

By Patrick Sarver

A Master's

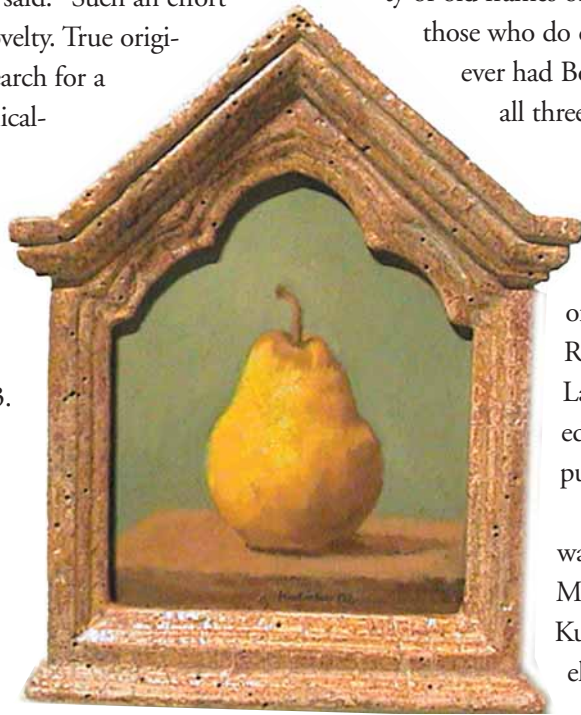
Robert Kulicke, creator of the metal section frame and Plexi box, raised period frame restoration to new heights and enjoyed a successful career as an artist and jewelry designer

To aim at originality directly head on is the only certain way of never arriving there,” noted frame maker Robert Kulicke once said. “Such an effort can only result in a self-conscious novelty. True originality is always a byproduct of the search for a technical-esthetic solution to a technical-esthetic problem.”

This philosophy was one of the driving principles behind the great creative talents of Kulicke, the twentieth century's most important framer, who passed away December 14, 2007, at the age of 83. He was best known in the framing world as the designer of the welded aluminum frame, the metal section frame, the Plexi box, the frameless glass or trap frame, and the crackle finish. But Kulicke's legacy also included raising the art of period frame reproductions and restoration to new heights and training a generation of leading frame makers in America in creating truly accurate antique frames. He was also a painter of note, known for his still lifes of pears and other fruit. And he helped revolutionize the art of jewelry making by resurrecting the ancient art of granulation in cloisonné.

“He may be the largest single contributor to the field of frame making, both in his insistence on the preservation of quality of antique design and in his willingness to compromise with modern materials and demand,” says Laurence Kanter, curator of Early European Art at the Yale University Art Gallery and former curator of the Robert Lehman Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “Generally

speaking, in the frame-making world you get people who are very careful and respectful of the uniqueness and quality of old frames or people who do modern frames or those who do cheap reproductions. No one else ever had Bob's high standards in combining all three.”



Kulicke was known for both his still life paintings of fruit, most notably pears, and for his period frames. He designed this one to echo the shape of the fruit.

Contemporary Frames

“Bob's contemporary frames evolved as a result of the nature of the work he was framing,” says Roy Davis, a partner at Davis & Langdale, the gallery that represented Kulicke since 1974. “He couldn't put a Louis XV frame on a Rothko.”

The welded aluminum frame was created in 1956 when the Museum of Modern Art asked Kulicke to design a frame for its traveling exhibitions. In 1960 he also developed the Lucite Plexi box frame for the museum's photography department.

“When he saw all the chrome and glass architecture, he decided those elements were needed in frame design,” says Kulicke's son, Mike, a frame maker in Mount Bethel, PA. “For months he worked with a metallurgist from a welding supply company to figure out how to braze extruded aluminum so it could be polished seamlessly and not show a joint. For quite a while he also knew he wanted to make a modular version of the welded frame—the metal section frame—but he wasn't sure what corner hardware was appropriate. He had everyone in the company looking for a device that would work.” One of the designers, Don Herbert, came back from a trip

Legacy

to Canada with hardware from a shower enclosure door that was adapted and developed for the sectional frame.

