

A Little Mohr Conversation
With SBMA's Nancy Rogers, 2008
By Lori Mohr



Nancy Rogers

Lori: Nancy, walk me through the process of framing a work that comes into the museum—either through our purchase or as a gift.

Nancy: A lot of times, when an oil painting comes in, from whatever era, there's not a lot of documentation about frames. It's only in the last 15 years that we're taking a resurgent interest in frame making. If you look in the file, there's a lot of provenance on the work—who painted it, when, who their influences were, etc. And then there's not a notation about the frame; that's very common. So, when something comes in now, we make a notation: whether it has a frame, doesn't have a frame, what the status is. When the registrar

looks at it, we note if it's been handled roughly, is the frame damaged, so it kind of gives a little bit of telling. But you can only make guess-timates.

Lori: There's no way to know if it's the original frame?

Nancy: [Slowly, shaking head] No. If you had a museum collection, and you had as much as 10% with original frames, that would be a bonanza.

Lori: When you unframe a painting, are there telltale signs of former mattings, a framing history?

Nancy: Sometimes you can tell if a frame has been on a painting a long time. The best sign of it being an original is if you have paint that the artist has dripped. That's a pretty sure sign that it's original, that gives you more credence.

Lori: Why aren't the original frames kept on the painting?

Nancy: Well, if you think about it, when somebody buys a painting, it's a piece of ownership. And if you buy it in a gallery, well, maybe the dealer chose that frame for merchandizing, for marketability, or maybe it was put on really quickly just to have something on it. Or the dealer puts something on it. Maybe it comes in with nothing. Or with something that looks really... shaggy, and the dealer will put something else on. And then the collector will come along to purchase it and say, "I really love the painting but I don't love the frame." And then they frame it. And then if the other partner doesn't like it, wants it to match the décor, you have another frame change. So in a painting's life, by the time it's donated to an institution, it's had many lives.

Lori: And the frame may or may not be era-appropriate.

Nancy: Well, those are things that we look at. Often the curators make that determination...and myself. We'll dialogue about what's looking right. Aesthetically is it pleasing? Does it overwhelm/underwhelm the painting? Was the frame put on to match the residence but it really doesn't work? That's often the case. But you know, in many cases, there are collectors who have educated eyes and they do make selections that are appropriate.

Lori: So the frame selection is subjective and not necessarily historically accurate.

Nancy: It's subjective. When we get traveling exhibits from other countries, they have a different aesthetic; they're making choices that are very different in feel and nuance. Work from Latin

American countries—their colors are brighter, bolder; they're using reds and greens and painted surfaces. It's just a different aesthetic. It's refreshing! We learn about their cultures by the frames they put on—and obviously, the paintings—but you really get a different feel, and it's nice when that happens.

Lori: You don't change those; they stay on for the exhibit.

Nancy: Yes. But when a painting is donated, then yes, occasionally we make a change. But you have to keep in mind—let's say you have a painting that was done in 1810 and it had a frame on it for the last 80 years. Do we call it an original frame? No. Do we call it an artist made frame? No. An artist chosen frame? No. But is it, loosely speaking, an original frame to that painting? [Pause] Yes. And there's a gradation. Many things that Wright Ludington gave us had frames there's little documentation—frames maybe a dealer chose, or he chose for his residence, and maybe they don't fit the era. However, they're still appropriate. And we've left many choices like that.

Lori: Did artists, for example, the Impressionists, typically frame their works or did the buyer frame them?

Nancy: Both. For the Impressionists, we do have certain examples of frames and notebooks with documentation. Like Prendergast paintings—Prendergast designed his own frames. We know this by his letters and his notebooks and many of those still survive on his paintings.

Lori: Is there a resurgent interest in frame making?

Nancy: I think there's an ongoing interest in looking back at older craft as we have fewer and fewer artists. I think we're looking back at how artists prepared frames and asking about the impact of that craft. You see this trend in art making in general—photographers taking an interest in making tintypes, making ambrotypes. I think there's a trend in looking back at craftsmanship and how does craftsmanship reflect who we are as a society? What role does it play?

