

THE PICTURE AND ITS FRAME

Ever since there have been paintings and they have been framed, it is somewhat surprising that no serious research has ever been undertaken on the problem of the frame. To be sure, some scholars have published studies on the different types of frames employed, particularly in Europe during the last centuries; they have classified them according to certain criteria and traced out their variations through various epochs and countries.¹ But the principal question has been avoided: why the frame? Perhaps because it is not capable of being answered; perhaps because located at the limits of esthetics, at the border between painting and furniture, it is considered to have lesser importance in comparison with theories of the visual arts, which have particularly

Translated by Sidney Alexander.

¹ J. v. Falke, *Rahmen*, 1892; M. Guggenheim, *Le cornici italiane dalla metà del secolo XV allo scorcio del XVI*, Milan, 1897; E. Bock, *Florentinische und venetianische Bilderrahmen aus der Zeit der Gotik und Renaissance*, Munich, 1902; *Cadres et bordures de tableaux de la fin du XVI^e siècle au premier empire*, Paris, 1910; Serge Roche, *Cadres français et étrangers du XV^e au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, s.a.; *Catalogue de l'exposition du cadre ancien du XVI^e au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Galerie Louis Sambon, 1924; Werner Ehlich, *Bild und Rahmen im Altertum*, Leipzig, 1954.

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drawn the attention of historians and art critics, not to mention essays full of good will by amateurs in the mood for writing.

However, ever since there have been paintings we find the frame, under the most diverse forms, from the simple marks surrounding scenes on the walls of Roman catacombs, to the gilded bronzes of Baroque epochs; from subtle ornaments around miniatures of manuscripts, up to immense wooden monuments and majestic sculptures, not to mention the papers and silks of Chinese and Japanese scrolls, nor the wooden moldings of Faiyum. The material varies; the forms are innumerable; the principle remains universal and must normally respond to over-riding needs.

It would be profoundly mistaken to limit the idea of the frame to its mobile form, so familiar to us today. The dictionary of the French Academy is only defining a recent situation: "A border of wood, marble or bronze... etc., in which a picture, a print, a bas relief is placed... etc.," the border being "that which garnishes or decorates or strengthens the edge of something." Probably with the exception of the Faiyum portraits this formula applies only to the last five hundred years. Without speaking of paintings on walls and on furniture, up to the fifteenth century the frame was materially created first and delimited a space reserved for the painted work. Icons have continued this method up to our own day.

Of course, the most ancient traces of parietal art did not know of any line which would enclose the animals, characters, scenes. It is probable that in those sanctuaries the works were created according to a rhythm and for determined magical purposes. The picture did not exist simply as such; it was executed at a given moment for a specific end. In the second millennium before Christ, the prototype of the frame appeared on a stone slab found at *Kivik* (Sweden): a vertical mark on each side of the subject, two horizontal marks above and below. From the time when there is a line deliberately enclosed to separate a particular area from the rest of the surface, there is a frame. In the Palace of Mari and Cnossus in the first centuries of the second millennium before Christ, the different scenes on the wall were surrounded by bands of a unified tone or simple designs, which cut off spaces on the wall reserved to the different themes being treated.

Much later, Roman catacombs offer us numerous examples of the same kind.

So long as the painting remains an ornament, that is to say, an accessory, so long as it possesses no individuality, limiting itself to render a pre-existing element more pleasant, and not modifying its condition, there is no frame. In this statement may legitimately be discerned one of the explanations for the stripped-down presentation of modern pictures. If it is incontestable that abstract works might have some significance, their exterior appearance too often makes one think of a simple decoration which does not necessarily have to be framed. Hence the temptation to show the work bare.

Ever since painting refuses to be an ornament and wishes to be a representation of reality, even non-figurative, it thereby acquires a personality; it embodies itself in its foundation to form a new object according to Etienne Gilson's penetrating formulation: "What is called a painting is a material, solid thing occupying a defined place in space and permanently functioning in all its parts."² Its limitation to the plane, and thereby in space, is defined by the frame, from the time of the simple enclosed line up until the architectural sculptures of decadent epochs.

In this separation itself Baudelaire finds a certain beauty:

Comme un beau cadre ajoute à la peinture
Bien qu'elle soit d'un pinceau très vanté
Je ne sais quoi d'étrange et d'enchanté
En l'isolant de l'immense nature.

[As a beautiful frame adds to the painting / Although it be by a most-praised brush / A something strange, I know not what enchantment / In isolating it from immense nature.]

