



A BOUNTY OF FRAMES

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

[Introduction](#)[Early Frames](#)[Complete Works](#)[Effects of Age](#)[Works on Canvas](#)[Period Frames](#)

A Bounty of Frames in the National Gallery of Art

J. Russell Sale, senior lecturer, department of adult programs
Steve Wilcox, senior conservator of frames

The great paintings in the National Gallery of Art are accompanied by an equally striking collection of frames. Like the pictures they enhance, these frames vary tremendously in style, materials, and ornamentation. Contrary to what visitors may presume, most of the frames on paintings in the Gallery are not original to the works they now surround. A few of our early pictures on wooden panels do include frames that were integral to the picture, and have never been separated since their paintings' creation. There is a very small group of works with detachable frames that were either designed for a particular painting or chosen for it when it was first hung. Other pictures bear frames from the same period in which the works were produced (so-called period frames) or frames intended to imitate a period frame, but made later. Most common are paintings displayed in frames from later periods.

[EARLY FRAMES >>](#)



Bernardo Daddi, *Madonna and Child with Saints and Angels*, 1330s, tempera on panel, Samuel H. Kress Collection

[help](#) | [search](#) | [site map](#) | [contact us](#) | [privacy](#) | [terms of use](#) | [press](#) | [NGA Images](#) | [home](#) |



Copyright © 2013 National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

[Introduction](#)[Early Frames](#)[Complete Works](#)[Effects of Age](#)[Works on Canvas](#)[Period Frames](#)

Early Frames: Integral, Semi-Integral, and Engaged

You may be surprised to learn that the earliest paintings at the National Gallery are the most likely to retain either all or a part of an original frame. Why? From the 13th century, when the Gallery's collections begin, on into the 15th century, it was typical for pictures to be painted on wooden supports. The panels on which the artist intended to paint included the frame, from the beginning, as part of the whole work. This larger structure was prepared before the painter even began to lay out the pictorial design or to apply the paint. In other words, pictures were framed before they were painted.

There are three different types of these early panel pictures with frames, which were frequently made by carpenters subcontracted by the painter: **integral**, **semi-integral**, and **engaged**.

For some small works that could fit on a single plank of wood, the flat surface for the painting itself was hollowed out from the central area of the plank, leaving a raised surrounding border to be carved and shaped into the frame. This type of frame, inseparable from the painted panel, is called an **integral** frame. The Gallery has a number of examples of these integral cornices in its Italian and northern European collections. Bernardo Daddi's *Madonna and Child with Saints and Angels* (1330s) in Gallery 1 has such a frame, although the delicate spiral colonnette embellishments and their capitals were added separately. Integral frames also surround *The Crucifixion* (c. 1400/1410) by the Master of Saint Veronica from in Gallery 35A, *The Expectant Madonna with Saint Joseph* by an unknown French master of the 15th century in Gallery 39, and Carlo Crivelli's *Madonna and Child* (c. 1490) in Gallery 13.

In one variation on the integral frame, the two vertical side members of the frame are carved from the same panel as the painting's support, usually running in the direction of the grain of the wood to make the carving easier. The top and bottom horizontal moldings are carved separately and attached by nails or dowels. This type of frame is called **semi-integral**. Unfortunately, the Gallery's collection contains no examples.

Far more common, especially on larger works, is the **engaged** frame. In this type, all the moldings for the frame were made separately and attached to the panel before the artist himself ever began to paint.

Bernardo Daddi's towering *Saint Paul* figure from the 1330s in Gallery 2 is one example of an engaged frame. We can imagine an early stage in its production when the work was a large assemblage of planks and pieces of wood glued, nailed, and pieced together, with no paint. As in similar early panel pictures, once the work had reached this construction stage, the artist and his shop coated the entire assemblage, engaged frame and all, with gesso (a plaster-like substance mixed with animal glue that, once dry and carefully smoothed, provided the ground for the actual painting and gilding). Looking at the picture at an angle from the side, we can see the molding of the frame where it is attached to the thick panel, as well as the continuous seam where they meet.

<< INTRODUCTION

COMPLETE WORKS >>

[help](#) | [search](#) | [site map](#) | [contact us](#) | [privacy](#) | [terms of use](#) | [press](#) | [NGA Images](#) | [home](#) |



Copyright © 2013 National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

[Introduction](#)[Early Frames](#)[Complete Works](#)[Effects of Age](#)[Works on Canvas](#)[Period Frames](#)

Complete Works and Fragments

Daddi's large *Saint Paul* panel has survived intact, but its form is relatively simple compared to other more complex altarpieces of the time. An example of a much more complicated engaged frame can be seen in Agnolo Gaddi's huge *Madonna and Child with Saints and Angels* (c. 1380/1390).