Lori: Is that because today's frames are likely to be machine-made rather than hand-carved wood?

Nancy: You'd be surprised; there are contemporary guilders, contemporary carvers—high level craftsmanship frame making. The George Bellows. We had an opportunity when [curator] Robert Henning was here to re-evaluate our *Steaming Streets*. You make these determinations about your time, your budget, then given your parameters, what kinds of changes you want to make and why you want to make them. The frame the Bellows had on before was underwhelming and not particularly appropriate, so we changed it. That had to have been in 2000. And we didn't have a lot of time for that project, so we hired out. We had a carver and we made some choices. Here's the raw wood [shows me section of frame] and you can see it built in two pieces, carved and prepared with yellow clay before it got gilded and toned. So, this is what's on *Steaming Streets*.

Lori: When do you actually get involved in the mechanics of frame making?

Nancy: We have two curators now...I don't make beautiful frames just to make them. It's all exhibition-driven. Because we haven't had a European paintings curator, we haven't had any projects. So, I'm really looking forward to when we get our modern and contemporary person on board and we get another European curator and I'll get to re-visit antique frames again.

Lori: How much does a frame affect the price of a painting when we go to purchase with museum funds?



Joaquín Torres-García
Composición [Composition], 1932
Oil on canvas

Nancy: Good question. Well, I think there are categories: there's the painting we acquire that has no frame—the Torres-Garcia—that came in with nothing and we created a frame for that. What has an impact is like that Eakin's piece. And Van Gogh painted frames, I think there's one in existence, maybe two. Over time, these hit the dumpsters; people want the painting but I-want-it-to-match-my-living room-I'm gonna change-it. At a certain caliber, that frame—it's yellow, I've seen it in pictures—would that make an impact on the sale price? Yes. But generally speaking, when we're making acquisitions, evaluating, does the frame come into play? Not a great deal. If you have a painting that's five-six million bucks, are you paying attention to the price of the frame? Not particularly, it doesn't have a big weigh-in; it's an accessory.

Lori: But aesthetically it has impact.

Nancy: A really good painting is going to stand alone; a mediocre painting with a good frame is going to make it look better; a substandard painting with a good frame is going to make it look...okay. And the opposite can be true. We had a Ludington painting come in and the frame it came in on was wonderful—we still have it, we sent it out for conservation. When it came back, I worked on it further. It was on our Braque and it may have been fantastic in his home, but it was so bold, and such a big, screaming, colorful thing...it was really hard for it to work in the gallery. It sort of overtook the painting; it's like having the football player accompany the ballerina to the prom!

Lori: It all has to work together, as an individual work and as part of the collection.

Nancy: Yes. On that frame, we never had any documentation. Did the artists choose it? Did the dealer choose it? Did Wright choose it? Or a decorator? It's possible Wright chose it, but we didn't have any evidence with which to make that determination. So once again, based on Robert Henning's determination, and we all talked about what was happening, we put something else on it.

Lori: Tell me what you do on a daily basis, Nancy. I mean, obviously you do framing and you do some frame restoration. But when I came in, you were working on hinges for the *Made in Hollywood* show.

Nancy: Because we're producing so many photography shows and because I handle all the works on paper that we have here—some 25,000—I deal with them as they come in. Say this photography show, for instance—the photographs come in, they come in a plastic sleeve in a box from the Kobol Foundation. I measure them, I mat them, and I hinge them with mulberry paper and archival hinges - they attach the artwork to the mat - then I mix the powder and water to make the paste that holds the artwork on the mat, then I put them in these purple heart travel frames, which are a purplish color instead of straight black. You've seen them a hundred times on view; they're really simple, they're strong. These photographs will go on view in July and then they'll travel in our frames to different venues all over the planet, wherever Karen has set it up.

Lori: Tell me about your background. How did you get here?