The poet is aware of the creation of a new object, the painting, which the frame only defines.

Up to the middle of the eighteenth century, the frame was called a border, a more expressive word responding to that first function of delimitation. The painting is terminated, as its maker had conceived it, whether he carried it out in a pre-existing frame, or whether it had been enclosed to indicate its completion.

² *Peinture et réalité*, Paris, 1958.

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The portrait of St. Nemo is only an empty rectangle with the inscription: "*Figura neminis quia nemo in ea depictus*"³: the frame created the work.

The frame may surround several pictures. The pictures are separated by partial frames which are part of the general frame harmonizing all. In the Middle Ages and among primitives it is normal that the principal work be surrounded by smaller scenes separated by painted frames or even frames in relief. A *Mary Magdalene* of the thirteenth century in the Gallery of the Academy of Florence shows the central figure jutting out onto eight little border scenes, more or less strongly delineated. Sassetta's *Madonna and Child* at the National Gallery in London combines three separate subjects in the same picture.

So long as painting had not conquered its independence with regard to the wall, to the object, or to the parchment page, the frame remained inscribed in the plane, a support whose surface could be extended outside the borders. The imaginary window opened on the world in *trompe-l'œil* had to be encompassed in order that the impression of reality be more perfect; the representation of an invented scene had to be sharply separated from its surroundings in order that the impression of reality be more perfect; the representation of an invented scene had to be sharply separated from its surroundings in order to indicate that it was not true. In both cases, the frame was indispensable: examples of both formulas are found in Pompeian frescoes as well as in Chinese scrolls. In each case, and although at first glance, this might seem contradictory, the frame is reassuring: it is not a random aperture, but rather desired by the artist who effaces himself before his creation. "By means of the frame, an evidently artificial separation, the painting says 'I am only a painting'," declares Alain.⁴ French philosophy believes that this limit is artificial: one must take this word in its old sense, that is, a product of art, a work of man in opposition to the natural, which

³ *Sermo pauperis Henrici de Sancto Nemine cum preservatione eiusdem ab epidemia*, Augsburg, 1510 (Information provided by Prof. E. Castelli).

⁴ *Vingt leçons sur les beaux-arts*, Paris, 1931.

is a product of nature; for it is certain that this separation is not factitious but required.

The frame tells the spectator that he has an accomplishment before his eyes; it individualizes and designates the work of art. The marbles of Ferrara, often not even retouched, in which the mind may imagine landscapes, *paesine*, in the Italian style of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries,⁵ like those of Yun-nan, still famous in China, reveal their value by their very framing.

Erecting the principle into a dogma and drawing the ultimate conclusions from it, Picabia one day exhibited at Drouant's a painting which seemed to mystify many of the visitors: a frame, through which were stretched four strings, suspended from the ceiling far from the wall which obstructed the space. Picabia was not exhibiting an empty lifeless frame, for it must be recognized that the frame's importance is not limited to the outside of the painting but is a part of it.

This question could not even be formulated when the picture was painted in a pre-existing frame; medieval retables, or in the icons and religious panels of the pre-Renaissance it was not possible to change the work without mutilating it.

This limit of the painting is part of the work; it is a "continuation and a boundary at the same time".⁶ It does not belong to an exterior within which the object will be fitted. The extreme case is that of the wall or the ceiling where high reliefs separate areas filled with paintings as in the great hall of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. But in that instance the problem is only being deflected; paintings and frames form an entity, separated from the wall or ceiling which supports them. That is only a particular case of a general rule. "The contour is part of the figure within."⁷

When the painting has a thickness: the wood, the stretcher on which the canvas is tacked, and when it is separated from the

⁵ Roger Caillois, "Où commence l'art?", *Arts*, Paris, September 2, 1960.

⁶ Max J. Friedlander, *On Art and Connoisseurship*, Oxford, 1942.

⁷ Kurt Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, New York, 1935.

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wall, it takes a delimited place in space as a result of the frame which, in general, projects. *Frame*, the English term, comes from an old root meaning "forward". Therefore, the unity, picture plus frame, becomes an architectural element and a kind of wall. This is easily realized when the painting is hung on the wall and is still more evident when it is placed on an easel in the middle of the room. It is quite common for frames to appear in *trompe-l'œil*, as at Pompeii or in the Fra Angelico Museum of San Marco in Florence.

