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# Frames and "Their" Pictures. The Role of Frames and Frameworks in Old Painting An Outline of the Subject

Until recently, picture frames have remained under the radar of art historians. Owing to 20th-century changes in theory and practice of painting and exhibiting art, the natural link between picture and frame was negated – to an extent that it was considered appropriate to display works without their frames, even in the case of Old Masters.[1] Sometimes showing unframed paintings – especially modern ones – may indeed be justified, yet this trend is a consequence of ideas that have now been recognized as misguided. An unframed picture was supposed to have a greater impact on the spectator due to the alleged "purity" of image and composition, without any "distracting" ornamentation. The still widespread practice of publishing reproductions of paintings without their frames, unsuccessfully criticized in specialist literature, stems from the almost century-old method of art interpretation, influenced by the modernist struggle against ornamental decorations.

However, frames are ever more often treated as legitimate, valuable historical objects. Nowadays, their significance has been recognized and they have been given an important place in museum practice. Historical frames are being researched and catalogued. The activity of the National Museum in Warsaw may serve as an example here: between 2008 and 2009, all of its frames were inventoried and catalogued.[2] Before the Gallery of Old Masters was opened, many underwent conservation and, equally important as the pictures, became part of the exhibition's narrative. Frames help us fully understand not only particular paintings, but also the history and essence of i m a g e s in general. The Gallery's new concept is a good starting point to revise the hitherto prevailing view of the significance of frames, and restore their rightful place. It questions the generally accepted opposition of craftsmanship and high art, emphasizing this – seemingly worse and less important – aspect of human creativity, regarded as devoid of the spark of "genius." This concept is consistent with the current methodological trend in art history, which assumes a "return to things" and "agency of things." This view, where an artwork's material and technological aspect is regarded as a "subject" that has an impact on the spectators and their surroundings, has inspired a new approach to museum

[1] Cesare Brandi, "The Removal or Retention of Frames as a Restoration Issue," in id., *Theory of Restoration* (Florence, 2005), pp. 123–28.

[2] The documentation was collected and analysed under the supervision of Tamara Richter and Krystyna Znojewska-Prokop from the Collection of Polish Art until 1914 at the National Museum in Warsaw.

exhibitions.[3] Maarten van Heemskerck's triptych *Ecce Homo*, shown in the Gallery with its original architectural frame (**fig. 1**), may serve as an example of that approach, whereas the frame of Pieter Nason's *Portrait of a Young Man Against a Landscape* with a *trompe l'œil* image of the model's fingertips (**fig. 2**), was reconstructed based on archive photographs and historical descriptions. Similar practices are common in other Polish museums. In the context of this revival, a theoretical work concerning picture frames seems especially important – and Polish literature still lacks such publications.

The current knowledge of frames is already extensive. One can access publications that present their history from ancient to modern times, catalogues of exhibitions focusing on them, scholarly monographs concerning specific types of frames (such as Medici frames, Renaissance frames at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the collection of frames held at Berlin's Gemäldegalerie, etc.). Some museums and galleries offer catalogues of frames, rightly taking pride in their most valuable exhibits. Historical frames can be purchased at specialized auctions in the most prominent auction houses. Knowledge about craft techniques and the development of forms helps date and interpret the paintings themselves.

Knowing and understanding the bond between pictures and their "borders" enables a fully conscious look at these works. Due to its multifaceted character and vague terminology, the subject of picture frames is a challenging one, methodology-wise. This complexity is a result of the intermingling of the three functions of frames: purely technical (structural and protective), ornamental/aesthetic, and ideological. A frame allows to localize a painting not only aesthetically, in real space, but also in the space of its meaning. This issue remains topical, and the aim of this essay is to provide a synthetic description of the origins of modern frames (this problem is essential to interpreting and understanding their functions), attempt to elucidate the numerous meanings attributed to picture frames, and thus – restore the original importance of Old Master frames.

## State of Research

It is worth emphasizing – yet again – that the issue at hand has remained on the outskirts of art history research. Mentions of picture frames can be found in publications dedicated to furniture. In the context of the history of artistic craftsmanship, no thorough compendia of the subject have been written so far, probably due to its affiliation with high art. However, the one hundred-odd items published between the 1880s and 2015 can be considered a solid basis for further reflection.

The oldest works were written as a consequence of the redefinition of history and art in the 19th century. In the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Historicism, collectors developed an interest in works of medieval and early modern art. It was then that polyptychs were being cut in order to sell individual sections and sculptures, while historical works of art were purchased using various, often unethical channels. Pictures that were taken out of their frames several times, later changed frames or became frameless. This destructive process was connected with the secularization of church institutions that had commissioned these works in the past. However, this was also the time when the most important European museums were founded, alongside the first specialized collections, whose owners appreciated the value of frames. The

[3] As exemplified by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam or the National Museum in Warsaw's Gallery of Medieval Art, both of which were recently reopened (in 2013 and 2014, respectively) following thorough refurbishment.

first collection of that kind, currently displayed at the Museo Bardini in Florence and regarded as classic, was created by Stefano Bardini (1836–1922) (**fig. 3**).[4] Even though – thanks to him and other collectors who shared the same approach – it was possible to save many valuable frames, 19th-century collectorship must be judged as ambiguous.

The slow process leading to the appreciation of frames – if only as examples of craftsmanship, often of high aesthetic value – would not be possible without the isolated, pioneering studies from the late 19th century, one of the first being *Le cornici italiane dalla meta del secolo XV allo scorcio del XVI* (1897) by Michelangelo Guggenheim, on Italian Renaissance frames.[5] Even though other works on the subject had been published earlier,[6] it was Guggenheim, who – also through his activity as cabinet-maker – popularized picture frames. Their profile was raised to "attractive historical works," which led to further specialized research.[7] Later studies by Wilhelm von Bode[8] – incidentally, Bardini's client[9] – are also worth mentioning. In the mid-20th century, another wave of popularity resulted in new publications on picture frames, including Giuseppe Morazzoni's book on Venetian (1944) and Bolognese frames (1953),[10] among others. These publications may be considered the last manifestations of the Romantic collector's approach to historical works of art, even though they do contain many more historical facts. Claus Grimm's study (1978), systematizing the existing knowledge and quoted in numerous further publications, was an important step in the research of Old Master frames.[11] The author describes a broader historical context, and the valuable illustrations are complemented by a detailed bibliography. Another work worth mentioning is Werner Ehlich's study of picture frames in antiquity (1979).[12]

In the 1980s, a new generation of scholars recognized frames as objects worth a closer look from art historians. Many scientific and popular-scientific publications have been written since then, alongside commentaries to public and private collections – especially focusing on Italian frames, considered pivotal to the development of the modern frame formula. The following books count among the most important: *La cornice italiana* by Franco Sabatelli and the

[4] Alison Clarke, "Stefano Bardini: Dealer, restorer and collector of frames" [online], The Frame Blog [retrieved: 23 May 2018], at: <https://theframeblog.wordpress.com/2018/03/05/stefano-bardini-dealer-restorer-and-collector-of-frames/>.