Nancy: I got my degree in Fine Art from UCSB and I could produce art work, but, you know, I got out and realized I had not one class on presentation. I mean, every artist must do this. You produce work on paper or on canvas and then in order to show it, you have to decide what to do next. If I lived in Europe, they have that guild system where you learn your craft and work in your craft and become proficient, you're building your skill level year by year. But what do you do here? Well, you learn through the School of Hard Knocks. I got into a shop, I took classes; you have to create your own apprenticeship opportunities. In the last 15 years, there are more books on frame making, historical perspectives on frame making, the art of the craftsmanship. And also, the American tradition is very different from the European tradition in looking

at the manufacture of frames.

Lori: Explain what you mean by that.

Nancy: The European tradition is huge! America, we're such a young country, just a blip on the map. Typically, the American view of frame making is a little bit simplified, they dropped these detailed, highly ornate frames to create new, more elemental types of surfaces.

Lori: Those ornate frames do feel like old Europe.

Nancy: Yes, with whatever adjectives you want to add: fussy, overdone, overblown. There's a time there where we're accustomed to seeing heavy, gilded French frames with those shells and cartouches on everything. We've come back a little from that and said, "You know what? This isn't quite appropriate."

Lori: Are those heavy, gilded frames still the preference in Europe?

Nancy: Oh, yes. The way that started, there was that whole system of the kingships, the Louie's: Louie the 13th, Louie the 14th, the Regent—one of the kings was so young, I think he was 9—but he was assigned a Regent and the Regent made his own frames! So we had the Regency period. Louie the 15th, the 16th...they would install carver/gilders in their palaces. They would take off all the frames of the last guy and they would create all new frames with their own cartouches (sp) and their own logos, their own insignias and really make their mark on design. Our Berthe Morisot just went out—

that's a Louie the 14th; it had all these curlicues and these rectilinear cuts. But in America, we don't have any of that type of tradition; we value individuality, so we're lucky, we have individuals making their marks. You have to keep in mind, in the big picture, frames were designed as an extension of the interior of the building, designed by architects. Like Frank Lloyd Wright, he designed the furniture, he designed the frames, the whole interior. You have architects thinking about the light; northern European with its colder, cloudier, darker climate, tiny windows, less light in the room. So, in the Northern

European tradition, generally speaking, you'll have a typical portrait in a really long frame. But it has a function. The light comes in that itty bitty window and hits the gilded side of the frame and reflects light. It illuminates. Spanish frames? Warmer climate, bigger windows, more light, more interior light. The frames are not reflecting anything, so they slope or at the very least, they're flat. Whole different function. Most of those [Northern European] frames and paintings were made when there was only candlelight in interiors. And you've got these gilded frames and the light is captured or reflected...it would've been so beautiful to see the actual light levels. Granted, you can't have people walking around the museum holding candelabras, but I really thirsted to see the way it was view when it was made. It's such a different experience.

Lori: I'm thinking again of the Impressionists and how thrilled they were to paint outside in natural light.

Nancy: By that time, though, the turn of the century, we have gas lighting coming in. You have to look at how the frame was functioning, and you have to look at the history of lighting: whale oil lamps, then gas lamps come out first in Glasgow, Scotland, of all places, and they're mostly in opera houses first and civic arenas and then ever so slowly it comes into suburbia. But it didn't happen fast.

Lori: In the evolution of framing, how did we go from elaborate to simple?

Nancy: Georgia O'Keeffe wanted a simple, simple frame and he [the framer] was the first to make metal



[Berthe Morisot](#)

View of Paris from the Trocadero,
1871-72, Oil on canvas, 18 1/8 x 32 1/8"

frames at her request; they were welded aluminum. Then they got modified through the '60s and '70s. Now, we can go to Art Essentials and buy a metal frame. So, it's radically different from the European style.

Lori: So you can tell an American from a European frame just by the style.

Nancy: Likely. And the back, like a carpet; you tell the quality of the carpet by the back, or a good garment, you can tell by how the seams are constructed. You look at a frame by the back. In a European frame, you'll see heavy splines (a piece of wood across each corner to allow for tightening the frame when the wood shrinks). That's not the American tradition; they made things to last, to be passed down through the generations, to endure.