Modern museum theory wishes to advance further. In the Guggenheim Museum in New York the painting is placed at the end of a support in front of the wall. Unframed, it becomes an unusual object which its maker had probably not intended; lost in space it seems to float in air. It is far from being evident that "the only framing required for a painting is this rapport with its architectural environment."⁸

In the Museum of the Jeu de Paume, the last works of Claude Monet are recessed into the wall, "encased in a false partition put in front of the wall with a slight dip in the bevel and covered with silver foil. After an attempt at what may be called "zero profile", we had a slight bevel made to suggest, nevertheless, a delimitation of the painting."⁹ The director of the museum did not dare eliminate the frame entirely but sought to give the picture the role of a fresco for which it had never been intended.

Whether it be in the Guggenheim Museum or in the Jeu de Paume, the individuality of the object tends to melt into its surroundings. Certainly, the excessive importance accorded to framing, often disproportionate with regard to the subject, springs from schizophrenia: the sick person feels "it necessary to escape into complete disaggregation, in order to avoid chaos." It is useful to make a "important border of dark tonality which tries

⁸ Frank Lloyd Wright, May 16, 1956 in *The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*, New York, 1960.

⁹ Germain Bazin, "Réaménagement du Musée du Jeu de Paume", *Museum*, Vol. 14-1, 1961, Paris.

to grasp the object by isolating it from its environment and restoring its own unique individuality to it.”¹⁰

The painting and its frame constitute an object. When Corneille de Lyon, in his portraits, paints the shadow cast on the painting by the border, he is only expressing this same idea.¹¹

The frame may be painted; at the Academy in Florence in a Greco-Venetian icon of the Virgin between the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, saints and prophets are depicted on the frame. Villon worked in the same way ever since *Noblesse* (1920), where the frame is painted dark brown to harmonize with the black, white, and red of the picture, up until *Pierrot* (1953), where the frame is stained black on a blue ground, picking up again the colors of the canvas.

The frame may be provided with shutters hiding the principal part, sometimes even to present another subject, as in Pompeii or in medieval retables. Some modern works shown frameless, but in which the lateral sides of the stretcher are painted, remind us that some substitute for a frame is necessary in order to make the painting an object.

Sometimes the painting goes beyond the area set aside for it and spills over onto the frame in order to enlarge the space of a given color or to lend all its force to a movement. This overflowing of the painted work onto the border is found, not only in frescoes and manuscript miniatures, but also in frames completed before the painter's work. Margaritone di Arezzo, in his *St. Francis of Assisi* at the Vatican Picture Gallery, paints the background of the picture and the frame in the same color, vivid blue and sombre red; *St. Paul and St. Peter*, in the catacombs of Domitilla, encroaches on the frame, like the angel attributed to Rublev in the Kihithrovo Gospels in the Lenin Library in Moscow or the portrait of Arnaud d'Andilly in which Philippe de Champagne has the hand go beyond the border.

In the opposite sense, Thomas Gainsborough, in his portrait of Richard Paul Jodrell in the Frick Collection in New York,

¹⁰ Robert Volmat, *L'Art Psychopathologique*, Paris, 1955.

¹¹ Information furnished by Mr. Charles Sterling.

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represents his model in an oval frame painted on the canvas; Seurat surrounds certain of his works with a frame painted on the canvas in a tonality in harmony with that of the painting; Rouault¹² and Tobey,¹³ whose esthetic concerns are different, do the same thing.

A special instance is that of certain Persian miniatures where the artists make the flag unfurl outside the frame of the real world represented. It seems that the artist wanted, in this way, to give these banners a supernatural value.¹⁴

On the other hand, the effect is normal when a fabulous animal is represented outside the frame, spitting fire on the main character;¹⁵ the dragon is not in the world where the scene takes place.

The very fact that in museums, framed paintings are framed again is a recognition of the unity of the work; the fifteenth century French *Virgin and Child* of the Frick Collection in New York; Cimabue's *The Madonna and Child with St. John and St. Paul* in the National Gallery in Washington; the *Dauphin*

¹² Cf. the *Gentil Bernard* of the Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts of Brussels or *Tibériade*. The analytical catalogue of Rouault's works drawn up by Pierre Courthion and Isabelle Rouault, limits the term "frame painted by the artists" to the frame painted on the canvas, not specifying cases in which the artist has painted on the wooden removable frame.

