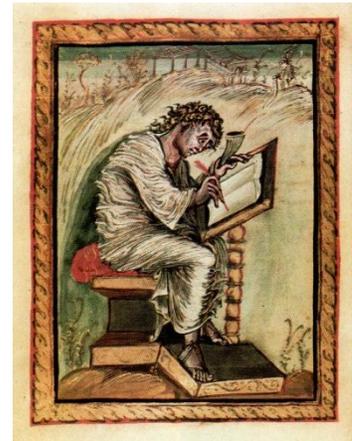
Mayan Vessel, Codex-Style, 550-800 CE



Greek Vase, Women at a Fountain House, 520-510 BCE

Early Christian Artwork

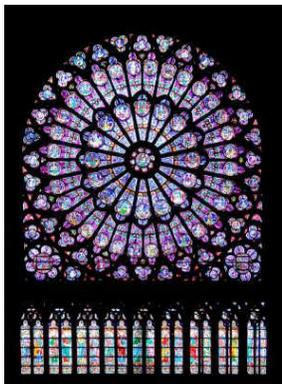
The roots of traditional picture frames can be traced to architectural framing devices used in religious places of worship such as cathedrals and temples. Early Christian art is especially connected to the evolution of traditional picture frames. Medieval art in Europe (500-1150 CE) established the strong development of Christian art and architecture throughout the continent. This



Page with Matthew the Evangelist, Book of Matthew, Ebbo Gospels, c. 816-35. France

further evolved into the Gothic Period (1150-1400 CE) which is best identified by massive cathedrals constructed across Western Europe. Frames in these settings created borders around images

of devotion, such as the Virgin Mary and Child, as a means of separating the image from common people. As a result, the frame encouraged a sense of distinction between art and the rest of society. Elaborate frames also reflected the wealth of the church and its patrons, as well as suggested connections to the heavens in their luxury. Examples of frames in places of worship include borders around altarpieces, diptychs and triptychs, window frames, and book bindings. How are the frames in the images below similar to the frames you see throughout the art museum?



Notre Dame Cathedral Windows, 1180-1225 CE, France



Duccio di Buoninsegna, Maesta Altarpiece, 1308, Italy

The Renaissance: A Rebirth

Perhaps one of the most well-known periods in the history of Western art is the Renaissance. Artists such as Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci commanded the attention of 15th-16th century Italian society, as interest in ancient Greek and Roman classicism was revitalized throughout Europe—a “rebirth” from the Gothic era. The styles and functions of frames also evolved during this time to reflect the changing ideals of Western Europe. Frames began to adopt similarities to architectural elements in Greek and Roman temples. Frames were also



Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* is framed using one of the portable frames that were invented during the Renaissance. These frames remain as what are currently considered traditional frames.

ornamented with shields, scrolls and leaves, all motifs that would have been considered inappropriate for frames in religious settings.

One of the biggest changes for frames during the Renaissance was the invention of frame portability. Prior to the Renaissance, frames were architectural embellishments that were a permanent part of a building added to enhance the interiors of important spaces for nobles and clergy. The Renaissance saw rise of

independently wealthy families who were also patrons of the arts such as the powerful Medici family. As a result

frames were designed by artists specifically for artwork

commissioned for one's home, and enabled families to relocate work between their various estates, or even within different rooms of their homes. Frames were created specifically for works of art, as well as home interiors. This portable style of frame is now recognized as the traditional types of picture frames we commonly use for works of art today.

Frames and Modernity

As the popularity of collecting art increased among the middle class in Europe, so too did the popularity of frame making. Artisans began frame making as a trade, replacing artists who had also made frames for particular artworks. With the rise in frame

production came a decrease in frame specificity. As a result, frames became less and less important to the wholeness of a painting; however, some artists

such as Degas and Whistler were exceptions to this change. Degas, best known for his Impressionist-style paintings of ballet dancers, is even rumored to have removed a gifted painting from a friend's home because the frame was changed! Whistler believed his frames were equally important to his compositions, and even wrote, "I have designed (my frames) as carefully as my picture—and thus they form as important a part as any of the rest of the work—carrying on a particular harmony throughout."

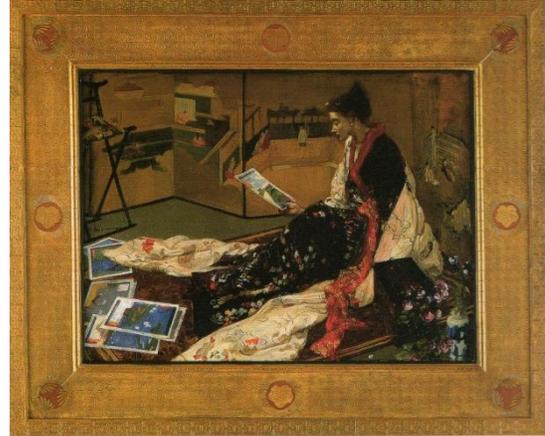
Modern art influenced artists to think about the relationship between tradition and art practices.

