

# ANATOMY OF A FRAME

By William B. Adair

UNDERSTANDING THE NAMES AND ORIGINS OF MANY FRAME ELEMENTS CAN MAKE YOU MORE PROFESSIONAL AND INSPIRE CUSTOMER CONFIDENCE IN YOUR EXPERTISE

**MARK TWAIN** once quipped that “Education” is the path from cocky ignorance to miserable uncertainty. And so, for most of us, when in doubt about a frame description, we mumble.

Knowing the proper frame nomenclature should be part of the essential tool kit of every professional custom framer. This knowledge not only helps convey specific details in formal museum reports but also can be useful in explaining a simple frame job to a client. A concise and accurate verbal description of a frame’s elements can also enable your clients to visualize the end product more clearly. It reinforces a sense of professionalism, helping you to avoid errors and misunderstandings.

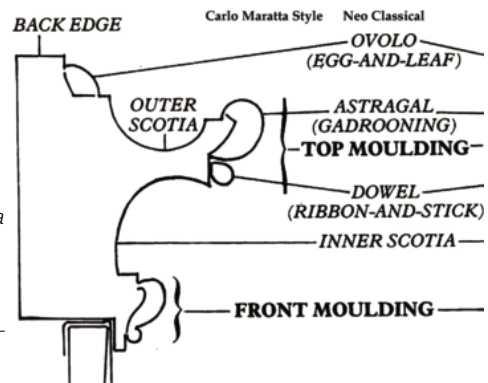
Since there are many inconsistent terms to describe a picture frame’s anatomy, begin by simplifying the process and examine independently each of three basic design components of the frame. First, identify the profile or shape of the moulding. Second, categorize the ornamentation or design. And third, accurately describe the finish and tone of the surface of the frame.

## THE PROFILE

The common denominator of all frames is the profile or shape of the moulding. The profile is where the origins and date of manufacture can be ultimately detected and properly identified. It can also be said that the frame is closely linked to the stylistic trends of architecture as well as prevailing interior design trends, thus the frame becomes a barometer of taste for the period of style in which it originated.



*Carlo Maratta-style frames were often used in framing late eighteenth-century English portraits by artists such as Sir Joshua Reynolds. (Right) a profile drawing shows the various components of a Maratta frame.*



*Drawing courtesy of Tim Newbery*

Picture frame profiles fall into three basic categories: concave scoop, convex or reverse scoop, and flat, and there are many combinations of these. Greek names are useful to describe the various sections, established for centuries, to avoid confusion in popular or colloquial nicknames for moulding shapes, such as “Swan,” or other colloquial names that need to be further explained and passed down from one framer to another. Typically, artist names are associated with particular mouldings, such as the cassetta pro-

file that is commonly called the “Murphy Style” after artist frame maker Hermann Dudley Murphy.

## THE ORNAMENTATION

There are many ways to identify ornamentation through source books and articles (“Ornamentation in Frame Design: In Search of Elementals, William B. Adair, February 2004). Ornaments fall into several categories of manufacture. Starting with the simplest, the designs are hand painted, stenciled, embossed with metal wheels, hand applied composition materials, plaster, compo, papier-mâché, resins, wood-simulated polymers, and the most reliable and expensive, carved wood.

## THE FINISH

Today, genuine gold leaf is rarely used in commercial manufacturing. Brass leaf is typically used and toned to imitate real gold and is a good substitute when economy is an issue. The leaf can be applied with either mordant (oil), synthetic mordant (Wunda Size), or the more traditional and elaborate water gilding, burnished or matte. Most frames are then finished with a variety of pigmented waxes, Japan paints, casein paint, dry pigments, glazing mediums, and a host of other artistic expressions and materials used by today’s creative framers. Some people have taken prefinished moulding and refinished it to suit their specific demands.

## NEO-CLASSICAL PROFILES

Although most neoclassical frames are based on fifth-century Greek architectural mouldings, the Carlo Maratta-style frame is named in honor of a seventeenth-century Italian painter. A slight variation

on this basic form is referred to as the Salvador Rosa style. The chief characteristic that makes it a “Carlo” is the separately made element of a carved and gilded running ornament attached with nails to the cove of the moulding. Its basic shape without the carved embellishment in the center is simply referred to as Neoclassical design, in vogue during the last quarter of the eighteenth century and used today by many manufacturers. It replaced the robust Rococo work of the previous generation’s craftsmen.

## OGEE PROFILES

With additional subsidiary mouldings, the entire profile of this frame forms an “S” curve. It is based on a yin-yang concept of

*The wide panel of a Murphy-style frame creates a neutral area around a painting, allowing contrast for highly detailed landscape or still life paintings with textured impasto brushwork.*



*The acanthus leaf design was derived from Greek architecture and eventually evolved into the most common neoclassical ornament on frames, as reflected in this current Omega Moulding profile.*



*A Rococo corner of a Gideon Saint profile (drawing from the Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection) evolved over time into the Neoclassical look of a Louis XVI frame, right, an entablature profile that used such classical ornamentation as lamb’s tongue and lotus leaf.*

balance and more formally stated Cyma Reversa and Cyma Recta forms of classical fifth-century Greek architecture. The ogee, when configured as a reverse profile, will push a painting forward and away from the wall to keep any overhead light from casting a shadow. Some Dutch, Spanish, and Venetian profiles are shaped this way.