¹³ From *Remote Field* (1944) to *Estampage* (1961). Nevertheless, the painter confided to Michel Conil Lacoste, who reports the interview in *Le Monde*, 24 October 1961: "The frame strangles a painting. In fact, a work is hung twice, first by its frame, and secondly to its nail." Perhaps by frame the artist means only that element of different nature imposed onto the painting.

¹⁴ Gaston Wiet connects this fact of overflowing the frame to literary memories: "Just as in descriptions in the *Book of Kings* the gilded points of golden banners rise up to the skies, penetrating the margins of the page as if they were piercing the clouds." (*Livre des Rois*, II, pp. 361, 467, 468, 482). Firdusi describes the flag eight cubits high "similar to a tree on the crest of a mountain which seems to be touching the moon." (I, p. 443, III, pp. 153, 192). Placing the head of a banner "above the sky" has become a cliché (Sa'di, *Gulistan*, p. 148), in "Miniatures persanes turques et indiennes", *Mémoires de l'Institut d'Égypte*, Vol. XLVII, Cairo, 1943.

¹⁵ Honorius Augustodunensis, *Expositio in Cantico Canticorum* (Cod. XI. 80), Saint-Florian, 1301.

Charles d'Orléans by the Master of Moulins in the Bestegui Collection of the Louvre, and finally, the *Noblesse* of Villon, at the time of the recent exhibit at the Charpentier Gallery in Paris.

Thus, it is a mistake to reproduce paintings separated from their frame, as is usually done in art books. Most likely, the idea is to present pictures in a larger format. Also, the concept of unity has in general been forgotten ever since the advent of the mobile frame, from which time all importance has been given to the pictorial work alone, conceived however, as suitable to a given setting and expressing its full value only in that setting. This profound unity of frame and painting is also found in Chinese and Japanese scrolls although the framing of these might have occurred after the creation of the painting.

The frame bounding the painting also protects it against the encroachment of the outside. "Frames and glass are inevitably only inconveniences when the air conditioning is perfect," wrote Frank Lloyd Wright in August 1946.¹⁶ In this plan each area is reserved and cannot be altered without harm. When the frame is no longer just simply a mark or a painted decoration, and when the picture has become independent of the wall, the role of the frame becomes greater: it materially protects the work against damage from the outside. This problem has even become the subject of a very learned doctorate presented at the University of Leipzig by Erich Everth, "The picture-frame as the esthetic expression of protective functions".¹⁷ The mobile picture must be preserved without risks; the frame must allow it to be hung on the wall, prevent its running up against other objects capable of damaging it, either when it is established in one spot or being placed elsewhere: hence its thickness which constitutes a zone of security. It must resist the pressure of the wall, the shocks coming from the side or from the front; the picture is recessed and may be covered by a pane of glass. Sometimes the top part quite naturally takes the form of a roof, the lower part that of

¹⁶ *The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*, New York, 1960.

¹⁷ *Der Bildrahmen als ästhetischer Ausdruck von Schutzfunktionen*, Halle, 1909.

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a console and the spectator discovers that the frame has a top and a bottom. Furthermore, it must be possible to move it without danger. Framed, the picture acquires a new stability. It is better armed to resist man and the centuries.

The square frame is an invention of the last centuries which is explained today by *Gestalt* theories. But examples of all forms are offered: regular, round, elliptical, triangular, hexagonal and irregular.

In China and then in Japan the foundation—fine paper or silk—was the occasion for special kind of framing about which R. H. Van Gulik furnishes us with an extraordinary documentation.¹⁸ In order to be preserved, this light delicate material demanded a stronger support. In China, since the 2nd century A.D., and Japan, since the 7th century, paintings were “framed” in paper or silk, under the form of long scrolls which the connoisseur looked at slowly, unrolling them from right to left. The vertical scroll, framed in the same way, appeared five centuries later. For more than a thousand years the technique of mounting has not varied—paper or silk, crumpled and wrinkled by the brush strokes, again becomes smooth by being pasted on heavier paper. The picture is bounded on the top and on the bottom by two thin paper bands. To the right and to the left, above and below, long strips of colored paper and brocade in various designs “frame” the painting, the proportion and color of these changing according to fashion and epochs. A wooden roller on the side for hand-scrolls, on the lower part for vertical scrolls, makes it possible to unroll the painting and roll it back for better conservation: and for the second category, to hold the picture straight when it is hung on the wall. The Chinese and Japanese do not permanently hang the work in their possession. The paintings remain in cabinets; they are only shown to visitors able to appreciate them, or hung on the wall for short periods.