Lori: What do you think about contemporary art that has no frame and is meant to be hung without a frame?

Nancy: You have to think, is this the artist's intent? Often, it is. Like Rick Stich—he's been painting many years. So sometimes he puts frames on things, sometimes he doesn't. Bigger works? They are simple wooden edges which are often referred to as slat frames. And that's in keeping with the contemporary aesthetic. And it's appropriate. Let's face it; framing is expensive, and for an artist who doesn't have a lot of interest in framing, it's another thing to do.

Lori: Nancy, I know storage is an issue for any museum. Where does the other 92% of what we have that isn't being shown get stored?

Nancy: With works on paper there's an effort to unframe them and store them in Solander boxes. If they're particularly fragile, say a collage or something that has a necessity to stay undisturbed, they'll remain framed. Large works that are really difficult to handle, they remain in frames. But there has to be a reason for it to remain in its frame. Paintings remain in their frames for handling and safety; they hang on big screens in the vault. Susan Tai's things—we have really old 17th century works. Do I want to put those in a box? No. I like them framed just so they're undisturbed. But yes, we have finite storage and it's always a challenge. We create boxes for things, customize devices to store them.

Lori: Let's dissect a gilded frame; what all is under that gilding?

Nancy: [Shows me part of a gilded frame]. Okay, so there's wood underneath as a substrate. It's all hand carved design, not compo [composition]. Then it's got about seven, ten layers of gesso, which is this white stuff, which acts as a cushion. The gold needs a place to live, a cushion, so that's the gesso. Then traditionally you put on the yellow clay, then goes on the red clay—about four, six layers - which is vibrant red from the Italian region where they have more iron in the soil and it makes the clay this deep red. And that red clay is going to come through the gilding; it'll have a warm, golden glow to it. If you put on too many layers of clay, it gets all murked up and filled in so you have to go back with a tool and crisp it up. It's an enormous effort. That's why you don't see it very often.

Lori: How long would it take to make a frame like this?

Nancy: [Thinking] A good carver? Two weeks, I would think.

Lori: Now I see how this frame is vastly different from the American.

Nancy: The American is very simple. You have to remember at the turn of the century we had the Industrial Revolution, so this was progress, having things machine-made.



Georgia O'Keeffe
Dead Cottonwood Tree,
Oil on canvas, 36 x 30"



Stuart Davis
Yellow Hills, 1919
 Oil on canvas, 24 x 30"

Lori: All the frames on the Impressionist works upstairs, those are French?

Nancy: Yes. And I think the heyday of heavy, gilded French frames on everything. I mean, there are other choices. But that's what people put on frames in Europe at that time. Let's go up to the gallery and have a look at frames in our collection.

Now this one [*Yellow Hills*, Stuart Davis] we had made by another carver-gilder. It's a little brassy for me, but it works with the golden hills, the yellows and earth tones. It's [the painting] is pretty bold, dominant, like the brushstrokes, that thick impasto. So a chunky frame works. [Moving on]. Now here's our *Steaming Streets*. Jay [Ewart, the other framer in the museum] and I found two different frames in a catalogue and we integrated them. This was made by Kirkagard, a local carver. It's about the time—it's turn of the century. It works. [Walking into Ridley-Tree]. Now this *Lady in Pink*. Robert Henning found a photograph, not this painting, but a similar one from the same era in Chase's studio. Based on that photograph, we did make a change from the previous frame. We bought this from Julius Lowey. He's been in business for 100 years as of last year, and we chose an original antique frame for this painting. And it's timely— not quite turn of the century, 1886 - but it was the beginning of the heyday of the Victorian era. It's very fussy, very flowery, ornate.

Lori: What about our American here, Childe Hassam? That's a pretty ornate frame. [*Manhattan Club*].

Nancy: It's pretty over-the-top. We were taking our clues from Europeans who'd been doing this a long time, and taking some of it, rejecting some, putting a new twist on it. But here, in this painting of this scene, it works!

Lori: Yes, wealthy New Yorkers strolling about with this gorgeous marble mansion in the background. Now, interestingly, here's another Chase with a completely different look.

Nancy: Now this is hand carved, late '50s I think; it had a linen liner and we changed that.

But the coloring of the frame works well with the painting; it's got some interest, some nuance. [Moving on to *Fight over a Waterhole*] Now this is straightforward wood, you can see the saw grain on

here from the table saw, the cuts. American – simple, wood, no adornment.



Childe Hassam
The Manhattan Club, (ca. 1891)
 Oil on canvas
 18 1/4 x 22 1/8"

Nancy: This Thomas Eakins [*Master Douty*] is very simple, very sweet. The lines here [on the frame] pick up the lines in his jacket. Very decorative; the coloring works. [Walking over to Alfred Sisley, *Banks of the Seine*]. Here we have this '50s linen liner again. The frame is working with this painting, but if the curator wanted to re-visit some of these, my recommendation would be to change to liner.

[Moving to the Monet's *Villas a Bordighera*] This [frame] is a replica; we had it made in the late '80s, early '90s and it works—a gilded frame works.



[William Merritt Chase](#) *The Lady in Pink*, 1886,
 Oil on canvas,
 68 1/2 x 38 3/4"



William Merritt Chase
Lydia Field Emmett,
 1900, Oil on canvas
 24 x 20"



Alfred Sisley, *St. Mammès, Banks of the Seine*, 1885 Oil on canvas, 21 3/8 x 28 3/4

Waterloo Bridge and *Charing Cross Bridge* have the same frame profile; I don't think they're carved frames. On *Waterloo Bridge*, see how the gilded tips, these highlights sticking out; the light is dancing on the tips which are burnished for reflectivity. It's very nice with the flickering water.

[Moving over to *The Forty-Niner*] This is clearly American, very simple. It came with this frame, and it works. Now would I have put on a wood frame? [Shrugs] I would've thought about some husky wood choices. But you have to think—1880s—it's still sort of early Victorian. It's a little frilly. In our modern view, would a wood frame have worked? Yes. Now this Seymour Guy [*Still-Life Plantain*] we had this made when Robert Henning was here and we re-visited some of the works in our permanent collection. Jay and Robert and myself sat down and we selected this. I don't think it's too over-the-top; there's a lot going on in this painting, a lot of detail—all where the eye rests. It's [frame] a bit wild, but I still think it works. It's pretty.

Lori: [Moving to the Christian Gullager, *Elizabeth Coats Greenleaf*] Now what's going on here? You have this formal portrait of a woman wearing a laced gown and this frame is solid black wood!

Nancy: I don't know the history, but black frames...when Commodore Perry goes into Yokohama in 1848-49, and we have this little crack, this opening into the Asian aesthetic, the Japanese aesthetic, later the Chinese aesthetic. We have world expositions happening in London, Paris. They bring with them these black lacquered, ebonized surfaces, and you see a heyday during the late 1800s of ebonized black furniture, and this kind of speaks to me of that era.



Ernest-Ange Duez
Woman in Grey on Board Ship,
Gazing at the Sea, 1873
Oil on canvas mounted

[Examining the Copley] I don't know if this is hand carved or if it's compo [composition]. When you look closely you can see the wood grain and subtle little variations; the human hand holding a tool is not exact. With machine-made compo it's much more precise.

Lori: Interesting that it wasn't immediately obvious to you here.

Nancy: Well, it's a murky technique; the look is...glumpy, there's not a lot of distinction. So I'm trying to look through the murk to see the actual design, and it's just a little hard to tell. If this was hand carved, they wouldn't have murked it up...I think this is probably compo.

Lori: And finally, what about *Woman in Grey*.

Nancy: This is a very contemplative scene, very quiet. I think this frame is a little...too wild for it.

Lori: Thank you, Nancy. This has been quite an education in looking at art works from outside the frame. 🍴



Thomas W. Eakins
Portrait of Master Douty,
1906 Oil on canvas
20 x 16 1/8"