[5] Michelangelo Guggenheim, *Le cornici italiane dalla meta del secolo XV allo scorcio del XVI* (Milan, 1987).

[6] E.g., Jakob von Falke, *Rahmen* (Vienna, 1882).

[7] Hans Bösch, *Bilder- und Spiegelrahmen von A. Dürer bis zum Rokoko* (Leipzig, 1897); H. Marshall, "Zur Aesthetik und Geschichte des Rahmens," Reclams Universum, no. 16 (1898), passim; Elfried Bock, *Florentinische und venezianische Bilderrahmen* (Munich, 1902); Erich Everth, *Der Bilderrahmen als ästhetischer Ausdruck von Schutzfunktionen* (Halle a.d. Saale, 1909).

[8] The author referred to the subject of frames in a number of his publications – see Wilhelm von Bode, "Rahmen und Sockel in Italien zur Zeit der Renaissance" [online], *Kunst und Künstler: illustrierte Monatsschrift für bildende Kunst und Kunstgewerbe*, no. 9 (1919), pp. 357–91, [retrieved: 23 May 2018], at: <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/kk1919/0373/image>.

[9] Clarke, op. cit.

[10] Giuseppe Morazzoni, *Le cornici veneziane* (Milan, 1944); id. *Le cornici bolognesi* (Milan, 1953).

[11] Claus Grimm, *Alte Bilderrahmen. Epochen – Typen – Material* (Munich, 1978). Published in English as *The Book of Picture Frames* (New York, 1981).

[12] Werner Ehlich, *Bilderrahmen von der Antike bis zur Romantik* (Dresden, 1979); id., *Bild und Rahmen im Altertum. Die Geschichte des Bildesrahmens* (Leipzig, [s.a.]).

collective work *La cornice fiorentina e senese* (both published in 1992);[13] the album *Repertorio della cornice europea* (2003),[14] by the Italian collector Roberto Lodi; and the works of Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts from 1996: *A History of European Picture Frames*[15] and *Frameworks – Form, Function & Ornament in European Portrait Frames*.[16] *The Frame Blog*,[17] a continually updated online collection of essays, is another valuable source. Catalogues of the few important exhibitions are also worth mentioning here.[18] The most famous exhibition, *Italian Renaissance Frames*, was displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1990,[19] showing a collection of frames even today regarded as the most valuable and interesting. What is more, it was accompanied by an extensive bibliography.

As for Polish source literature, Bohdan Marconi's publication on the aesthetic aspects of framing[20] was a pioneering work – though it contained several inaccuracies, especially in the arbitrary deliberations concerning types of frames. Teresa Mielniczuk and Bohdan Grzegorzewski's popular-science book (1977)[21] contains many generalizations as well, but one ought to mention that the authors included several valuable examples from the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw.[22] The relationship between frames and paintings was analysed

[13] Franco Sabatelli, *La cornice italiana dal Rinascimento al Neoclassico* (Milan, 1992); Renato Baldi et al., *La cornice fiorentina e senese. Storia e technice di restauro* (Florence, 1992).

[14] Roberto Lodi, Amadeo Montanari, *Repertorio della cornice europea: Italia, Francia, Spagna, Paesi Bassi, Galleria Roberto Lodi* ([s.l.], 2003). After 30 years of activity, in 2016 Roberto Lodi began selling his collection.

[15] Paul Mitchell, Lynn Roberts, *A History of European Picture Frames* (London, 1996). First published as "Frame," in Jane Turner, ed., *The Dictionary of Art* ([s.l.], 1996), vol. 11, pp. 372–496.

[16] Paul Mitchell, Lynn Roberts, *Frameworks – Form, Function & Ornament in European Portrait Frames* (London, 1996).

[17] The blog <www.theframeblog.com> is run by Lynn Roberts, long-term employee of the National Portrait Gallery and the National Gallery in London. The bibliography of new literature (created after 1995) on frames is kept by the National Portrait Gallery and made available on its website: <https://www.npg.org.uk/research/programmes/the-art-of-the-picture-frame/research-bibliography.php>.

[18] *Italienische Bilderrahmen des 14.–18. Jahrhunderts*, Leo Cremer, Pieter Eikemeier, eds, exh. cat., Alte Pinakothek, Munich, 1976 (Munich, 1976); *The Art of the Picture Frame: Artists, Patrons and the Framing of Portraits in Britain*, Jacob Simon, ed., exh. cat., National Portrait Gallery, London, 1996–97 (London, 1996); *The Art of the Edge: European Frames 1300–1900*, Richard Bertell, Steven Starling, eds, exh. cat., The Art Institute, Chicago, 1986 (Chicago, 1986); *Cadres des peintres*, Isabelle Cahn, ed., exh. cat., Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 1989 (Paris, 1989); *In Perfect Harmony Picture + Frame 1850–1920*, Eva Mendegen, ed., exh. cat., Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1995 (Amsterdam, 1995); *Framing in the Golden Age. Picture and Frame in 17th-Century Holland*, Pieter J.J. van Thiel, C.J. de Bruyn Kops, eds, exh. cat., Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1984 (Zwolle, 1995); *Cornici barocche e stampe restaurate dai depositi di palazzo Pitti, a cura di Marilena Mosco*, exh. cat., Palazzo Pitti, Florence, 1998 (Florence, 1998); *Schöne Rahmen aus den Beständen der Berliner Gemäldegalerie*, Hannelore Nutzmann, ed., exh. cat., Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2002–3 (Berlin, 2002); *Rahmenkunst. Auf Spurensuche in der Alten Pinakothek*, Helge Siefert, Friedrich Veran, eds, exh. cat., Alte Pinakothek, Munich, 2010 (Munich, 2010); *Frames in Focus. Sansovino Frames*, Nicholas Penny, Peter Schade, Harriet O'Neill, eds, exh. cat., National Gallery, London, 2015 (London, 2015).

[19] *Italian Renaissance Frames*, Timothy Newbery, George Bisacca, Laurence Kanter, eds, exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1990 (New York, 1990).

[20] Bohdan Marconi, "O ramach," *Arkady*, no. 1 (1937). Reprinted in Marconi, *O sztuce konserwacji*, ed. by Juliusz Bursze (Warsaw, 1982), pp. 59–66.

[21] Teresa Mielniczuk, Bohdan Grzegorzewski, *Historia ramy do obrazu* (Warsaw, 1998), second edition.

