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20th Century Frame Innovator Spotlight on Robert Kulicke

"The function of the frame designer/frame maker is to serve the painter using the forms of the architect."

By Bruce Gherman

The decision to re-frame the impressionistic paintings from the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum is a topic of ongoing controversy. Recently, *Connoisseur Magazine* published an article addressing the controversy, specifically that the replacement of the original, ornate period frames with modern, float frames was done against the advice of many designers. Robert Kulicke, the designer of the float frame and consultant on those projects, partially agrees. The article sparked my interest.

Kulicke's name is very familiar to me.

The float frame, the welded metal frame and the plexiglass box are almost synonymous with his name. As publisher of PFM and an admirer of his works, I wanted to meet this man to learn more about his contributions to the framing industry and experience his framing knowledge. He responded to my request for an interview with a gracious invitation to his home where I could view his new frames and paintings.

My preconceived notion that his home would reflect Louis XIV splendor integrated with some of his own modern works could not have been further from the truth. What I encountered instead, was an apartment

filled with 13th and 14th century Gothic frames, so beautifully executed and reproduced that I thought he might have actually taken them from Gothic churches. I later learned that Kulicke is an expert reproduction maker and gilder, whose frames adorn paintings such as the DaVinci in the National Gallery.

Robert Kulicke's life has been and continues to be dedicated to the pursuit of excellence in art and framing. His knowledge of history and technique is unsurpassed. When the Met, Guggenheim or Modern Museums have a difficult framing problem to solve, Kulicke is often called upon for consul-



tation. At the age of 65, the man we best know as painter and frame maker enjoys a life full of accomplishments. In the short time I've known him, I'm left with the distinct impression that he has only begun to scratch the surfaces of his talent. The following is the heart of my enjoyable and personally enlightening interview with Robert Kulicke.

Bruce Gherman: When did you decide to become a framer?

Robert Kulicke: In 1947 I was studying art and advertising design. I took the summer off to paint. I made

some frames at that time which people really responded to, and thought to myself that being a frame maker would be a wonderful way to make living. When I began my career, I had no idea of the extent of my ignorance. I was easily the worst frame maker in America, being reasonably intelligent, persuasive, enthusiastic and totally ignorant all at once.

BG: How did you go about advancing your skills?

RK: As a young novice in Philadelphia, I desperately sought to learn what, in 1947 in America, was the unlearnable. There were only a handful of framers in America who had the knowledge to carve and gild. They were all extremely secretive. I pleaded with them to let me work for nothing but they wouldn't. Unable to learn what I wanted in America, I left for Paris in 1949 on the GI Bill. I studied painting with Leger in the morning and apprenticed myself to carvers, gilders and matmakers in the afternoon. It was still difficult to get important technical information. There seemed to be a code to teach only their sons the craft, but no one else. I then paid a carver a journeyman's wage just so I could watch him work. These skills took 15 to 20 generations to evolve, so this was the only way I could think of to learn them. In my second year in Paris, I spent less and less time with Leger and more and more time in the Louvre, teaching myself the history of frames. I couldn't read French, so I returned to New York to continue studying the history of frames and architectural design at the New York 42nd Street Library. It gradually occurred to me that frames are furniture and furniture is a form of architectural design. I had to learn this to make sense of the history of frames.

BG: When did you open your business?

RK: I started my frame shop in New York in 1951, at the age of 26, and began working with the painters of

the emerging School of Abstract Expressionism. I began developing, for and with them, the water gilded furniture wood strips in various gold and fine wood band frames. In 1953, I designed and developed the floating frame for Knoll Associates. This was actually first used by artists in the 20's. What I did was to develop these ideas into products to serve the painters. None of these were inventions. They were developments. I am a designer—I develop products. Invention implies something coming from nothing and that never happened. It is always an evolutionary development not an invention.

Originality always happens as a byproduct of the search for the answers to a technical or an aesthetic problem.

At the same time I was also improving my skills as a reproduction maker. My knowledge of history and tradition enabled me to make acceptable replicas, many of which hang in the Metropolitan Museum, the National Gallery and other museums.



BG: How did you establish such an important clientele for yourself?

RK: When there are twenty guys in New York trying to make the most money as picture framers and there is one guy trying to make the best frames in the world, that's practically unfair competition. Everyone thought that I must be a very rich man and quite crazy because I was selling frames for less than what they cost to make. For the first ten years of Kulicke Frames, I lost between 5 and 20 thousand dollars each year. I made it up by buying and selling medieval art. During that time it was more important to me to establish an audience. I was also a working painter, so I had a natural sympathy to serve the painters with whom I worked. When Franz Kline, Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell or Bill DeKooning are at a cocktail party and the subject of frames comes up, and they all say there's only one frame maker in America, Bob Kulicke, they have nothing per-

sonal to gain by it. That's more persuasive than any advertising.