This work's pointed arches, triangular gables, quatrefoil shapes, and other decorative motifs were inspired by contemporary Gothic architecture. They were intended to enhance the sacred aura of the altarpiece and the painted holy figures when illuminated by candlelight in the often dim interiors of churches. Looking at the altarpiece from the side we can see the object's complicated construction, with two overlapping molding layers used to create the deep frame for the gables and arches, as well as the damage that insects have caused over time to some of the altarpiece's major wooden structural members. Much of what we see in Gaddi's work is original. Yet some pieces, including parts of the base and the spiral colonnettes, were made and added in the 20th century to replace missing parts that originally covered joints between the painted panels.

Duccio's *Nativity with the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel* (c. 1308/1311) in Gallery 1 has had quite a different history. Its immediate engaged frame is intact, but the work itself is only a small segment of the artist's huge *Maestà* (*Madonna in Majesty*) altarpiece that was carried to the high altar of the cathedral of Siena in a magnificent civic procession after it was completed in 1311. Perhaps the largest and most splendid altarpiece of the entire Middle Ages, this monumental work was painted on both sides with scenes glorifying Mary and Jesus. By the 18th century, however, Duccio's art was no longer appreciated, and his magnificent *Madonna in Majesty* was cut apart. Some individual panels were sold, including *The Nativity* and *Calling of the Apostles Peter and Andrew* (also in Gallery 1). Unfortunately, the latter picture lost its engaged frame when the altarpiece was dismantled. It now has a frame made in the last century.

In contrast, Nardo di Cione's entire small portable *Madonna and Child with Saint Peter and Saint John the Evangelist* altarpiece (c. 1360) in Gallery 1 remains intact—both the painting and the gilded frame.

The work, a triptych, consists of a central panel and two smaller moveable wings. The delicacy of the original engaged Gothic-style frame adds to the

splendor and solemnity of the holy figures. When closed over the central image of Mary and the Christ child, the wings provided protection to the painted surfaces and undoubtedly contributed to the triptych's remarkable preservation. Looking closely at the outer edge of the right wing with the figure of Saint John the Evangelist, we see both the joint of the engaged frame molding and the raised lip of wood perfectly fitted to the recessed groove on the left wing when closed.

The tradition of such intimate, portable altarpieces continued into the 15th century, as seen in Sassetta's elegant *Madonna of Humility* (c. 1435/1440) in Gallery 3. This delicate, refined panel is the central part of a triptych that lost the two side wings originally attached to it.

<< EARLY FRAMES

EFFECTS OF AGE >>

[help](#) | [search](#) | [site map](#) | [contact us](#) | [privacy](#) | [terms of use](#) | [press](#) | [NGA Images](#) | [home](#) |



Copyright © 2013 National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

[Introduction](#)[Early Frames](#)[Complete Works](#)[Effects of Age](#)[Works on Canvas](#)[Period Frames](#)

The Effects of Age on Panel Paintings and Their Frames

As mentioned above with Gaddi's huge *Madonna Enthroned with Saints and Angels* polyptych (multipart) altarpiece, wooden panel paintings are by their very nature prone to insect infestations, and the damage they cause is often visible in the unpainted structural parts. In addition, the passage of time causes numerous changes to these early paintings on wooden supports.

One of the Gallery's very oldest pictures, the 13th-century Byzantine *Enthroned Madonna and Child* in Gallery 1, a gift of Mrs. Otto H. Kahn, still has its original engaged frame; it definitely shows the harmful effects of the more than 700 years that have passed since its creation. With great age often comes a pattern of fine cracks visible both on the frame and surface of this painting, and in many others of similar date. This cracking derives from the different rates of expansion and contraction of the picture's wood support, gesso ground, and paint layers as they dried and experienced changes in temperature and humidity over the centuries. The continuity of many of the cracks from the flat surface of the painted image directly onto the frame is a clear indication that the engaged frame is original to the picture and has never been removed.

In addition, by looking at the side of this painting we can see not only the multiple layers of wood that make up the decorated panel and its frame, but also the edges of a device—called a cradle—that conservators of the late 19th and early 20th centuries used to try to stabilize the complex structures of these early pictures. Because wood expands and contracts with changes in temperature and humidity, panel paintings are intrinsically prone to warping and the resulting damage it can cause to their painted surfaces.

Before the advent of modern climate control, cradles were meant to prevent such warping. How did they work? These devices consisted of a gridwork of wooden strips whose vertical pieces ran with the grain of the painting's wooden planks and attached to them, while the horizontal pieces were held against the back of the picture in grooved mortises cut into the vertical slats. Theoretically, if the painted panel began to change shape, the carefully fitted horizontal members of the cradle would bind up in their slotted grooves and resist the warping. In reality, however, this method

proved less than effective and often entailed thinning down the painted panel's original wooden planks when they were installed, so the method was abandoned. The cradle on this Byzantine-style Madonna was applied to the painting in the early 20th century, before it was accessioned to the National Gallery of Art.