Outside of the Chinese painter's workshop, the picture is always framed. All modification involves risky difficult work, capable of deteriorating the original; it is comparable to a restoration. Thus, remounting is undertaken only to repair the havoc

¹⁸ “Chinese Pictorial Art”, *Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente. Serie orientale*, Vol. XIX, Rome, 1958.

of time and men. "Since the fate of famous scrolls depends entirely on the quality of their mounting," writes the Chinese collector, Tcheou Kia-tcheou, at the beginning of the 17th century, "I would go so far as to say that the framer is the master of the scroll's destiny".

If the importance of the frame for the purely material preservation of the art work has often been underestimated, the esthetic problem of the rapport between frame and picture has always remained a major consideration. "Everyone may observe," writes Alain, "that a frame embellishes a picture and gives it more value."¹⁹ Today, painters often seem to have forgotten this idea. Picasso, however, who wants only flat moldings as a frame, when he saw how the Soviet Museums had framed his pictures, exclaimed that these magnificent immense gilded sculptures were much more beautiful than his paintings. But having made this remark, he reverted to his original ideas; which didn't prevent him from painting, for a group of young friends, pictures with frames as well as their picture-hooks, on the wall of a new apartment.

The frame must help show off the value of the painting. On this point everyone agrees; then, questions of principle and taste come into play. In miniatures, the frame is often primarily decorative. However, through the ages, various painters have attached a special value to framing. Vasari recalls that the framer and gilder placed their signatures ahead of the painter's. Rembrandt painted the portrait of his gilder. Ruysdael, the father of the landscape artist, was famous for his simple austere ebony frames. Poussin's letter to Chantelou should be cited in this regard: "When you have received your picture, and if you find it good, I pray you decorate it with a little *corniche*,²⁰ for it needs it in order that while looking at it from all sides the eye's rays should be focussed and not deflected outside by receiving all kinds of other neighboring objects which, thronging pell-mell with the painted things, confuse the light. It would be especially suitable," he adds, "if the said *corniche* should be gilded very simply mat

¹⁹ Cf. note 4.

²⁰ From the Italian *cornice*, frame.

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finish, because that harmonizes very gently with the colors without breaking into them."²¹

The artist has forgotten that this was an epoch in which he was painting within a frame prepared in advance; nevertheless he was interested in dressing up his work. An English adage states: "You can judge the artist's opinion of his picture by the quality of the frame he selects for it." Very often the painter contents himself, like Poussin, with traditional means. But Dürer designed his frames, in particular for his *Martyrdom of Ten Thousand Christians* and his *Adoration of the Holy Trinity* which were then executed in wood by Veit Stoss. Seurat constructed his own frames. Degas and Renoir designed them. The problem seems less important to contemporaries, although Braque has dwelt on the problem, Rouault "seeks an accord between the painting and its frame,"²² and Masson, "artisan of his picture" has been concerned because of the absence of a frame.

When the painter gives no other indications, the framer will make his own choice; he participates in the creation of the unit: that is, the picture plus frame. "The painting is only the central panel of the work," declares Percy Brown with regard to Mogholes miniatures:²³ the artist's work is completed by a collage on cardboard and a frame painted by a specialist qualified from the technical as well as artistic point of view. Chinese painting assumes its full value only when it is mounted: the name of celebrated mounters like the two Wangs, father and son, of the fourth century A.D. are still illustrious. The scholar Tchang Tch'ao in the 17th century declares: "The mounting is to the scroll as make-up is to a young girl." Inasmuch as make-up follows fashion, styles of mounting do the same, according to the taste of epochs and changing ideas. A history of art could be written via the variations of framings all over the world in accordance with, or in reaction against, painting tendencies of the period.

²¹ April 28, 1639.

²² Letter of Mlle Isabelle Rivière to the author.

²³ *Indian Painting under the Moghols*, Oxford, 1909.

Just as the picture should not be looked at alone, the frame should not be studied alone, even if customs officials charge a special tariff for it. When it is incorporated with the work, the risk is less great, for unframing is a difficult and perilous job; having become mobile, it becomes easy to separate it from the frame. As a technical accomplishment the frame might be excellent, its artistic form of great value, yet, by itself, it becomes an object without a soul. Certainly, a piece of sculpture, almost architecture, such as that framing the *Portrait of a Man* by Dirk Bouts at the Metropolitan Museum of New York; or *The Virgin and Child* by Botticelli at the Ambrosian Gallery of Milan; or in some Gothic Czecho-Slovakian paintings, are monuments whose interest are far from being negligible. Despite its value, the pictorial work disappears.