During this time, the role of frames in art were regularly questioned, leading many artists to abandon the use of frames for their art entirely. Why do you believe an artist would decide to not frame their work? Are there any kinds of side effects, either positive or negative, that frames bring to art? Artists such as Frank Stella

incorporated the idea of framing into the shapes of his paintings. How

does this change your opinion of frames?

Frank Stella is an American painter whose paintings are quite large, using solid colors in contrast with heavy lines and strong geometric shapes. His career primarily spanned the 1950-80s.



James McNeill Whistler, *Caprice in Purple and Gold: the Golden Screen*. 1864. Whistler created this frame specifically for this painting, ornamenting the wood frame with gilded gold leaf.

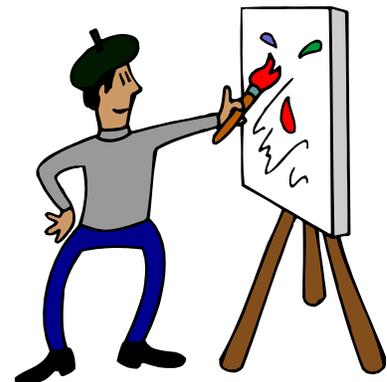


4. Exhibition Writing Activities

Sometimes it is difficult to even think about how frames effect the ways you see and understand art. The following questions were created to help you appreciate why frames are important. Take a moment to read these questions over, and consider the different ways you could possibly answer them. Feel free to be creative with your answers! Sometimes it is even better to draw a picture for a response!

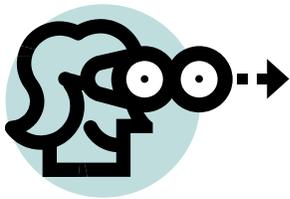
Most people consider frames to be purely decorative. What kinds of frames would you call decorative in this museum? Where are they? What kinds of artwork do they frame?

What makes a frame decorative? What kinds of frames are not decorative? Why might someone not want to use a decorative frame for their art?



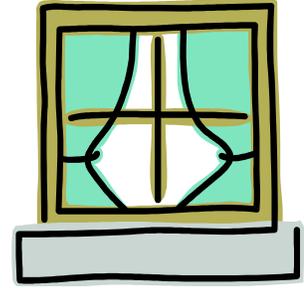
In the past, many frames were attached to buildings as part of the architecture.

Can you think of places where there are frames like this? Are there any examples in the museum?

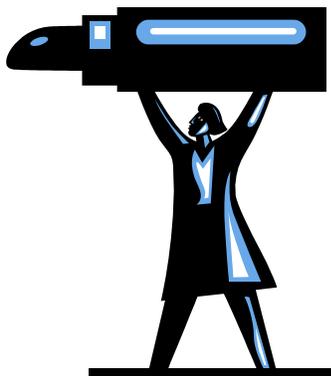


Frames provide a border between the artwork and the wall or room. How does this make a difference in the way you see the art? Can you find a painting that you really like in the museum, and imagine what it would look like without its frame? Would it still be your favorite painting without the frame?

When you look at a framed picture, do you ever feel like you are looking out a window? Are there windows in the museum that allow you to see artwork that is outside?

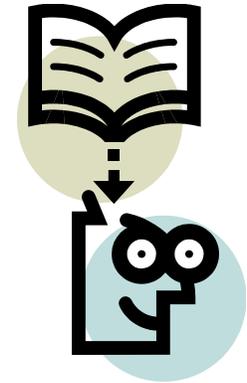


If you could make any picture frame, what would it look like? Would you put any designs on it? What kind of art would go inside your frame?



5. Outside Activity and Reading Suggestions

We encourage you to continue the discussion of frames and framing devices at home and/or in other museums. Here is a list of a few reading and interactive sources that you or your child may find particularly interesting!



Making Frame Crafts for Kids: Ideas for Frame Making Arts and Crafts Projects & Activities for Teens, Children, and Preschoolers

This website suggests hands-on frame making craft projects for children of all ages, and uses everyday materials you probably already have in your home.

<http://www.artistshelpingchildren.org/photoframespictureframesartscraftsideaskids.html>

Musical Picture Frames

Follow Mystery Guitar Man as he animates and frames the different instrumentation for the song "Ghosts 'n' Stuff" by musical artist DeadMau5.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxYXg5vhqjw>

Frame Conservation

The Tate museums are a family of four art galleries housing the UK's collection of British art from 1500 and of international modern art. This link explains how the museums' conservation teams decide which frames to preserve and use for the collections.

<http://www.tate.org.uk/conservation/frames>

Eli Wilner, ed., *The Gilded Edge: The Art of the Frame* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000).

This book provides an excellent historical guide to the development of picture frames in the United States. Although the reading level is quite advanced, this book is full of wonderful full-color photographs, and provides plenty of in-depth research for American frame (and art!) enthusiasts.

W.H. Bailey, *Defining the Edges: A New Look at Picture Frames* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002).

Bailey develops a critical engagement with the evolution of frames, basing his positions on historical examples of picture frame developments. The language used in this book is also for advanced readers; however, it is beautifully illustrated with examples of different frames and framing methods used by artists of all time periods. We suggest that parents of younger children read this book first on their own, and then discuss the different ideas with their children while looking at the various photographs printed on the pages. Bailey's selections of artwork are sure to generate great discussions!