The inevitable expansion and contraction of the various layers in wooden panel paintings often led to a gap at the edge of the picture where the engaged frame separated (or was removed) from its painted panel. When this happens, we frequently can see part of the unpainted margin of the panel originally covered by the frame. A ridge of thickened paint and ground, called a **barbe**, marks this outer edge of the painted surface where the engaged frame separated or has disappeared. A barbe (French for "beard") of slightly raised, jagged paint, and gesso is visible along the lower edge of Agnolo Gaddi's *Madonna and Child with Saints and Angels* in Gallery 2; along the outer edges of Neroccio de' Landi's *Portrait of a Lady* (c. 1485) in Gallery 8; and in Bernhard Strigel's 1527 portraits of Hans Roth and his wife Margarethe Vöhlin in Gallery 35A (especially along the left margin of the former). When a barbe exists on a panel painting that no longer has its engaged frame, it is likely that the original dimensions of the painted image are still intact and have not been cut down.

<< COMPLETE WORKS

WORKS ON CANVAS >>

[help](#) | [search](#) | [site map](#) | [contact us](#) | [privacy](#) | [terms of use](#) | [press](#) | [NGA Images](#) | [home](#) |



Copyright © 2013 National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC



A BOUNTY OF FRAMES

NATIONAL G

[Introduction](#)[Early Frames](#)[Complete Works](#)[Effects of Age](#)[Works on Canvas](#)[Period Frames](#)

From Wood to Canvas: Attached Frames and Artists' Choices

Canvas never completely replaced wooden panels and other firm surfaces as a support for paintings, but by the later 15th century its use for this purpose had become more common. Lighter in weight, more portable, and much less vulnerable to warping from environmental factors than wood, canvas became the preferred support in the 16th century for the easel pictures that princely and ecclesiastical collectors began to display on the walls of their private galleries. As a result, rather than continuing the earlier practice of framing before painting, frames increasingly were attached to pictures after they had been painted—often to harmonize with the decorative setting of a domestic interior. Intended to both protect the paintings they surrounded and to enhance their visual impact, separately attached frames could now be replaced much more easily to meet changes in taste, or because of wear or other damage.

The vast majority of frames on pictures in the National Gallery of Art from the 16th century onward are examples of these **attached** or **detachable** frames, added after the paintings were completed. It was quite common for individual owners to have their own frame design surrounding their paintings, thus unifying the collection in harmony with the overall domestic design. Canaletto's two views of Venice from the early 1740s in Gallery 31, *The Square of Saint Mark's, Venice* and *Entrance to the Grand Canal from the Molo, Venice*, are splendid examples. The works are the same size and have been together since the 18th century when Henry Howard, the fourth earl of Carlisle, probably purchased them for Castle Howard, his country seat in Yorkshire, England. Both have the same style of frame, which has nothing to do with Canaletto; instead the frames were provided for them once they arrived in England. With their projecting square corners the frames are good examples of the type inspired by the architect William Kent, and hence called a Kent frame, popular in mid-18th-century Britain.

It is quite rare for post-Renaissance paintings to retain the frame that the artist designed or intended for them. The National Gallery of Art is fortunate to have a number of such paintings, particularly in its American collection. The frames on Thomas Cole's four paintings in his *Voyage of Life* series are original, although their surfaces have been altered. Thomas Wilmer Dewing's *Lady with a Lute* (1886) has the frame that was designed for it by the artist's architect friend Stanford White. The frame on Edmund

Charles Tarbell's *Mother and Mary* (1922) was designed by the talented wood carver and frame maker Walfred Thulin. George Bellows' *Club Night* (1907) also retains its original frame.

Because of the ease of changing attached frames, the history of framing on a given picture can become quite complicated. For instance, the frame now surrounding James McNeill Whistler's *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* of 1862 was selected and painted by the artist and includes his signature butterfly symbol on the right vertical member. We might thus call it an original frame. Yet there is some evidence that the present frame was placed on the picture only in the 1870s, and that the famous painting had been in a different frame when Whistler first exhibited it in 1862. We thus might also consider that earlier frame, now lost, as being original to the picture.