In isolation, the frame is an element without function, without soul. Collectors are beginning to collect objects which possess, it cannot be denied, a certain beauty of incompleteness; but there is nothing sadder than an exhibit of frames, dead pieces like stuffed animals. The frame then becomes the main thing and the picture the accessory. Degas' wise saying is forgotten: "The frame is the pander of the painting; it sets off its value, but it must never shine at its expense," for the most beautiful frame is the one which goes unnoticed. Francis I asked his framer to provide him with a frame whose price would equal that of the painting; in the 18th century artists never had any hesitation about purchasing very expensive pieces, the *maquettes* must be the most beautiful, the carvings the most complicated, the materials the richest, nothing is ever magnificent enough, the frames become more and more intricate and often veritable monuments. It is probably in reaction against the massive picture frames in vogue at the end of the 18th century, that artists ended by adopting mere moldings.

The frame sets off the pictorial work in itself and in relationship to its surroundings. The Abbé Jean-Baptiste du Bos posed the problem: "Borders cast a new freshness on the colors and, by detaching them from neighboring objects, seem to re-integrate more successfully the parts of which they are composed."²⁴

²⁴ *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture*, Paris, 1719.

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Two and a half centuries later, Van Gulik, specialist in Chinese painting, writes: "The mounting (the framing for Chinese and Japanese painting) helps set off the beauty of the brushwork, heighten the tone of the ink and colors and, at the same time, place the painting in harmony with its environment."²⁵

The unit, picture plus frame, with relation to its surroundings, immediately poses another problem: this object must take its place amidst other objects; the temptation to cheat is great by changing the frame in order that it be more harmonious with the place in which it is located. Whence, the notion of seeking a liaison between the painting and the collector's room, or the room in the museum. The Roret encyclopedia, spokesman of common sense, declares: "The frame, so to speak, is the mark of union between the object which it encloses and the room where it is to be hung. Therefore, one must try as much as possible to satisfy both: nevertheless, in certain instances, it is preferable to do what is necessary to lend value to the framed subject and sacrifice the harmony of the room if it is not possible to reunite both qualities."²⁶ The picture frame enters into the "frame" of the setting to constitute a total harmony; it is no more than a simple piece of furniture in the décor of the room.

In the 14th century, the painter still chose his frame before beginning his work; sometimes he wrote the inscription *Orate pro pictore* on the frame in order that it should share in the prayer of the image. Later, he sought for the frame after having finished his work. Then, the framer's role becomes important; finally, it is the owner of the canvas, like Marie Antoinette, who had her monogram and arms sculptured on the frame of her portrait by Madame Vigée-Lebrun. The picture-dealer, Durand-Ruel, utilized a simple gilt molding, purchased by the meter, for all the works which he exhibited.

New possessors change the frame by virtue of their right of ownership. The painting is unframed, and reframed according

²⁵ Cf. note 18.

²⁶ S. Seulô and de Saint Victor, *Nouveau manuel complet des fabricants de cadres*, Paris, 1896.

to taste, the old frame cast aside; for, it must be noted, more old pictures have been preserved than old frames.

This way of doing things is not new. In the royal collections of France, when the setting of pictures was changed, the superintendents made formats even larger or smaller, "in order to correspond with the requirements of the furnishings." Clear-minded collectors like Maurice Gangnat are rare. Gangnat bought old frames and asked Renoir to fill them with a work, thus renewing ancient methods forgotten for half a millennium.

In the Pitti Palace in Florence, Italian pictures have gilt frames and Dutch pictures black frames. A further step was made when Schinkel in the Berlin Museum framed all his pictures in the same way, like uniformed inmates of an old age home.

Art lovers and the ever-more important museum directors—artists are disinterested—are taking new initiatives. They are eliminating frames, placing the pictures in front of the wall, a new way of revealing their particularities. The Museum of the Jeu de Paume has exhibited the Impressionists without any framing other than a simple white paper border. "The visitor has the impression of entering into the very space of the picture," declares the curator, Germain Bazin.²⁷ Theory is usually carried to extremes.