Another original design of Kulicke and his company was the trap frame, which uses two sheets of acrylic sandwiched together with a very thin extrusion channel around it, with the art floating inside. “The two sheets float off the wall on hangers and the art doesn't go out to the edge, so the wall serves as a mat border,” says Mike. “My father said that a mat provided an island of neutrality around art and that mats were more important a couple hundred years ago when wallpaper was more common and had a much busier texture.”

Marty Horowitz, owner of Goldleaf Framemakers of Santa Fe, worked at Kulicke Picture Frames in the early 70s. “They were the best frame maker in New York City, if not the world, and the most important thing I learned there was taste—how to design an elegant minimal package, what we always called Madison Avenue framing. Bob was the father of the simple $\frac{3}{8}$ " and $\frac{5}{8}$ " band gilded in white or yellow gold over red clay or with a wood side. He was also the father of the Knoll floater, which he created for that design firm, with a wood side and a simple white gold top. Nobody had gilded clean mouldings like that before. All the great artists of the day were there, buying frames.”

Kulicke was always attuned for ideas that he could use

in framing, and one of his creations, the crackle finish, started with an inspiration from an unusual source. “Bob said that the crackle finish was the result of one of his wife's baking experiments that didn't work out,” says William Adair, owner of Gold Leaf Studios in Washington, DC, and a former business associate of Kulicke. “Something in the baking gave him the idea of how to get a crackle finish. He kept innovating on the effect and finally got it.”

Period Frames

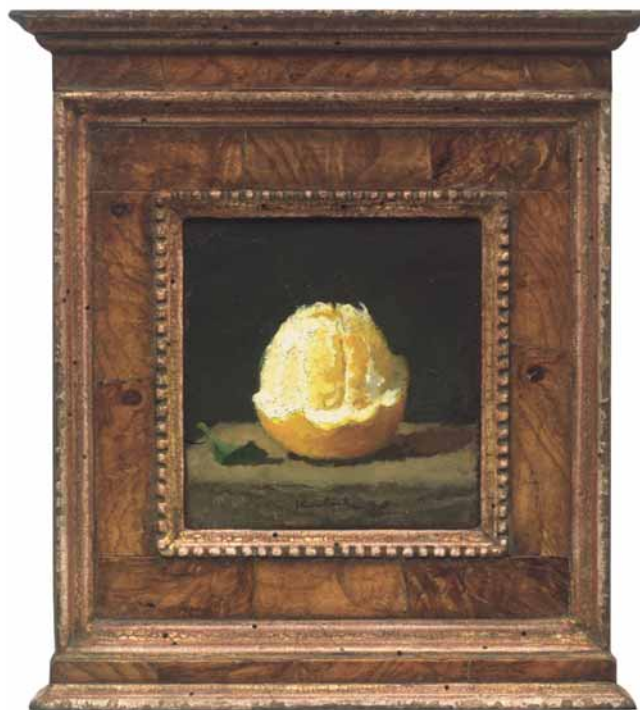
Kulicke wasn't just about contemporary frames. His company had a full line of period frames, and he passed on his knowledge to many of today's leading gilders and frame restorers. “Bob was a major influence on the framing industry

and had a lasting impact in training generations of American gilders,” says Adair. “He learned his techniques in Paris and brought them back here. He was able to imitate a patina because, being an artist, he understood the subtleties of glazing and how it all came together. And then he taught Abe Munn. Bob said he took in Abe Munn early on because he was a refugee. He liked to say, ‘I taught Abe everything he knows but not everything I know.’”

“Many of the innovative things Bob learned in Paris or he developed himself,” adds Davis. “The existing frame makers in this country were pretty much overwhelmed by the things he

accomplished. His basic premise when doing antique reproductions was to not to try to improve on an original. A lot of the frames that were made in those days were copies of Louis XV and XVI frames, interpretations that conformed to existing mouldings or mouldings that would be less expensive. They took liberties with frames. Bob's premise was that you can't improve on an original and you had to be as accurate as possible. This was a revelation because the frames that were being made in this country at the time were atrocious.”

The number of his period frames at the Metropolitan Museum is a testament to his emphasis on quality, with more than 300 in the Department of Drawings alone. But



This Kulicke painting of an orange is in a reproduction of a tabernacle frame with a burl inlay panel.

they are elsewhere in the museum as well, including the frame on Giotto's "Epiphany."

In a 1990 interview in *PFM* Kulicke spoke about his focus on authenticity. "When there are 20 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," he said. "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. 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."

An important influence on Kulicke was Mario Modestini, a frame restorer who was born in Italy. "Mario would be sitting at lunch and get a call from the secretary of the Pope, which Bob always found very funny," says Pam Sheehan, Kulicke's widow. "They were very dear friends, and he was one of the big influences on Bob. Mario's father was a gilder, and Mario became a restorer. Bob knew him from post war until his death. Mario and his wife restored a lot of fifteenth-century work. That was where the two of them really joined, because Bob had this thing for the fifteenth century. He loved older frames and art. He also loved modern frames, but for his own work he preferred the antique."

"Bob had one or two Renaissance frames in particular that were personal favorites," says Kanter. "So later in life when he created a series of paintings of a single pear on a table, he actually chose one of those frames that he remembered from his boyhood in Philadelphia. It defined a picture field of a shape not unlike a pear, narrower at the top than at the bottom. He then structured the composition of each painting to fit precisely in the center of the frame. Artists like Seurat did similar things but were much less ambitious than Bob because he had more complex ideas relating framing to painting."

Painting

Kulicke was interested in art from early in his life. He had attended the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia before World War II and went to Paris on the G.I. Bill afterward, where he studied painting at the studio of Fernand Léger and

apprenticed at several framers. For some years he was discouraged in his painting, but resumed in the 1950s when the World House gallery brought him 300 paintings by Giorgio Morandi for framing. Morandi's work inspired him to focus on smaller, simpler subjects, and thereafter he painted and regularly exhibited small still lifes of flowers and single fruit, notably pears.

"I think Morandi was number one for Bob," says Sheehan. "The quality of the man and his paintings were about the simplicity of the work, the directness, and the kind of emotional humility that you find in fifteenth-century icons. Morandi seemed to speak to Bob in that kind of lan-

guage. He also thought painting was the only thing truly worth doing with his life. There was a kind of a non-materialistic element in that. What was most satisfying to Bob was to have made a painting that, as he would say, he agreed with. Such a painting in a frame from an era that he loved was just the complete package for him."

"Bob had a certain methodical way of making a frame—how it was carved, joined, and finished—and this process was transmittable to a worker," says Davis. "Bob used the same kind of approach to his painting. He used a camera lucida to transfer images onto a canvas and then would go about painting in a fairly methodical way. He had the process totally worked out and used to teach it to favorite friends. He called it

'three easy lessons' or something like that in which they could follow Bob's procedure to produce a 'Kulicke.' "

Jewelry

In addition to Kulicke's accomplishments in painting and frame making, he also had a major impact on jewelry making. "It's funny because the jewelry world doesn't know anything about his contribution to the framing world and vice versa, but they were both big," says his daughter, Fredricka, who owns the Fredricka Kulicke School of Jewelry Art in Parsippany, NJ. "He did with jewelry exactly what he did in the frame industry. There are so many jewelers today who make high karat gold handmade jewelry with granulation, jewelry that has a sense of history. That's how he changed the look of modern jewelry in America. The Victoria & Albert



Kulicke transformed many of his still life paintings into cloisonné enamel jewelry.

Museum in London actually has one of his pear jewels, which were translations of his pear paintings into cloisonné.”

Fredricka says her father became interested in jewelry when he went to the museum to look at paintings. “He’d walk by all the beautiful ancient jewelry—ancient Greek, Roman, and Egyptian jewelry as well as medieval cloisonné and religious icons—and he was fascinated by it,” she says. “He started reproducing his paintings as miniature cloisonné enamels. Then he learned goldsmithing to make settings for them. And then he taught himself how to do granulation, another ancient technique that hadn’t been done much in the western world for the last 1,000 years. He got his New York artist friends involved, and a whole group was reproducing their works in miniature cloisonné enamels in our apartment. Eventually he rented studio space on Broadway. That went through a lot of changes and names but still exists as the Jewelry Arts Institute.”

Temperamental Genius

“Bob was a really amazing guy, a diamond in the rough,” says Adair. “He had a great sense of color and design and a keen eye. He could also be a bit crusty. During the last few years of his life I’d go visit him, and when I’d arrive at ten in the morning he’d want to go get a hamburger for breakfast.”

“My father had a strong ego and was a very temperamental genius,” says Mike. “He did chill out a lot in his older age, but when he was in his 30s and 40s, he had a temper. For example, when the Lincoln Center was being built in the 60s, my parents were called in to frame two Calder, 25’ tall murals or banners. My mother was late, and my father and several of the principals were discussing the framing when my father detected some kind of aesthetic flaw in a building detail and pointed it out to the architect. The architect asked him to create a frame design to compensate for this defect, which was perfectly reasonable, but my father didn’t see it that way. He thought it was shoddy and that the builder should fix the problem. He actually yelled at the architect and stormed out. My mother came in late to a very tense atmosphere and had to smooth things over.”

It was just a reflection of Kulicke’s uncompromising concern with making the best product he could regardless of price. “He was just an extraordinarily dedicated person who had a tremendous historical and aesthetic background,” says

Davis. “His interests were far ranging, and frame making was simply a byproduct of this. And he didn’t stop until 11 or 12 at night. I had a room downstairs in a brownstone, and the business was upstairs. I never gave him my home number because he would call at all hours of the day or night. Once I was watching a ballgame and heard him on the phone machine screaming something like, ‘Roy, did you see that catch? Did you see that catch? Give me a call. Why don’t you give me your phone number?’ He couldn’t understand anybody who didn’t share that same kind of enthusiasm. Bob was like a 100-watt bulb burning at 150 watts for

a good part of his life and, in the end, Bob’s light just burned out.”

“He lived and breathed painting and frame making, and I think that that was what made him such a great frame maker,” says Sheehan. “He loved being in the presence of frames and paintings. Sometimes it would take five years before he would be able to do something he had conceived of. He found that very frustrating, but he had a

persistence that anybody who knew him would say was remarkable.”

Wide-ranging Experience

“Historically, frames were largely designed not for paintings but for the rooms in which they hung,” says Kanter. “Only in the nineteenth century were frames designed for works of art and were sometimes designed by artists. Bob was very interested in both those phenomena—architectural frames relating to rooms and artist-designed frames meant to complement the image. Bob tried to do both, and he had perhaps the widest ranging experience of any practicing artist to be able to accomplish both.”

In a CBS interview on Kulicke in 1994, reporters walked all around the Met to find out what made a Kulicke frame more faithful to the original than any other copy. “I tried to explain that Bob understood the workings of a frame from the inside out—even to point of knowing the sex life of insects that eat frames,” says Kanter. “For example, he understood that wood-boring insects live inside a frame and come out once a year to mate and go back inside. So when he put insect holes in a frame, they were authentic. That was Bob. He would focus on details in that way and enrich them infinitely. That’s the kind of person he was.” ■



Kulicke typically worked in his studio, painting and working on frames, until late at night.