## CASSETTA PROFILES

This classic Italian Florentine sixteenth-century profile is referred to as the “cassetta” because the same Italian craftsmen who made frames also made little decorative boxes or “cassetta” then embellished the panels with ornamental cast- or hand-wrought *pastiglia* designs on the flat panels. The



cassetta profile developed from these origins and is now identified by this distinctive element. In some cases, the surface is adorned with a soft, undulating details, such as J.W. Alexander's "The Blue Bowl," painted in 1897. This area is known as a "taenia," frieze, or panel. This is flanked by two raised mouldings on either side known as "scotia" or half-round (concave) or by more common terminology such as "scoop" or "hollow."

John White Alexander (1856-1915) was an illustrator for *Harper's Weekly*, and by the time "The Blue Bowl" was acquired by the Rhode Island School of Design in 1904, Alexander had achieved international stature as a painter. Like other young artists of his generation, he had advanced his training in Paris, combining the flowing vine lines of Art Nouveau with the asymmetric spatial principles of the Japanese Aesthetic Cult Movement. It still retains its original French Art Nouveau cassetta frame with the vine and leaf pattern, most likely selected by the artist.

## ENTABLATURE PROFILES

The entablature profile is one of the more elaborate profiles used for frames from the mid-fifteenth century. It was readapted and simplified during the late eighteenth century and evolved into the Louis XVI frame profile. It contains many of the frame elements needed to properly describe the basic frame nomenclature. The tabernacle frame also provides a concise collection of various architectural forms if the need arises to describe a tabernacle or aedicule frame.

## HOW TO DESCRIBE A FRAME

Here is a typical example of a formal written description of a historic frame. This gilded frame is an original Neoclassical, Carlo Marattastyle frame for an oil-on-canvas portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds. It is part of an examination report where documentation of an object is an important step before its treatment.

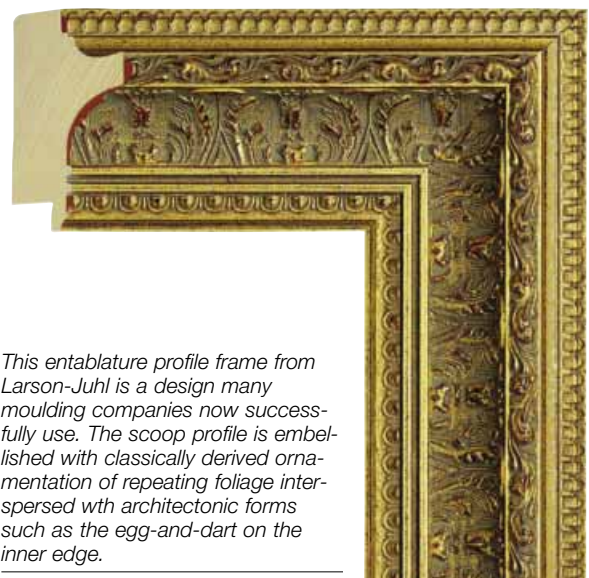
- The Pine frame is from the last quarter of the eighteenth century and has suffered numerous restoration campaigns that have resulted in an overall deteriorated condition.
- The frame's original finish was 23k gold leaf, water gilded, over a plum-colored bole but was subsequently oil gilded and then varnished with shellac (possibly done in the mid- to late-nineteenth century), which has deteriorated in a crazed oxidized finish with some intermittent areas having turned purple.
- There is evidence of original gilding visible to the naked eye and two corresponding bole colors: plum (from the eighteenth century), and gray (from the nineteenth century), augmented with some additional remedial repairs of intermittent bronze paint that has oxidized and turned dark. The bronze paint likely dates from the twentieth century.
- The decorative elements (innermost bead pattern, twisted ribbon and stick, calves tongue with acanthus leaf, and outermost foliate



*This reverse profile frame with laurel leaf and berry ornamentation and a cross strap from UniversalArquati pushes a painting forward so no shadow falls on the canvas from overhead lighting.*



*This cassetta-style frame, original to J.W. Alexander's "The Blue Bowl," incorporates Parisian Art Nouveau patterns echoed by the swirling brushwork in the painting.*



*This entablature profile frame from Larson-Juhl is a design many moulding companies now successfully use. The scoop profile is embellished with classically derived ornamentation of repeating foliage interspersed with architectonic forms such as the egg-and-dart on the inner edge.*

- design) are all clogged with subsequent restorations and have lost the refined detail of the artisan's original intent.
- The frame's outer edge is damaged: wood has been lost due to impact damage, and some areas are missing.
  - The frame has suffered severe gesso losses, especially on the outermost rim; many areas have been worn down to the wood and have been painted with bronze paint.
  - The rabbet of the frame is broken and split and is no longer able to safely hold the canvas.
  - There are some paper labels affixed on the back of the frame: English art dealer Thomas Agnew's label and an unknown handwritten inscription.

It can be very satisfying if you can accurately describe profiles, ornamentation, and finishes with confidence, and your professionalism will ultimately be rewarded. With study and perseverance, every moulding in your shop will have a proper classification and consistent description, and you will surge ahead of the competition with a valiant attempt to prove Mark Twain wrong. ■

*For a detailed look at profiles, frame design, and the evolution of frames, go to [www.pictureframingmagazine.com](http://www.pictureframingmagazine.com).*

*For more on frame history and period frames, look for William Adair's classes at the National Conference in Las Vegas.*



**William B. Adair** received his B.F.A. in Studio Art from the University of Maryland in 1972. For the next 10 years he worked for the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery as a museum conservator specializing in the treatment of picture frames. In 1982 he formed Gold Leaf Studios to make frames and conserve gilded antiques. His clients have included the U.S. Department of State and the National Park Service. He is the founder of the International Institute for Frame Study, a non-profit archive dedicated to collecting and disseminating information on the history of frames. He can be reached via e-mail at [bill@goldleafstudios.com](mailto:bill@goldleafstudios.com).

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