However, one must not forget that a picture, with or without a frame, is a piece of furniture. Through the centuries, according to the framework of the painting, borders have followed variations of taste parallel with architecture and housefurnishing. All symmetrical and asymmetrical forms, bizarre and simple, hollowed, flat, sloping out or in, with endlessly different shapes and ornaments made of all sorts of materials: wood, bronze, copper, leather, celluloid, cardboard, plaster, rope. They are Gothic, Renaissance, Louis XIII, Baroque, Rococo, Romantic, Louis-Philippe, each time harmonizing with the pictures they contain or the "frame" surrounding them. In an epoch in which architecture is without ornament and materials are left bare, it is normal that the picture should be presented as simply as possible, without any embellishments, without a real frame.

The debate is by no means over: period frame, modern

²⁷ "Le musée du Jeu de Paume," *Museum*, Vol. I, Paris, 1947.

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frame, frame chosen by the artist, frame designed by the framer, frame requested by the dealer, frame demanded by the first purchaser, frame to the taste of the new proprietor. One will prefer a strong border with bulky sculptures, another a simple molding; one will desire harmony between the picture and the border, another will only search for a contrast that should set off the values of the painting. Now let's cut up Chinese scrolls and set them under glass in special frames—and we will have reached the limit.

Occidental art, indeed, has only faced this problem since the 15th century. To destroy the frame in which the work was painted is undoubtedly an act of vandalism; and it is just as much so whether the artist has drawn the border belonging to his picture or chosen it. However, no argument can convince either those favoring historical reconstruction or those who are for modern display, not to speak of those whom Maiakovsky mocked, those who simply have "bad taste."²⁸ The American painter Robert Henri is correct in writing: "When we shall have acquired good taste, most frames made today will be thrown into the furnace."²⁹

The original total work must be respected. The rights of the current proprietor are morally limited. Of course, today it is impossible to see an art work with the eyes of those who created it centuries ago and in other countries. But it would never occur to the mind of a literary critic to rewrite the beginning and the end of recognized masterpieces; if cases of that kind have occurred, they have aroused a certain amount of laughter. For old constructions, restoration does not mean the reconstruction of certain parts and modification of the others. The original frame was part of the picture whether we like it or not. In principle, a painting is not changed even when the owner of the picture feels that it could be bettered; if certain collectors sometimes correct the works in their possession, adding a detail and masking another, they remain exceptions.

On the other hand, it is more and more rare that the frame

²⁸ *Banija*, Moscow, 1930.

²⁹ *The Art Spirit*, New York, 1923.

will not be changed by the new proprietor, and this always occurs with the best intentions. Such a change is undoubtedly congenial and permits a personality to affirm himself in collaboration with the artist. Did not Renoir declare: "The frame is the most beautiful invention of painting?"³⁰

³⁰ In this short study, only a particular case could be encompassed: the frame of a painting. A similar work on photographic frames, while keeping to the same general line, would make it possible to emphasize other elements, among others, the preliminary importance of "cropping," less apparent, but also very important in painting; the multiple choices, as much in the shooting of the negative as in the development of the proof, quickly offer a wide field in the rendering, and might, at first glance, seem to diminish the role of the border. Also, one must not forget that photography was born in an epoch of the decadence of the frame, abandoned to the framer; a further reason, therefore, for the predominance of the content. More detailed research might be brought to bear on mirror-frames. In that case, the image framed is only a transitory reflection of reality, without any direct human intervention. (Of course, it must be understood that distorting glass is not being discussed here.) An interpretation of the world appears, which, despite differences in its realization, takes on the appearance of a picture. In fact, man frames the mirror, a simple plane surface with particular properties and limited dimensions; thereby delimiting an image over which he has no power. The object, frame-mirror, is inert and simply permits the presentation of a moving scene which by chance is enclosed within a certain outline. The fixed frame no longer surrounds a congealed representation with which it may become identified and form a unit; there is a sharp separation between that which contains and that which is contained. Greater still is the difference in the case of the cinema and television frame, fixed in advance and in which moving images are presented; "cropping" normally takes on a still greater importance. The frame of a bas relief does not necessarily seem to pose new problems; it is very closely related to the picture frame, even if the third dimension no longer appears only in the border. Finally, taking on its value with relationship to the period, and to the space enclosing the scene and limiting it, there is the frame of our theatre which stage managers are attempting to avoid in an effort to renew ancient traditions. However, wishing to generalize from a particular example, main lines end up by becoming blurred; painting remains a special case, although there may be numerous windows, holes in the wall or bays opening widely on a familiar or unusual world.