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TRADE SECRETS

A Little Frame Goes a Long Way



BEFORE AND AFTER For a 1960 work by Jean Dubuffet, G/K Framing chose an ebbonized 18th-century Dutch frame.



By **CLAIRE WILSON**

FRAMES are the fashion accessories of the art world. And just as the wrong shoes can ruin a Prada outfit, the wrong frame can ruin a Picasso. Yet collectors are often flummoxed: should the frame reflect the artist's style, period or palette — or some combination of these?

Eli Wilner, a leading dealer in antique frames (1525 York Avenue, at 81st Street; 212-744-6521) who also makes replicas of period frames for the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the White House, said people should expect to spend 10 percent of the value of the painting on a frame.

Christie's and Sotheby's tend to borrow period frames for important auctions because they help sell works, but framers and curators agree that a period frame does not add lasting value to a painting. "A diamond in a beautiful setting sells for more than a diamond in a bad setting," Mr. Wilner said. But, he added, "it's not whether it is a period frame or a replica of a period frame that adds value to the painting. It is the style and the quality of execution that adds value."

Nonetheless, Mr. Wilner said, period frames are increasingly in demand, with prices up 800 percent since 1990 (the year the Met held an exhibition of antique frames). Collectors and museums are especially willing to pay a premium if a frame is original to a painting. A frame made by an artist for a particular work is worth three times as much as a frame from the same period not determined to be for a specific painting, he said. Van Gogh, Degas and Eakins are among those who made their own. Whistler signed his

frames instead of his paintings — with a signature butterfly — so the two would not be separated.

Elizabeth Goldfeder, the chief executive of G/K Framing in New York (169 Hudson Street; 212-431-0633), whose clients include the International Center of Photography and the American Folk Art Museum, said finding the right frame is an interpretive process, best begun by examining similar works in a museum or on the Internet. (Web sites with framing information include artlex.com and biddingtuns.com.)

"The first thing you want to look for is wheth-

Finding a frame that enriches, not upstages, is an art in itself.

er there is a preferred or typical presentation for the work of an artist," she said. Picasso and Miró, for example, favored 18th-century Spanish frames. Original owners of Impressionist paintings often framed them in elaborate gilded 18th-century French confections. John Singer Sargent commissioned Stanford White to design gilded frames with intricate decorative motifs for his paintings.

Finding the right frame for a 20th-century work can be a challenge because there are few stylistic guidelines. In such cases, Alexander Havilland, the director of G/K Framing's vintage frame division, lets the painting suggest an answer. To frame a painting by Francis Bacon informed by El Greco, for example, the best choice

might be a frame in the 17th-century Spanish style favored by El Greco.

Many 20th-century artists, like Jackson Pollock, Jasper Johns and Barnett Newman, eschewed frames altogether, and dealers agree their intent should be honored and the works remain frameless.

It's a rare art collector, of course, who trundles into a frame shop with an original by Sargent or Picasso. But high-end shops do see plenty of artwork from the 1960's, 70's and 80's, framed in gold plastic, fake wood stripping or aluminum, none of which make sense now that the pieces are so highly valued. In these cases, Ms. Goldfeder looks for motifs or patterns in the paintings and frames accordingly. When a soup-can print by Andy Warhol came to her shop in a disintegrating plexiglass frame, for example, she replaced it with a frame that had the look of an ebbonized 17th-century Dutch one with a pattern mimicking the rings on the soup can.

The current fashion is to create frames that often overwhelm paintings instead of flattering them, Ms. Goldfeder said. She calls the popular gilded cassetta frame, with its wide flat panels and raised edges, a "lazy, sloppy solution."

"I've also taken off more Louis XV frames than I've ever put on," she said, referring to the popular gilded reproductions.

Well-designed frames should seem like such a natural extension of the work that they almost disappear, said Robyn Pocker, president of J. Pocker & Son (135 East 63rd Street; 212-838-5488), an 80-year-old shop in New York.

"You don't want to walk into the foyer and say, 'Oh, what a great frame!'" she said.

Ms. Goldfeder agreed. "If you see the frame before the art, we have made a mistake," she said.