

Style Snapshot

A look at a frame, its characteristics, and history

By Peter Werkhoven

What style frame is this? Even though there is valid debate concerning this particular style's attribution, I consider this to be a Louis XIII-Louis XIV transitional flower corner frame. However, the primary focus for this month is in regard to the surface treatment. The particular finish is known as *decapé*. It came into existence more than 200 years after the frame itself.

Where is it from? France.

What time period is it from? From the birth of the Impressionist movement in France in 1874 continuing until the early 1970s.

Who was instrumental in developing this style of frame? At the last quarter of the 19th century, painters once again began to pay more attention to the manner in which their paintings were exhibited and how the frame related to their artwork. This had previously occurred during the Early Italian Renaissance (16th century). An example of this is Jacopo Sansovino's sculptural frames. It was the French Impressionist artists who were banned from exhibiting their work at the Salon in 1873 who are credited with the origination of this finish. That decision became a turning point that started this way of thinking—artists participating in the presentation of their own work. This idea found followers across the continent and was soon picked up by artists in the United States as well.

What are the defining/common characteristics of this style? Before these impressionist painters started developing their own types of frames (styles, profiles, and ornamentation), they first experimented with stripping down the gold of the frames that previously surrounded



Reproduction Louis XIII-XIV transitional flower frame made by Aedicule Fine Framemaking.



This detail shows dozens of colors per square inch.

All photos courtesy of Aedicule

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their work. Their sense was that the vulgar, bright, and shiny gilded frames didn't balance their artwork. They began by attempting to refinish the frames that the art dealers had previously selected for selling their paintings. The harsh color of gold didn't suit the soft (especially red) tones of this new movement. Many diverse techniques were tried. Some started experimenting with hydrochloric acid, for instance. This created a sort of white/gray patina over the frame and allowed some of the bole and gold to remain, just enough (in their view) to create a better balance between the painting and its frame.

What design departures might be seen on some frames of this style?

The next logical step was for artists to start designing their own frames. Degas created a few frames, which are still considered very popular. Seurat painted on either basic flat profiles, or he would even create a frame-like element on the canvas itself. In the United States, this thought was followed by Whistler. Around the 1950s, artists utilizing the decapé finish became very popular once again, especially when the abstract period had reached its peak and artists tended to use softer tones again.



Detail of the remains after the acid treatment.

What type of artwork would this frame most likely house? Impressionist paintings.

Additional comments and/or anecdotes. To illustrate how dedicated these artists were to what they considered to be the appropriate presentation of their work, Degas is known to have taken back a painting that he had sold to a gentleman who had the nerve to reframe Degas' artwork in a burnished gilded frame. ■



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