[22] The complex fate that befell the frames of paintings from the NMW collection requires a more in-depth analysis. During the Second World War and the post-war restitution process, paintings were deframed by default, or returned to the museum unframed and had to be reframed later. Even today it is sometimes possible to connect the once separated historical objects. The collection of empty frames, predominantly from the 18th and 19th centuries,

in older publications on the theory of art. In his now-classic compilation of source texts,[23] Jan Białostocki includes Giulio Mancini's set of picture framing rules addressed to collectors. Andrzej Rottermund's essay remains one of the few scientific publications – however, it focuses not so much on frames as on the spaces where paintings are shown.[24] A holistic interpretive approach to the frame-picture unit is presented in Janusz Nowiński's recently-published essay.[25]

Publications on picture frames are usually structured like documentation albums, with short descriptions repeating the same, basic and not always confirmed information. Detailed photographs provide an insight into the state of preservation (allowing the reader to develop an eye for old wood texture, missing fragments or abrasions in the polychrome or gilding) as well as structure and technique (methods of joining the slats, different depending on time and place of manufacture, as well as knowledge about gilding techniques[26] help date the work and determine its provenance). It is also a standard practice to include reproductions of frame profiles in 1:1 scale. However, the question of the link between the painting and its frame is rarely analysed.[27] This relationship, often very close, can be perceived primarily on a visual level – seeing whether the form and colour of the frame corresponds with the painting. However, the issue used to be more complex in the past. This subject still requires more research and popularization.

The bond between the picture and the frame is mentioned by only a handful of philosophers and theoreticians, merely in passing (e.g., in the works of José Ortega y Gasset[28] or Hans-Georg Gadamer[29]). Meyer Schapiro devotes a couple of sentences to that issue in his essay from 1969.[30] Also, Mircea Eliade's theory of sacred space – half-a-century old as it may be – gives a still convincing explanation of the basic mechanisms that accompany the act of framing.[31] The subject of combining the history of picture frames with the psychological aspect of or-

often changed locations to be ultimately transported to Otwock. The most precious ones are currently used to frame paintings exhibited in permanent galleries and held in the Painting Storeroom.

[23] See Jan Białostocki, *Teoretycy, historiografowie i artyści o sztuce, 1600–1700*, Maria Poprzęcka, Antoni Ziemba, eds (Warsaw, 1994), pp. 39–40.

[24] Andrzej Rottermund, "Obraz i rama we wnętrzach paradnych europejskich rezydencji nowożytnych," *Materiały Muzeum Wnętrz Zabytkowych w Pszczynie*, Ann. 6 (1990), pp. 12–42.

[25] Janusz Nowiński, "Portret opata-mecenasa Mikołaja Antoniego Łukomskiego, pędzla Józefa Rajeckiego i rama jemu dedykowana," in *Architektura znaczeń. Studia ofiarowane prof. Zbigniewowi Bani w 65. rocznicę urodzin i 40-lecie pracy dydaktycznej*, Anna Sylwia Czyż, Janusz Nowiński, Marta Wiraszka, eds (Warsaw, 2011), pp. 318–37.

[26] Tomasz Sadziak, *Klejowe i olejne prace pozłotnicze* (Warsaw, 1981). Biblioteka Muzealnictwa i Ochrony Zabytków. B Series, vol. 69; Zdzisław Engelman, *Pozłotnictwo* (Zielona Góra, 2005); Arleta Tylewicz, *Sztuka pozłotnictwa i inne techniki zdobienia* (Poznań, 2007).

[27] However, awareness of the role played by frames seems to be gradually reaching the broader social circles, as testified by occasional press articles ranging from glossy magazines on interior decoration to specialist journals – see Maria Thullie, "O ramach utraconych i zachowanych," *Cenne Bezcenne Utracone*, no. 1/70 (2012), pp. 26–29.

[28] José Ortega y Gasset, "Medacion del Marco," in id., *Obras de José Ortega y Gasset*, vol. 1, pp. 369–75 (Madrid, 1943). The text was written in 1921; English version: "Thoughts on art and philosophy" [online], *The Frame Blog* [retrieved: 23 May 2018], at: <https://theframeblog.com/2014/07/23/frames-state-of-the-art-part-1-jose-ortega-y-gasset/>.

[29] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London–New York, 2004), pp. 130–57.

[30] Meyer Schapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art. Field and Vehicle in Image Signs," in *Schapiro, Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (New York, 1994), pp. 1–32.

[31] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, transl. by Willard T. Trask (New York, 1961).

naments and decorations, described by Ernst H. Gombrich,[32] still remains to be developed. The only publication devoted to the ideological meaning of frames, not just those meant for paintings, is *The Rhetoric of Frame* (1996), edited by Paul Duro, which touches upon the visual frame of gender, memory, fantasy, and the world shown on old maps.[33] In theory of image, and therefore its borders limited by the frame, Ernst Michalski's philosophical concept of "aesthetic borderline"[34] may serve as a reference point, as well as Hans Belting's anthropological approach to images[35] or – much more precise and pertaining directly to frames – reflections on margins in Victor I. Stoichita's book.[36]

Because the once-integral relationship between the picture and its frame has become blurred, nowadays the most we are able to manage is to discern the aesthetic aspect of the frame, the beauty of its ornaments and the technical mastery of its creators: the sculptor and the gilder. Sometimes one notices how the forms and colours are suited to the painting, only rarely being aware that the damages and "noble patina," seemingly pleasant to the eye, actually distort and even obscure the original form of the frame. Just as the approach to paintings as works of art has evolved, the way of perceiving frames has changed. The function of every frame – in varying degrees – is utilitarian, decorative and symbolic.[37] These intermingle in various proportions, depending on the historical period.

Formal analysis serves as the starting point for further deliberation. Changes in the general form of the frame or individual ornaments allow us to create historical sequences with specific periodization, valuable for dating and attribution (for instance, as in the case of acanthus frames). They are usually arranged according to geographical criteria (Italian, Dutch, Spanish, French or German frames),[38] but one ought to remember about the strong interregional exchange of motifs. For instance, Italian frames were very popular in France, Germany or the Netherlands, whereas Northern frames – in Italy. The forms of frames evolved together with interior design, architectural decorations, carpentry and furniture making. Types of rooms or, more generally speaking, types of interiors influenced the style of frames – different in polyptychs in church, triptychs in small chapels, paintings in private collections and genre scenes in individual rooms. Therefore, in order to understand the form of a frame, one needs to know more about the framed picture, its theme, function, context of time and place, its author and donor. The frame itself may provide such information. Technological details are just as crucial – from the functioning of woodcarvers' workshops, to carpentry issues, influencing the form of the frame and its function, as well as the process of commissioning the work.

However, formal or stylistic analysis would not suffice to determine the historical significance of the "frame + picture" unit – an anthropological and anthropological-historical approach

[32] Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Ithaca, NY, 1979).