Winslow Homer's *Hound and Hunter* of 1892 provides another intriguing example, because it is in a frame made to Homer's design and is thus original. Yet when the painting first came to the Gallery it had a different frame, one that probably had no direct connection to Homer himself. It turns out that the Homer-designed frame now on *Hound and Hunter* had earlier surrounded the artist's *Right and Left*, also in the National Gallery. In the 1990s Gallery curators discovered that the frame was actually too small for *Right and Left* and slightly obscured important parts of the painted surface. They also found that the frame fit the slightly smaller *Hound and Hunter* perfectly. As a result, the "original" Homer frame was put on *Hound and Hunter*, and a slightly larger duplicate was made for *Right and Left*. We know from Homer's correspondence with his New York dealer, Knoedler & Company, that he could be flexible about his frames, telling his dealers on one occasion that they should take off the frame from one of his pictures they already had and put it on a new picture he was then sending to them.

<< EFFECTS OF AGE

PERIOD FRAMES >>

[help](#) | [search](#) | [site map](#) | [contact us](#) | [privacy](#) | [terms of use](#) | [press](#) | [NGA Images](#) | [home](#) |



Copyright © 2013 National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

[Introduction](#)[Early Frames](#)[Complete Works](#)[Effects of Age](#)[Works on Canvas](#)[Period Frames](#)

From Period Frames to No Frames

Given the frequent changes in ownership of paintings over time, as well as the destruction and displacements caused by economic crisis and even warfare, it is not surprising that the majority of frames on old master paintings in the National Gallery were made and added long after the pictures were painted. The Gallery sometimes replaces frames on pictures that have been donated or purchased as part of a continuing effort to display the paintings to their best advantage. Most often, Gallery curators try to surround paintings with frames from the same historical time as the pictures, known as period frames. For example, we have a number of 17th-century Dutch and Flemish works that show one or two paintings hanging in private interiors. Johannes Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* (c. 1664) is a good example that illustrates how actual paintings of the time were framed.

Works such as this have helped us to find or construct frames for our pictures in keeping with the period in which they were painted. Leonardo da Vinci's famous portrait of a young Florentine lady, *Ginevra de' Benci*, presents a different case: the painting is not in its original frame, and we have no record of what that frame may have looked like. As the result of damage to the lower areas, the painting was probably cut down; the original frame was undoubtedly larger and may have been damaged as well. The current frame is the second to surround the picture at the National Gallery—it replaced an earlier one whose profile cast an unattractive shadow on the painted surface.

Ginevra de' Benci is now displayed in an early 16th-century detached frame most likely made in Venice. It is a type of frame that was extremely popular in Italy called a *cassetta*, or "little box," consisting on all sides of the same distinctive inner and outer moldings around a rather flat frieze. Here the frieze area is ornamented with applied pieces of parchment that have been painted with a polychromed design.

In cases where an actual period frame of the correct size is not available, a frame is made in the appropriate period style. One marvelous example is the sumptuous frame now surrounding *The Adoration of the Magi* by Fra Angelico and Filippo Lippi in Gallery 4. The picture belonged to the ruling Medici family of Florence and is listed in a 1492 inventory of their possessions as having a gilded frame. But as far as we know, that Medici



cornice has not survived. The tondo's later owners have had different frames made for it. The present frame is the painting's second since entering the Gallery. It was made in 1955 as a suitably ornate complement to this very extraordinary painting, and was inspired by the late 15th-century frame on Botticelli's *Madonna of the Pomegranate*, now in the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence.

Some of the Gallery's very greatest works pose unique challenges in terms of providing them with a suitable frame. Considering that Jan van Eyck's magnificent *Annunciation* possibly was painted for Philip the Good, duke of Burgundy, for a church or chapel in Dijon, the picture must originally have had an elaborate engaged frame of a more Gothic architectural style. In addition, the painting undoubtedly was part of a more complicated, multipart altarpiece, perhaps as the left wing of a triptych.

At some point the splendid ensemble was taken apart and the individual panels dispersed, with the *Annunciation* ultimately landing in the Imperial Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg before arriving at the National Gallery of Art. Furthermore, while in Russia the painting was transferred from its original wood support to canvas. Given its actual and probable history, and the challenges that it has survived, the *Annunciation* still communicates the physical marvel of Van Eyck's oil technique and the sophistication of his iconographic program within the relatively simple moldings of the frame made for it in the last century.

Many 20th-century and contemporary artists have eliminated frames altogether, but those works that do have them pose many of the same problems encountered in works by earlier masters. Rather than retaining the original frame that the painter may have initially used or selected, many modern paintings coming to the National Gallery of Art have frames that have been chosen by subsequent owners, including the Gallery and our expert staff.

<< WORKS ON CANVAS

[help](#) | [search](#) | [site map](#) | [contact us](#) | [privacy](#) | [terms of use](#) | [press](#) | [NGA Images](#) | [home](#) |  

Copyright © 2013 National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC