

# Gold in the Basement

*A current exhibition at the Getty Center in L.A. extols the rich legacy of historic French frames*

By William B. Adair

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then there is a new exhibition of empty frames at The Getty Center in Los Angeles that will leave you speechless. The current exhibit, “Louis Style: French Frames, 1610 – 1792,” strives to answer the question: what makes a French frame French? The show answers that question and, actually, demonstrates that there is a lot to learn about empty French frames.

These hidden gems are being showcased for the first time ever, illustrating a rich legacy of the mostly unknown craftsmen and the exquisite works they left behind. The Getty’s curators, Davide Gasparotto and Anne Woollett, along with frame specialist D. Gene Karraker, have selected the museum’s collection of empty French frames and cleverly displayed them by interspersing the frames with a few key paintings that have retained their rare original frames.

After many years we now have a major cultural institution providing the general public with a proper forum for the important, yet neglected, subject of French frames. The curators discovered a virtual treasure trove of empty frames in storage and, within a relatively short time of eight months, mounted the exhibition.

The well-organized show clearly explains the complex history of three centuries of French frames, all related to the French monarchy. It achieves this result through an innovative format of double hanging the frames in historical progression in the high-walled galleries along with a graphic time line and descriptions of ornaments on the wall. This allows the viewer to compare the different styles as they developed, even from a distance. The curators have also displayed the frames in



*French Trophy Frame, c. 1723, possibly carved by Michel Lange, designed by Gilles-Marie Oppenord. A frame can sometimes contribute important information to our understanding of not only the painting but also the historical and social context of the time in which it was created. This knowledge generates a synthesis of the human condition for our contemplation. For example, in the case of this portrait of Charles de Saint-Albin, Archbishop of Cambrai, by Hyacinth Rigaud, the official robes only tell part of the story. The restored frame dutifully completes the picture as it was originally conceived. Thanks to recent research, the elaborate carving of the extended corners, a symbolic royal and ecclesiastical top-crest cartouche, and scallop shell at the antependium (The order of Saint James) are again visible after having been destroyed during the French Revolution.*

a visually rich and informative way that lets the viewer not only see the differences in the frames but also remember them because of the wall graphics explaining ornaments and styles.

Gasparotto hatched the idea for the exhibit about eight months ago when he arrived from Parma, Italy. He is a particularly frame-conscious curator whose appointment to The Getty comes as no surprise. This kind of approach to scholarship is exactly what is needed in the field today.

Members of the general public who frequent museums typically have no way of knowing what they are looking at because curators typically ignore the rich and varied history of frames. Labels about frames are rarely found anywhere simply because it's difficult to be definitive about this arcane subject. What once was important and valuable to collectors and artists has been sadly abandoned, until now. As evolving tastes change, most museum basements have excess frames in storage waiting to be restored or sold. A colleague once remarked to me about my job of placing frames back on paintings found in the basement of museums: "It's like finding an orphan that needs the right home."

In the early 1970s, the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, CT, developed an interest in the frames in their



*Transition Style Frame, c. 1764. Frame original to painting, "Market Scene in an Oriental Port," by Jean Baptist Pillement (1728-1808). This particular frame style has evolved into a kind of universal pattern that has been used for many applications over the years for pastels, oils, watercolors, and engravings. Pillement's major famous patron was Marie Antoinette, and his influence was extensive as these frame patterns continue to resonate today with frame makers. It has both a free-flowing elegance and a solidity, combining the best of both worlds of the Rococo and the developing Neoclassical-style frame patterns of the period.*

collection. This was primarily a result of an evaluation by world respected frame specialist Paul Levi, who recognized the importance of the collection's untouched original frames. Since that time, a lot has happened in frame studies and appreciation of frames as an art form that has been paramount to the knowledge and understanding of art history. Frames provide important interpretive roles in reflecting the taste and style of each era as well as important

## **Louis Style: French Frames, 1610 – 1792**

**The Getty Center, Los Angeles, CA**

**September 15, 2015 - January 3, 2016**

This exhibition contains 48 empty frames and nine framed paintings. Drawing on The Getty's large collection of French frames, "Louis Style" presents a survey of some of the best original carved and gilded frames produced during the reigns of French kings from 1610-1792. These empty frames represent five stylistic periods (Louis XIII, Louis XIV, Régence, Louis XV, and Louis XVI), with extraordinary examples showing the design development from restrained to elaborate and dynamic and back to a more reserved and linear style.

The arrangement and accompanying material provide an excellent compendium of French design and craftsmanship. The practical vocabulary of ornament identifies the period of a frame and provides insight into the construction and gilding. Techniques such as the use of oak, recutting or engraving of gesso, and water gilding with an identifiable translucent orange bole color are specific to frames made in France. Sometimes the use of 18k gold was used for additional refinement and most always high contrast between burnish and mat areas, also referred to as "dead and bright."

The text accompanying the exhibition is titled "Looking at European Frames: A Guide to Terms, Styles and Techniques," by D. Gene Karraker. More information about the exhibit is available at [www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/french\\_frames](http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/french_frames).

Louis XV Style, 1723-1774. The chief characteristic of this period of frame making is the incessant fluid movement of ornamentation, often referred to as the Rococo style. The only straight line is typically along the sight edge of the canvas, allowing the eye to mimic the sinuous movement of the contemporary painting styles prevalent in this period. They favored elaborate landscapes or curvaceous women wearing flowing satin gowns and other details such as pierced lace ruffles on the cuffs of the sitters.



Louis XIII Frame, 1610-1643. Primarily influenced by Italian craftsmen, this is perhaps the most universally imitated of all the French frame styles. The ornamentation and profiles are more easily produced and could be imitated by artists and craftsmen who were not as well funded as the king's frame makers.

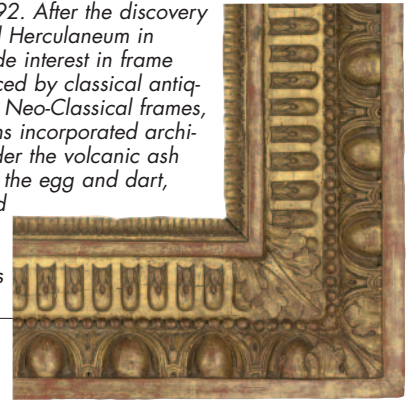


clues as to previous ownership and provenance.

Frame dealers have produced a number of small exhibitions and publications on French frames over the years, most notably Parisian frame specialist Georges Gross's superb 1991 exhibit with rare catalog, "Le Cadre et Le Bois Dore: A Travers les Siècles," for Gallerie Georges Bac. Gold Leaf Studios Curator Jennifer Janicki was inspired by the Georges Bac show and, in 1999, organized a show on French frames called, "Glorious Borders, Three Centuries of French Frames," with a superb publication (still available from the PFM bookstore).

The show at The Getty is a virtual feeding frenzy for frame lovers. This current effort not only makes an important contribution to frame scholarship but also proves once again that a museum's role in this world is to educate, not just decorate. This exhibit is not to be missed, for it not only provides rare moments of awe but also informs and delights, thus causing the eye to never

Louis XVI Frame, 1774-1792. After the discovery of the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum in 1748, the shift of worldwide interest in frame design was greatly influenced by classical antiquity. Also commonly called Neo-Classical frames, these less elaborate patterns incorporated architectural elements found under the volcanic ash such as running designs of the egg and dart, bead or pearls, fluting, and acanthus leaf corners, which are still used on many contemporary frames today.



Gilders Tools, Diderot's Encyclopedia, c. 1751. This page illustrates the primary tools used by gilders in the eighteenth century. Jesuit trained philosopher Denis Diderot (1713-1784) is best known for launching an illustrated encyclopedia on the trades. It made knowledge available to the general public during the age of enlightenment. The encyclopedia continues to be an important resource for scholars to this day. Catherine the Great acquired his research library, and his collection of books now resides in the National Library of Russia in Saint Petersburg.



look at just the painting without considering the effect of the frame. Perhaps the Getty's historic exhibition on French frames will inspire other institutions to reassess their own holdings and discover some of the lost gold in their basements. **PFM**

*Learn more about frame history and how frames have influenced other cultural movements in William's sessions at The National Conference in Las Vegas in January.*



**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 at [bill@goldleafstudios.com](mailto:bill@goldleafstudios.com).