[33] *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*, Paul Duro, ed. (Cambridge, 1996).

[34] Ernst Michalski, *Die Bedeutung der ästhetischen Grenze für die Methode der Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin, 1931) (second edition: Berlin, 1996).

[35] Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (Princeton, NJ, 2011); Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (Chicago, IL, 1994).

[36] Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, transl. by Anne-Marie Glasheen (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 67–102.

[37] Mitchell, Roberts, *A History of European...*, op. cit., p. 8.

[38] Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts divide frames into Italian, French, British, Netherlandish and Belgian, German and Central European, Scandinavian, and Spanish ones – see ibid., p. 8.

is necessary. The framing of a picture is an act of introducing order into space, resulting in the creation of the following relations: outer space – frame – its interior; picture – background; picture – space.[39] Only by being aware of these relations can one recognize the role of the frame in various contexts: in a collection that belongs to a particular owner,[40] in the mounts of portraits that represent social status (images of power), commemorative pictures, works serving as epitaphs, altarpieces, depictions of the sacred (such as "holy pictures" and icons[41]), as well as large-format engravings and maps.[42]

The primary symbolic aspect of a frame, or indeed of the very act of framing, was the need to set boundaries between the painting and its surroundings, and therefore to introduce order or hierarchy in the particular space.[43] This need of hierarchization is one of the most primeval needs of man and of culture-creating societies.[44] Using theological terms adapted by Mircea Eliade and developing his ideas, one may say that frames and frameworks convey a message of hierophany.[45] A frame played the role of a border of a "holy world," at first as a door frame, a threshold of a house, boundaries of a place of worship, or finally, as organized religious architecture.[46] These boundaries defined a specific kind of space – the space of images, in a wide anthropological understanding of that word. Following in the footsteps of Hans Belting, who wrote that the "place of image" is man himself,[47] one could say that an image appears in human consciousness thanks to being separated from the world by its frame.[48] Such is the case of all kinds of *eikones*: 6th-century Byzantine icons, 15th-century panel paintings of saints, paintings on Baroque reredos, 19th-century devotional oleographs, and today – also pictorial messages on television and on the internet. Therefore, the trend to frame one's TV set (often in a golden frame), which began a dozen or so years ago, should come as no surprise.

The question of the spatial relation between the sacred and the profane thus becomes the fundamental question about the role and significance of the frames of religious paintings or depictions of sacralized power.[49] Regarding frames, frameworks and mounts as the "borders" of religious acts opens the door to a whole range of possible theological, philosophical and anthropological speculations that might lead to new artistic solutions. This question aims to determine to what extent the frame was intended as a border of the sacred presence, to what extent it was an erudite, meaningful addition to the central sacred theme, and to what extent

[39] *The Rhetoric...*, op. cit., pp. 6–8.

[40] The most famous Polish example being the frames made for King Stanislaus Augustus.

[41] A detailed description of the framing of sacral representations may be found in my MA dissertation *Ramy do ikon w Rzeczypospolitej w XVII wieku na tle historii ramy do obrazu*, prepared under the supervision of Rev. Prof. Michał Janocha and presented in 2009 at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University.

[42] John Gillies, "Posted Spaces: Framing in the Age of the World Picture," in *The Rhetoric...*, op. cit., pp. 24–43.

[43] Schapiro, "On some problems...," op. cit., pp. 8–12 and passim; Wolfgang Kemp, "The Narrativity of the Frame," in *The Rhetoric...*, op. cit., pp. 11–23.

[44] Eliade, op. cit., pp. 8–18.

[45] Ibid., p. 11.

[46] Ibid., p. 58: "[...] *religious architecture simply took over and developed the cosmological symbolism already present in the structure of primitive habitations*" (original italics). This interpretation is backed by the most accurate publications on frames – see Grimm, *The Book...*, op. cit., pp. 24–25; Mitchell, Roberts, *A History of European...*, op. cit., pp. 10–12.

[47] Belting, *An Anthropology...*, op. cit., pp. 9–15.

[48] Ibid., p. 13.

[49] Eliade, op. cit., p. 20–24; see also Gadamer, op. cit., p. 143–44.

it was a purely aesthetic or artistic frame; also – how close its formal and stylistic relation with the interior was intended to be: with the place of worship and piety, its status and role, its liturgical equipment, its practical furnishings, etc.

### The Origins and Evolution of the Modern Picture Frame

In his reflections on frames, even though he mainly focuses on their golden finish, José Ortega y Gasset wonders about the circumstances of their creation.[50] He asks whether a frame is the same thing for a painting as clothes are for a body – at first glance, the comparison looks logical. It seems that a frame, just like clothing, is supposed to decorate. Clothing, however, decorates a person by concealing the body, whereas frames do not conceal paintings. If a painting is well framed, one does not notice the frame, whose task is to accentuate the picture's aesthetic value. According to Ortega, a frame rather plays the same role for a painting as tattoos play for a body, especially in primitive cultures. Jewellery made out of hunting trophies, but first and foremost – tattoos and initiation marks that become one with the body, were supposed to draw attention to the decorated person. The function of frames can be described in a similar fashion: they draw attention to the framed object, optically and symbolically. In the case of painting, frames separate the depicted world from reality, and individual scenes from one another,[51] taking on the form of a simple frame or ornament: geometric, floral or architectural.

Ornamental decorations were used already in prehistoric times when objects of cult and magic were embellished with various patterns. In light of Eliade's theory of hierophany, the practice of decorating dead bodies and graves with flowers seems especially interesting.[52] Firstly, one can regard it as the origin of floral ornaments – that will later become the main motif of picture frames, apart from architectural elements. Secondly, the formation of frame ornaments was from its very beginning closely connected with ancestor worship; the motifs were derived from tombstones, sarcophagi and later from reliquaries. Depictions of human figures (and of God as Son of Man) – the primary subject of medieval art[53] – also point the spectator towards otherworldly realms, with God and angels abiding in heaven. It was only later that patrons were included in paintings and that individual portraits and other themes were developed.

Painted stripes isolate Egyptian wall paintings from the surface of the wall, separate individual scenes, encase decorations on Greek pottery, organize Pompeian wall paintings, not unlike 20th-century comic book frames (**fig. 4**). Frames decorated with relief sculptures encircle Fayum mummy portraits. Byzantine icons, frames of medieval frescoes or mosaics

[50] See n. 29.

[51] Stoichita, op. cit., p. 30: "The frame separates the image from anything that is non-image. It defines what is framed as a meaningful world as opposed to the outside-the-frame which is simply the world experienced."