BG: How did you invent the welded metal frame that you are famous for?

RK: I was not the first man to make a metal frame. I invented nothing. I am a designer. Metal frames have been made in various forms since the 20's but not well, and not successfully in terms of serving the painter, or as a viable art world

product. I understood back in 1954, that the welded metal had to be the classic 20th century frame, but it took me until 1960 to develop. I came to realize that abstract painting needed a welded polished metal frame in order to be elegant enough for the large powerful art. I decided on aluminum because stainless steel weighed 7 times as much. The problems with aluminum were its difficulty to produce a clean aesthetic weld and its lack of cost effectiveness.

While still experimenting with the problem, Porter McCrae, of the museum of Modern Art, contacted me about a welded metal frame. If I could solve the problem, they agreed to buy 2,000 frames from me over a three year period. For the next year and a half I gave most of my time to this effort, with a great deal of help from the Utechni Corporation and their staff. I finally succeeded in designing and developing a welded, polished, aluminum frame of which I am still enormously proud. It is aesthetically based on the Mies Van de Rohe Barcelona Chair of 1928, a masterpiece of 20th century design and craftsmanship, in steel and leather, with an achieved sense of simplicity. One of my proudest moments was when I received a letter of congratulations from Van de Rohe's assistant. What still seems incredible is the time span between the design of the

chair and that of my frame. This indicates just how far behind the architect the frame designer can be.

BG: How soon after the welded metal frame did you develop the metal section frame?

RK: As I was struggling with this new technology, I realized that if I could come up with a viable mechanical joint, a metal section frame could be sold the way canvas stretchers were being sold all over the world—in standard

length and pairs. I knew I was too close to the problem and would probably not come up with the answer on my own, so I told my salespeople to keep an eye out for a mechanical joint we could use. One day in 1966, one of my assistants, Don Herbert, came back from a sales trip in Canada and placed, on my desk, a corner joint design which was exactly what I had been looking for. Kulicke Frames, Inc. brought out the metal section frame in 1967 through our contract division, for distribution as a commercial product and it was a huge success.



BG: Another important

design you developed was the Plexiglas box. Where did you come up with the concept?

RK: We developed the plexibox in 1964 for the Photographic Wing of the Museum of Modern Art. The concept of a frameless frame started with the braquet—a product of the 30's. The plexibox had been made off and on for 20 years, but never well and never as a viable product, and not by anyone who understood that the significance of the presentation is the proportion of the mat. I had noticed since the 50's that I would design a mat for a Paul Klee watercolor with proportions that gave it a wonderfully dramatic “island of neutrality”, forcing your eye into the art. Sitting there on the table with that mat, it was perfectly presented. As soon as we put a frame on it, the frame became more visually important than the picture. How could that be good

design? Thus, the idea was a frameless frame. The first one to be developed was the braquet in 1936. The problem was it was temporary and wasn't dust proof. So I developed the plexibox for conservation purposes, for a clean presentation and to present the work of art on its own terms and for its own sake. That's a hard thing to do. A picture frame must present a work of art in the most sympathetic manner possible.

BG: What do you think are the most important things a framer should know?

RK: The most important thing is the history of art and frames. Also important to learn is the function of a mat and the history of architectural design. Then, it will become apparent that a Louis XIV frame has the same characteristics as a Louis XIV chair, or the architectural carvings of a Louis XIV building.

BG: Your last frame design was completed and marketed in 1967. What have you been doing since then?

RK: I lost my company. Actually, I was fired because I was considered a troublemaker. I wanted to invest money in product development which in my opinion was the company's life blood and the only way we

could stay ahead of the competition. Those running the company disagreed. They felt money spent on product development would be a waste because everyone would soon copy it and sell it for less. It was this philosophy that destroyed my company and forced me out.

BG: What are you doing now?

RK: Most of my time is spent painting and framing my work. I am an intimist, still life painter and the 34 years have devoted myself to painting fruits and flowers, often a single fruit. My painting stems from Zen philosophy and Medieval art, which is why I have found that 11th, 12th, 13th and 14th century frames are the most sympathetic to some of my work. I decided to experiment making medieval frames as fairly authentic reproductions. To me, the frame is the ultimate presentation, the reward for painting the picture. I get an enormous amount of enjoyment out of making them. These little frames are very labor intensive and take a great deal of time to make. What I have is a wonderful little product with a potential market on one (myself). I've done 60 or 70 now, none of which are identical. To make these frames I need to make only two aesthetic decisions—one, the architecture and two, the patina. In painting, every brushstroke is an aesthetic decision. ■