[52] Piotr Kaczanowski, Janusz Krzysztof Kozłowski, *Wielka historia Polski*, vol. 1 (Warsaw, 2003), p. 66: "[...] Yet what brings the Neanderthal man closest to his contemporary counterpart is the first appearance of elements of spiritual culture. These are both objects and rites of symbolic character (...) as well as evidence of certain ritual and funerary customs. The first intentional burials, known both from Europe and Western Asia, are associated with the Neanderthal man. [...] While the existence of burial gifts has not been indisputably confirmed, Neanderthals could express their attitude to the dead in an even more subtle manner, by placing flowers on graves (burial from Shanidar Cave in northern Iraq)" (translated by Aleksandra Szkudłapska).

[53] For the history of the concept of imago in the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages, see Kurt Bauch, *Beiträge zur Philosophie und Wissenschaft: W. Schilasi zum 70. Geburtstag* (Munich, 1960), as cited in Gadamer, op. cit., p. 168. ("At any rate it is still a question of the picture in human form. This is the sole theme of medieval art!").

and miniatures, decorations of sculptures: monumental as well as smaller, carved in ivory, gilded book covers, scenes on liturgical vessels and objects – almost every known image from the 1st millennium is enclosed in a frame[54] (**fig. 5**).

To simplify, one may say that Western European ornaments of late Antiquity and early Middle Ages were influenced – through contact with ancient architecture and visual arts – by Greek and Roman motifs, but also Oriental and local ones ("barbaric" – deriving from Barbaricum areas).[55] In the 1st millennium, the progressing division of Europe into the East ("Greek") and West ("Latin") resulted in different evolutions of picture frames in these two cultural fields. At first, the idea of frame as such was identical in both areas. In the East, where painting was widely practised, the "icon field" played the role of a convex frame – it surrounded the *kovcheg*, was separated from it by a *luzga* (a narrow faceted frame) and filled with *kleimas* – depictions of saints or scenes from their lives, often referring to relics, funerals and the "eternal" continuation of worship, understood as veneration of the dead[56] (**fig. 6**). One can say that the "field" was a frame in its purest form – a perceptible rift between two worlds: the "here and now" and the "there and always (for eternity)," as a result of the strictly spiritual character of icons. Frames formed that way did not need decorations or additional ornamentation (according to categories of decorative beauty – *decor* and *ornatus* – present in Western, Latin theology of beauty and creating representations, and dating back to Isidore of Seville, 6th/7th century).[57]

Initially, the form of Western picture frames was identical (**fig. 7**), until the late Middle Ages – the period when "cult images" were replaced by "artistic images" (according to Belting: *Kultbild* versus *Kunstbild* and *Bild* versus *Gemälde*) or the period when "[illusionist] paintings were born" (Stoichita) and the painted panels and reredos were given separate decorative frames. In Latin Europe, the previous, theological symbolism of the frame in relation to the picture was obscured by new meanings. It was given the role of an addition to a cult object – a panel embodying the sacred, illustrating the subject of pious meditation, or conveying religious admonitions – external, complementary "stage directions," for instance, portrayals of prophets, scenes from the Bible or from the lives of saints, presented in separate sections or roundels (the character of which, unlike the "icon fields," was not strictly sacred and devotional). These additions, complementing and commenting on the paintings, gradually transformed frames into "marginalia" (as understood by Michael Camille):[58] marginal, but important and significant areas; into *parerga* (a notion from ancient theory of art); into a non-sacred space, which made room for secular fantasies and an undoubtedly earthly imaginarium, as seen in borders and *bas-de-page*s of book illuminations. Frames became the main space for realizing the "sense of ornamentalization" (as understood by Ernst H. Gombrich) – which, in turn, developed from frames encrusted with precious gems or their imitations, conveying the still sacred symbolism

[54] See Mielniczuk, Grzegorzewski, op. cit., pp. 5–10; Grimm, *The Book...*, p. 25; Mitchell, Roberts, *A History of European...*, op. cit., p. 10.

[55] Piotr Skubiszewski, *Sztuka Europy łacińskiej od VI do IX wieku* (Lublin, 2015), passim.

[56] See Aleksandra Sulikowska, *Ciała, groby i ikony. Kult świętych w ruskiej tradycji literackiej i ikonograficznej* (Warsaw, 2013).

[57] Only later, in the 17th c., did this rule change in the eastern part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, when under the Western decorative influence, derived from prints and other documents, icons started being mounted in frames inspired by Western ornamentation. This is associated with the "icon crisis" and the purported loss of its integral holiness, which was broadly described in literature – I also wrote about it in my MA thesis (see n. 41).

[58] Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (London, 1992).

of God's light (*splendor Dei*, *lumen* and *lux Dei*), the related reliquary frames with capsules containing fragments of holy bodies mounted in the slats (**fig. 8**), and in gilded, carved relief frames, embellished with ornaments and figures, used for the most valuable modern paintings in Italy, Flanders and Spain. Late-medieval and Renaissance frames served their purpose not only through their mere presence, but also because of the significance they were given. Even though they were still very closely related to the paintings' forms and themes, they gained autonomy. They had their own, individual forms, finish and symbolism of ornaments.[59]

In Western Europe, paintings (*eikones*, *imagines*) were originally intended as elements of architecture – frescoes and mosaics. It was only later that they became separate painted panels. They partly supplanted sculptures, "replaced" reliquaries in reredos, and "entered the stage" bordered with architectural forms. After all, they remained in the sacred sphere, or in the place of devout prayers, limited by the very form of a reredos. The most important impulse for the creation of individual modern frames was the development of private, individual, meditative and contemplative piety, practiced in homes and chapels. The evolution of frame types was determined by the sizes of paintings. Forms that were aesthetically and technologically suitable for large-format altarpieces had to differ from frames of privately-owned paintings, kept in houses and transported. Portable altars and reliquaries with pictorial decorations were the result of an emancipation of religious paintings from the context of church interiors (**fig. 9**).

Claus Grimm notices that late-medieval picture frames might have been influenced by ancient philosophy of beauty and Thomas Aquinas' aesthetics[60] – an observation definitely worth mentioning. According to Doctor Angelicus, an image is not a literal representation (*re-praesentatio*, i.e., embodiment, incarnation, manifestation) of the sacred, but is meant to bring the faithful closer to the perfect form (the Divine beauty that brings things to existence by bestowing forms upon them). Saint Thomas claims that this happens thanks to the artist's technical mastery (*téchne*), allowing the image to connect the spectator, who seeks aesthetic pleasure, with the Divine beauty, which manifests itself in the artwork's perfection (the *integritas* of form), its regularity and harmonious proportions (*consonantia*), and the clarity of form (*claritas*).[61] Therefore, if beauty (the ancient *decor*) is supposed to be "integral," perfect and comprehensive, it must – though Saint Thomas does not say that literally – include the frame, the sphere of "marginal" ornamentation, as well. Thomas's definition of a "beautiful thing" as something that "gives pleasure to the spectator" should also pertain to frames – beautiful frames. This might answer the question concerning the origins of the increasing attention to the beauty of ornaments, which manifested itself in the development of late-medieval and early modern frame decorations.

The symbolic meaning of the sacred survived in the gilded finish of frames. It is an "extension" of golden backgrounds of icons and medieval panel paintings, as well as gildings of figure sculptures. The golden slat frames of late-medieval and modern paintings may be derived from golden architectural frames of 14th- to 16th-century altarpieces. Gold, the least "real" of materials, and a very eye-catching one, is particularly well suited to separating the painting's "window" from the surface of the wall (according to Leon Battista Alberti's definition

[59] Mitchell, Roberts, *A History of European...*, op. cit., p. 10.

[60] Grimm, *The Book...*, op. cit., p. 27.

[61] A concise presentation of the aesthetics and philosophy of beauty followed by Thomas Aquinas may be found in Götz Pochat, *Geschichte der Ästhetik und Kunsttheorie. Von der Antike bis zum 19. Jahrhundert* (Cologne, 1986), pp. 175–90.

of painting as a window). This "unreality" and "isolation" from the surroundings compel the spectator to concentrate on the borders created by the frame and direct his glance towards the image itself, which he automatically recognizes as a different reality.[62] One needs to add that golden frames also served a practical purpose – in dark interiors, illuminated only by flickering candles, gold was the most effective means to draw the spectator's attention, and its glow provided more light for the painting. The churches of Italy or Spain needed more gold than northern, large-windowed interiors, where narrow gold frames, gildings in openwork traceries of the wings and finials were enough for altarpiece quarters. Frames with golden finish were still used for realistic modern painting, especially in the case of more sublime themes – such as history, religion, antiquity, as well as allegories and portraits of kings – echoing their previous, sacralized function.

Ornamental frames were invented in the 14th and 15th centuries. Decorative motifs were inspired by book illuminations (page borders with floral and geometric ornaments), decorations of metal objects (such as portable altars and box reliquaries) and objects carved in ivory; the list would not be complete without ornaments on the edges of antependia, painted on panels or canvas, cast in bronze or gilded.

Architectural frames are yet another type of late-medieval and modern frameworks. They were used especially for decorating retables, which in the 15th century evolved into large winged altarpieces. Architectural forms carved in wood, understood as depictions of Solomon's Temple, or a "temple within a temple," were adapted to frame panel paintings, preserving the symbolism of arcade and niche or the classical *aedicula*, deriving from antiquity and adopted by Christianity. Two types of retables were used in early Italian painting: large-format panels, enclosed in a solid wide frame, which – lest it should overshadow the painting – was optically "broken apart" and decorated with smaller elements, such as roundels with depictions of saints (**fig. 10**); and later, multi-bay and multi-panel structures with a taller central section – imitating the cross section of the naves of a basilica. The side panels were usually framed using small arcades on engaged columns and the entire structure was crowned with a finial. In 1423 in Florence, Gentile da Fabriano resigned from using columns dividing the surface of the altarpiece which only remained under a Gothic finial (**fig. 11**). It was also there, in Florence, that the altar painting was given the form of a single scene, built in a square (since then the Italian word *quadro* – square – is also a synonym of painting), and framed by a finial imitating ancient Roman forms of *aedicula*, portico, fronton, informed by the Renaissance trend of reconstructing ancient forms (**fig. 12**). Older, multi-panel paintings were often unified into single-surface depictions, clipped to fit the square or rectangle form, set in "modern" architectural frames with pilasters and entablatures (*all'antica* altars).[63]

The size of paintings played an important role in the evolution of frames. Works intended for private contemplation or for interior decoration were of course given smaller frames that were easier to dismantle. The Italian profiled *cassetta* are considered the first independent frames of that type – these simple, dark slats decorated with sgraffiti in the corners and in the central sections (**fig. 13**) were inspired by decorative frameworks of doors, windows and fresco sections, as well as ornaments on *cassoni* (wedding chests). With regard to technology, they

[62] Mitchell, Roberts, *Frameworks...*, op. cit.

[63] George Bisacca, *The Rise of the all'antica Altarpiece Frame* [online], lecture from the *Frame Study Day* series, National Gallery, London, 15 May 2015, as cited in: *The Frame Blog* [retrieved: 23 May 2018], at: <theframeblog.com/2015/06/18/the-rise-of-the-allantica-altarpiece-frame>.

derive from convex, "faceted" margins of painting surfaces in paintings integrated with their slat frames, common in northern paintings, for instance, in Jan van Eyck's portraits[64] (**fig. 14**).

Contacts between the North and South played a pivotal role in the development and dissemination of independent frames. In Italy, it was fashionable to own pieces created on the other side of the Alps (instead of works by local artists), especially by famous painters, such as Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden or Hans Memling. Italians appreciated their illusionist realism and the power of their devotional, religious message. The popularity of Northern masters can be explained by ideological, but also practical factors – paintings were easier to transport. In the 15th century, Dutch paintings on canvas (only a few of which survive to this day) were being produced in great numbers due to immense demand. Many works travelled to the Apennine Peninsula[65] and as they flooded the Italian market, local artists were forced to adapt "more oil-painting-like" techniques.[66] At that time, the frame became separate from the painting – making it possible to roll pictures painted on canvas (often transported inside bolts of fabric), stretch them over lathes after arriving at their destination and frame them afterwards. Paintings were now more popular, cheaper, quicker to produce and easier to transport – they crowded private houses and their new themes required "appropriate" frames, according to the Aristotelian and Vitruvian principle of *decorum*, of which now the world of artists and collectors had to be reminded. New forms of frames were undoubtedly inspired by rediscovered classical ornaments, as well as local and oriental patterns (such as the arabesque, moresque and Dürer's *Knotenornament*). The form of a frame depended on the subject and format of the work, as well as its placement and the buyer's or commissioner's wishes. The turn of the 16th century was a period when the group of secular, wealthy art owners grew in numbers. Therefore, on the one hand, the art market was able to develop and new motifs were included in iconography, to meet the needs of erudite, humanist commissioners and clients; while on the other hand, artists could experiment with "new" painting techniques.

The popularization of easel painting, particularly on canvas, which began to substitute older techniques, meant that the frame had to become a separate, easily replaceable part of a picture. Originally, frames that were integrated with the support and primed alongside it were either purchased together with panels or delivered by the donor.[67] This was the case in both northern and southern Europe, where such frames, for instance in Italian retables, were ultimately also painted upon. Sculptors (carvers), painters and gilders were treated equally, as makers of the commissioned painting. This is reflected in their remuneration. Today, one might be tempted to arrive at a rash conclusion that carvers – frame-makers whose pay was equal to that received by painters – were valued unexpectedly highly. However, something else was actually true: at that time, painters had not yet gained their privileged status. What is more, if the frame and painting were commissioned from two separate workshops, the frame was often ordered first and sometimes cost as much as painting the picture itself.

[64] Hélène Verougstraete, Roger Van Schoutte, "Frames and Supports of Some Eyckian Paintings," in *Investigating Van Eyck*, Delphine Cool, Sue Jones, Susan Foister, eds ([s.l.], 2000), pp. 107–17.

[65] Antoni Ziemba, *Sztuka Burgundii i Niderlandów 1380–1500*, vol. 2: *Niderlandzkie malarstwo tablicowe 1430–1500* (Warsaw, 2011), pp. 424–34 (chapter "Płótno jako podobrazie malarskie").

[66] Caroline Villers, "Paintings on Canvas in Fourteenth Century Italy," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 58, no. 3 (1995), pp. 338–58.

[67] Jørgen Wadum, "Historical Overview of Panel Making Techniques in the Northern Countries," in *The Structural Conservation of Panel Paintings, Proceedings of a Symposium at the J. Paul Getty Museum, The Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles, 24–28 April 1995*, Kathleen Dardes and Andrea Rothe, eds (Los Angeles, 1998), pp. 149–77.

Consequently, the painter would earn relatively less.[68] In order to increase the pace of production, the execution process was ultimately divided in two: the frame-maker would carve the frame, and the painter would paint the picture. Time brought yet another development: the painter as "artist" (*artifex*, *artista*, rather than *opifex*, *faber*, *artigiano*) began to decide on the appearance of the entire work, which also included the design of the frame. It was the painter rather than the donor who made the commission. In later centuries, certain types of frames were named after the painters who commissioned them. Mounting pictures in specific types of frames contributed to the artist's image and brand ("Sansovino" or "Salvator Rosa" frames). Anyone who could sculpt could try their hand at frame-making – this activity was no longer confined to large architectural, sculpting and painting workshops or specialized carpenters who manufactured painting supports. When the frame, support and often the finished painting itself were no longer the work of a single workshop in the form of a single object, frames were removed from the supervision of guild rules, which had closely monitored the quality of wood or primers. Since the frame had to be matched to furniture or interior design, decorators and cabinet-makers began to produce frames.

It is currently difficult to ascertain to what extent these processes may be described as "secularization" of the frame. Although the sphere of ideas was marked by deep transformations (here it is worth mentioning the debate on *paragone* – the competition between different art disciplines, as a result of which the position of painting became gradually stronger than sculpture and carving), the final appearance of the framed picture was simultaneously influenced by technological aspects. Only recently have we begun to consider the array of workshop traditions, techniques and possibilities available to a craftsman facing the task entrusted to him by the client.

Here one should also discuss the origin of decorating frames. Architectural frames referred to the Temple of Jerusalem and the very structure of a church. In *De re aedificatoria*, Leon Battista Alberti advised future builders to make wooden frame designs as a practical exercise – meaning that both disciplines were initially represented by one person, i.e., the builder. Nature was another rich source of decorative motifs. The symbolism of plants described in medieval literature enabled the communication of various meanings associated with human life (rebirth, eternity, immortality) or religious spirituality (plants associated with the virtues of Mary or the Passion of Christ). On the threshold of modernity, the classical Vitruvian understanding of the acanthus, associated with funerary rites and the spirit world, the sphere of heaven, re-emerged in a new form. The resulting new types of pictures, alongside new interiors used for their exhibition, contributed to a massive extension of available ornamentation. Suffice it to mention the tondos, which were typical for this period, decorated with three-dimensional flowers and fruit. Their form and symbolism were rooted in the tradition of bringing a plate of gifts (*desco da parto*) to the mother of a new-born child. Such plates included flowers and fruit, and these are precisely the ornaments decorating the broad frames found in images of the Virgin and Child and the Holy Family (**fig. 15**).

The growing number of commissions for paintings designed for private interiors, including portraits, gave rise to another interesting context of the development of frames – though they

[68] These issues are described in-depth in Gilbert Creighton's canonical article "Peintres et menuisiers au début de la Renaissance in Italie," *Revue de l'Art*, no. 37 (1977), pp. 9–28 (English version: *Painters & Woodcarvers in Early Renaissance Italy* [online] [retrieved: 7 March 2018], at: <theframeblog.com/2015/11/13/painters-woodcarvers-in-early-renaissance-italy>. For a more recent analysis, see Michelle O'Malley, *The Business of Art: Contracts and the Commissioning Process in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven–London, 2005).

were meant to serve secular painting, they were informed by the reredos tradition. By using architectural motifs derived from retables or particularly sumptuous ornamental decoration, portrait frames gained a sacred-like (sacred power) or elevating character (the portrait as legitimization of social status) (**fig. 16**). Yet with time, the sacred and transcendental expression of the painting was dominated by the expression of its composition, perfect proportions, harmony, colour, etc. Belting's *Kultbild* gradually transformed into *Kunstbild*,[69] acquiring a high rank among objects and demanding an appropriate frame solely because it was created by an artist.

Around the year 1500, there emerged a network of phenomena that paved the way for the modern shape and diversity of picture frames. They may be divided into two main types. The first is represented by purely utilitarian frames, initially integrated with the support, most often in the simple form of a convex "window" or "rift" surrounding the depicted reality. With time, they became separate from the painting and turned into structures that were superimposed on it. The latter type, to put it simply, was represented by elevating, decorative, often architectural and symbolic frames derived from medieval retables, which were used in both church and private interiors. Starting from the 16th century, the symbolic meaning of such frames was gradually trivialized. In Catholic Baroque art, the opulence of carved and gilded frames was only used to complement the evocative power of the composition or the colour harmony of the picture. The colour of gold brought to mind the triumph of Church on earth rather than the divine sphere.

The symbolism of the frame no longer resulted from the division between the world and its "recreation," or the imitation of solemn architecture (the divine Jerusalem). It was conveyed by appropriately selected carved signs and allegorical figures, personifications with attributes that surrounded the portraits, wall displays of weapons accompanying battle scenes, distinctions and emblems, which communicated the content intended by the author or donor *ad litteram* (**fig. 17**). Paintings that did not require such decorations were framed in a simpler manner, in line with the instinctively understood appropriateness (*decorum*) of the frame for the picture.

Another division found in source literature is related to the status of the spectator and the location of the artwork: frames designated for religious interiors (paintings used in public and private devotion), court frames (associated with power and wealth) and popular ones (designated for the social strata of the third estate, sometimes even for craftsmen and plebeians, like in 17th-century Holland). Yet what it fails to include is the key category of modern recipients – collectors and connoisseurs. In this case, the development of types of frames was closely related to their personal requirements, trends in interior decoration and fashion; suffice it to mention the example of Medici frames[70] (**fig. 18**). Paintings of less distinguished owners received simple and more subtly finished frames, which were suited to patrician interiors. Patterns merged irrespective of political or geographic borders. A change of the owner or location of a picture often resulted in changing its frame. This became a necessity if the format of the work was modified for some reason or other. Private collections began to be mounted in identical frames, often bearing the collector's monogram or emblem. Each and every case tells a separate story of a relationship between an individual picture and its subsequent frames.

The 19th century brought with it a new attitude towards history, a redefinition of the term artwork and the new notion of a historical artefact. Collecting became more widespread and

[69] Belting, *Likeness and Presence...*, pp. 551–52.

[70] Marilena Mosco, *Cornici dei Medici. La fantasia barocca al servizio del potere / Medici Frames. Baroque Caprice for the Medici Prince* ([s.l.], 2007).

egalitarian, public exhibitions were becoming increasingly popular, conservation began to be analysed from academic and critical standpoints, and painting was steadily growing as the main means of artistic expression – all of which led to the changing function of the frame. There emerged a practice to mount paintings in historical frames, which were readily available in antique shops – consequently, we often see Impressionist paintings in 17th- and 18th-century frames. The new Parisian elites of the late 19th century were eager to refer to the French court tradition and Rococo culture. The gilded frames of Impressionist paintings rendered them "neo-Rococo," thus anchoring them in the tradition. Mounting paintings in original historical frames was also present in 20th-century avant-garde movements (**fig. 19**). By doing so, artists underlined the connection between the most recent art and Old Master paintings (whether it was opposition, transposition or continuation), and voiced their objection to the practice of mounting almost all paintings, even the earliest ones, in mass-produced, moulded (rather than carved), historicizing French frames.[71] In parallel to using "recycled" historical frames, painters kept designing their own ones (**fig. 20**), constantly looking for new ornaments and artistic solutions.[72]

The history of framing was strictly connected with the history of ornamentation, understood as deliberate decoration meant to highlight the importance or sacred nature of the given object. However, in the 20th century, the ornament was degraded and rejected as a "crime."[73] Already in the second half of the 19th and the early 20th centuries – the age of mass mechanical reproduction of art described by Walter Benjamin[74] – the artistic and symbolic frame was no longer necessary. Individual original images, which have their own texture and bear the traces of history, are perceived as flat, retouched illustrations without frames in the imagination of the contemporary spectator.

Abandonment of the frame declared by "progressive" 20th-century painters was meant to result from the symbolic inclusion of a work of art in current reality. The opinion that modern and contemporary painting does not have to be framed became rooted in the public consciousness. It could seem that a painter as innovative as Kazimir Malevich would exhibit his works without frames. This is not the case, though (**fig. 21**). His figurative works are mounted in frames with decorative corners that seem almost "old fashioned." Another artist one could suspect of rejecting frames, Pablo Picasso, deliberately mounted his works in original Spanish frames from the 16th and 17th centuries – and no-one would want to exchange them today. Nevertheless, contemporary art galleries and museums often exhibit unframed paintings, supposedly in line with modernist aesthetics. In turn, street art on walls is created in direct opposition to market-based "gallery art." Painting in the urban, public space usually requires no framework (whether visual or represented by museum or gallery walls), which renders it all the more associated with the "here and now," in line with the intentions of the founding fathers of new art forms in the early 20th century. Yet this is not always the case – murals and graffiti are framed

[71] "How artists have used the frame in the past & how they can use it now" [online], *The Frame Blog* [retrieved: 7 March 2018], at: <theframeblog.com/2016/06/09/how-artists-have-used-the-frame-in-the-past-how-they-can-use-it-now>.

[72] For instance the thoroughly analysed frames used by Edgar Degas – see "How Pre-Raphaelite Frames Influenced Degas and the Impressionists" [online], *The Frame Blog* [retrieved: 7 March 2018], at: <theframeblog.com/2017/07/25/how-pre-raphaelite-frames-influenced-degas-and-the-impressionists>.

[73] Gombrich, op. cit., p. 59.

[74] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (London, 2008). First published in Germany in 1935 (*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*).

by edges of walls or by whatever physically surrounds the painted image. Therefore, protests voiced in recent years by eminent mural artists against removing their works and transferring them from the public space into galleries (or even illegally selling them at auctions) may be regarded as another chapter of the historical relationship between the image and its frame.

Contemporary links between art and the *sacrum* were described by Jan Białostocki in his last essay. Although the author describes these two walks of life as ultimately divided, they used to coexist and complement each other within a single work of art.[75] The image organically required a frame that would communicate its affiliation with the "other world." Until the 18th century, there was no rigorous distinction between art, idea and concept of paintings on the one hand, and craftsmanship, execution and technique on the other.[76] Originally, a profiled strip of wood or the recess of a *kovcheg* were enough to contain holiness in the image itself. On the threshold of the modern era, as paintings gradually entered the profane realm represented by private rooms, they required frames as newly understood works: products of art and artistry. The frame began to surround the reality of nature and history, observed through the window of a painting, as defined by Alberti (*De pictura*, 1435; Italian: *Della pittura*, 1436). It delineated the field of vision and artistic creation. Yet throughout all that time, until the early 20th century, the painting and the frame were one. Paintings were only complete once they were framed.

To quote Gadamer again: "We have only to remember that the ornamental and the decorative originally meant the beautiful as such. It is necessary to recover this ancient insight. Ornament or decoration is determined by its relation to what it decorates, to what carries it."[77] Modern aesthetic appraisals (by "modern" I mean ones derived from enlightened, post-revolutionary modernism of the 18th and 19th centuries) brought with them a rift between the artistic (which substituted the holy) and the craftsmanlike, devoid of the transcendence of God, the Artist's genius or deified Art.[78] If frames are regarded as separate objects, one is tempted to include them in the latter, "worse" category. Without the painting, their evocative power is greatly limited – they are mute, crippled – quite like paintings without frames. Only by carefully considering the frame and painting as a whole can we gain a thorough understanding of their history.

Translated by Aleksandra Szkudłapska

[75] Jan Białostocki, "Art's Humility and Irreverence Vis-à-Vis the *Sacrum*," *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie. Nowa Seria / Journal of the National Museum in Warsaw. New Series*, no. 2(38) (2013), pp. 170–76.

[76] Antoni Ziemba, "'Rękodzielność' w teorii sztuki epoki nowożytnej. Szkic," in *Wśród ludzi, rzeczy i znaków. Krzysztofowi Pomianowi w darze*, Andrzej Kołakowski et al., eds (Warsaw, 2016), pp. 501– 20.

[77] Gadamer, op. cit., p. 152.

[78] Ibid.: "The antithesis of the decorative to a real work of art is obviously based on the idea that the latter originates in 'the inspiration of a genius.' The argument was more or less that what is only decorative is not the art of genius, but mere craftsmanship."