ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

FRAME GAME

Finding the right fit for an Impressionist painting.

BY LEO CAREY

The Brooklyn Museum's conservation department has big windows that face south, toward the Botanic Garden, suffusing the rooms with natural light. One morning not long ago, classical music played quietly on an old radio, and, lying around on trolleys, like patients on gurneys, an assortment of objects awaited treatment—dismembered statues, decomposing mosaics, snapped Native American pipes. One conservator patiently shored up a hole below the sleeve of a Dutch woman in a seventeenth-century portrait by Thomas de Keyser; another applied glue to a water-damaged patch in a Spanish genre painting. Nearby, a canvas, twenty-one inches by twenty-six, by the French Impressionist Camille Pissarro, stood frameless on an easel, looking not very different from how it must have appeared when Pissarro finished it. Standing in front of it were Elizabeth Easton, the museum's curator of European paintings and sculpture, and Tracy Gill and Simeon Lagodich, a married couple who own a frame gallery and restoration studio in Tribeca, and who were about to make a new frame for the picture.

Camille Pissarro wrote that gilt frames "stank of the bourgeois."

RICHARD McGUIRE

Lagodich, an alert man with large spectacles and a droopy mustache, peered closely at the canvas. "Very different in person, I must say," he said. So far, he had been working from a full-scale photograph. Painted in 1875, "The Climbing Path, L'Hermitage, Pontoise" is a view of tiled roofs through trees; the right side of the canvas is dominated by a snaking hillside path, which Pissarro has rendered with a coarse swath of tan pigment. Easton pointed out the daring way in which the flatly painted road seemed to defy perspective. "Look at it," she said. "He's gone at it with a palette knife. It's got an amazing paint application." Easton, whom everyone calls Buffy, is a loquacious, brown-haired woman in her forties; she is a meticulous dresser, with a taste for chinoise jackets. She explained that the painting came from a period in the eighteen-seventies when Pissarro and Paul Cézanne lived and worked side by side, often painting the same scenes. It was shortly going out on loan for a big exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, "Pioneering Modern Painting: Cézanne & Pissarro," which sought to demonstrate the affinities of Pissarro's style with Cézanne's in this period; the show would then travel internationally. The picture had been in an undistinguished gilt frame, and the exhibition had inspired Easton to commission a frame that would draw attention to the painting's revolutionary qualities.

Until recently, the role of frames in the art-historical world was, in every sense, marginal. But in the past three decades curators have begun to look at the frames in their collections more critically. They often find an incoherent assemblage of styles, reflecting the tastes of generations of collectors, dealers, and curators, who have tended to favor the curvy gilt frames of eighteenth-century France, even though many artists, from the mid-nineteenth century on, actively disliked this aesthetic. Now that the study of frames has emerged as a field in its own right, museums across Europe and America have set about replacing examples that are historically inappropriate or poorly made. Paul Mitchell, a London frame dealer, whose book "A History of European Picture Frames," co-authored with Lynn Roberts, is considered a standard work, told me, "If you think how many crappy frames there are on most gallery walls, if you took the pictures out and put the frames up, you'd just ask someone to come and take them away and burn them." Easton, an expert on the painter Édouard Vuillard, became interested in frames about a decade ago, and, since then, has commissioned new frames for works by Monet, Caillebotte, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Morisot. For the Pissarro commission, she wanted Gill and Lagodich to imitate an unconventional nineteenth-century frame that she had recently seen on a Morisot painting. It had a border of gilded laurel leaves and berries, which surrounded a strip of stained wood with a very shallow downward step; next to where the painting would be—the "sight edge," as framers call it—was a narrow strip of white. The frame was strikingly similar to one that Pissarro had once designed.

Lagodich, his fingers stained brown from shellac, produced several rough corner samples of stained wood from a bag. Like home buyers experimenting with swatches, the three took turns holding the samples up to the canvas, viewing the effects of the various shades of wood stain on the painting. When Lagodich brought out the darkest sample, its deep, warm red elicited a gasp of approval from Easton, who thought that it would complement the red tones of the roofs on the left side of the painting. But, next to the picture, the color seemed too vibrant, threatening to overwhelm the more subtle tones of the pigment. Then Lagodich held up the lightest of the samples against the painting. "It looks too new," Easton said.

Lagodich is used to the difficulty of trying to make new things look old. "What you're trying to do is re-create the ravages of time," he told me later. Older objects acquire a particular lustre, a patina, that is hard to fake. Often, when Gill and Lagodich see buildings in Tribeca being renovated, they try to grab old joists that could be reused in a frame. They haunt estate sales and auctions. A few years ago, they bought a cache of old white moldings that had come from a Baltimore framing company which closed in the early nineteen-hundreds. Easton had seen in them the kind of aged white that she wanted for the sight edge of the new frame. "It's the shine of years," Easton said, as Gill produced samples and laid them on the table, the morning light falling across them. "What I loved was the patina, the milkiness."

"We bought probably ten thousand feet of it," Gill said of the moldings. "More than twenty different profiles. Don't know if they were meant to be gilded originally, but we just kept them white."

"Is this just gesso?" Easton asked.

"It's extruded gesso, which nobody makes anymore," Gill said, explaining that the gesso, a kind of paste made from chalk and animal glue, had been applied to a wooden core, creating a more pristine finish.

Returning to the structure of the frame, the group addressed the question of how the gilded laurel-and-berry border should be placed on it. Easton had given Gill and Lagodich a photograph of the Morisot frame, but small details were hard to see. Was there a narrow strip of wood between the border and the stained-wood panel? Or was it just a shadow? Lagodich's experience of frames led him to believe the former, but Easton, who had examined the Morisot frame closely, was convinced that it was the latter.

Lagodich quietly dissented. "There's something weird that happens when ornament lies right down on something," he said. "Trust me. It's going to look like a stick-on. It's not going to look right." The morning's only disagreement hung in the air. Eventually, Lagodich said, "I'll do it both ways, and you can see for yourself."

The first frames in Western painting were part of the picture, carved out of the same piece of wood as the main panel. Medieval altarpieces were made by teams that included a carver, a gilder, and a painter. According to Mitchell and Roberts's history, it was not unusual for the carver to be paid the most, and for the painter to receive the panel only after it had been carved and gilded. Until the end of the fourteenth century, the influence of Byzantine art meant that the

entire surface of the picture was gilded. But, as the naturalistic backgrounds and perspectival approach of the Renaissance took hold, gold retreated to the margins, where, during centuries of candlelight, it reflected beams into the heart of the painting itself.

Throughout the Renaissance, the finest frames and most influential styles generally came from Italy. In the seventeenth century, however, French craftsmen began to take frame-making to new levels of specialization and finesse. During the Baroque and Rococo periods, they embellished the frame's basic rectangle with an undulating rhythm of twisting ornament, often adding elaborate cartouches—shaped like shells, leaves, fleurs-de-lis—at the corners and in the center of each side. These pieces, intricately carved, most often in oak or linden, are regarded by many collectors as the apogee of the framer's craft. After the French Revolution, however, the labor required to create such ornate marvels was no longer affordable, and, simultaneously, the emerging middle class demanded cheap art in cheap frames mass-produced from wooden molds. (Some carvers, short of work, ended up carving the molds that would make them redundant.) It was also common to recycle gilt frames and affix them to new pictures. Many nineteenth-century landscapes were placed in old portrait frames that had simply been rotated ninety degrees.

To some observers, however, the gilt frame looked gaudy. Immanuel Kant, in his "Critique of Judgment" (1790), wrote that if an ornament "does not itself enter into the composition of the beautiful form—if it is introduced like a gold frame merely to win approval for the picture by means of its charm—it is then called finery and takes away from the genuine beauty." The first sustained attack on the dominant style came some eighty years later, in the early exhibitions of the Impressionists. Pissarro, one of the more politically subversive of the group, wrote that exhibitions where gilt frames were obligatory "stank of the bourgeois." He and other Impressionists began to experiment with different ways of framing their work.

One notable innovator was Degas. A restless polymath, he covered pages of notebooks with unconventional designs for frames, drawn in cross-section. One afternoon, Buffy Easton met me at the Metropolitan Museum—"the greatest encyclopedia in the world for this stuff"—to look at the frames on the Degas pictures from the Havemeyer collection. She stopped at a small Degas painting from 1866, "The Collector of Prints," and explained that its subtle frame is one of the most famous he ever designed. It had an area of flat wood next to the picture and a pattern of grooved parallel lines at the edge, which are known to frame scholars as *chemins de fer*—railroad tracks. Speaking in an excited museum whisper, Easton praised the frame's restraint: "It gives you a visual break between the picture and the room."

Degas's opinions on frames were not always shared by his collectors, Easton said. Once, a friend of Degas's bought a painting from him and replaced its gray-green frame with a gilt one. When Degas saw the result the next time he visited, he pried the canvas out with a two-sous coin and stalked off with it. But he was fighting a losing battle, because collectors love to reframe their acquisitions. "The only thing a collector can do to establish any sort of impact on a picture is to reframe it," Easton said, noting that, for many of the early collectors of Impressionist art, ornate gilt frames would have had the benefit of matching their sumptuous furniture. Unfortunately, such treatment has often obscured the visual radicalism of Impressionist works. As Easton put it, "It doesn't make them more exciting. It makes them look like they were in living rooms on Park Avenue."

Some Impressionists, searching for an alternative to gold, developed framing styles rooted in the same scientific thinking that inspired their paintings. Many of them were influenced by the notion of "complementary colors" advanced by Michel Eugène Chevreul, a French organic chemist who is credited with inventing margarine and refining soap manufacture. Chevreul became interested in color after being put in charge of dyeing at a government-owned tapestry works. His ideas had a direct bearing on the Neo-Impressionist techniques of Seurat and Signac, whose method of rendering compound colors with small dots of primary color was intended to exploit the way the human eye perceives color. Chevreul also had ideas about frames. One of his experiments—putting the same lithograph inside eight different-colored borders—seemed, to several of the Impressionists, to open exciting possibilities. Mary Cassatt mounted her pictures in red and green frames, not a single one of which survives. Pissarro explored the idea at an exhibition in 1880, and the result was described by Georges Lecomte, an art critic: "A predominantly red sunset had a green frame, a violet canvas had a matte yellow frame, a greenish spring scene was mounted in pink; the light gleamed, making everything more correct and harmonious."

Pissarro eventually rejected this practice as distracting gimmickry—he called it *puffisme*—but Chevreul's work did outline a further option. His comparative experiment had included, as a kind of control, a ninth border that was pure white—in his opinion, the most neutral color, and the one least likely to distort a picture. In the third Impressionist exhibition, Pissarro and Degas both put their pictures in plain white frames. "Resting Dancer," a Degas painting from 1879—privately owned and still in a white frame—gives some idea of how these canvasses might have looked. The picture shows a ballerina in a moment of repose, her foot on a bench and her white skirt forming an almost perfect circle around her. The white frame, rather than harmonizing with the white of the skirt, seems to project the entire image forward, giving greater definition to the muted tones of the painting.

White frames quickly became associated with Impressionism. The Salon, the dominant institution in French art at the time, made conservative stipulations about how works should be presented, and in this context white frames were a radical departure. Mitchell and Roberts note that for many years Paul Durand-Ruel, a major Impressionist dealer, wouldn't allow such frames in his galleries; one newspaper dismissed Pissarro's white frames as resembling the "sides of crude packing cases." Although most of the Impressionists used white frames at one time or another, no more than a handful exist today.

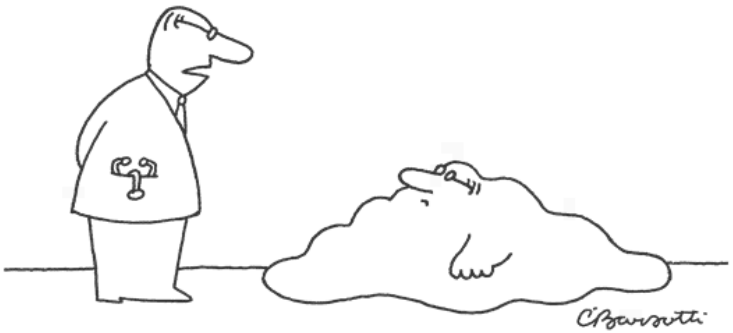
Occasionally, frame enthusiasts discover tantalizing glimpses of the past. A few years ago, Easton told me, she asked an intern to fetch the slide of a Degas pastel in the Brooklyn Museum's collection. The intern, unfamiliar with the office layout, went to a drawer that was no longer used, and found a forgotten slide showing the picture in a white frame. The frame was almost certainly original; the painting had been sold at a Degas estate sale and came to the museum soon afterward. "It would have been the only white frame known that existed of this style," Easton told me. "And the slide was dated 1968. So until 1968 this pastel lived in the original white frame." It is now in a gilded frame.

In 1887, Pissarro was preparing pictures for the Exposition Internationale, which forbade white frames, and attempted to create what has become known as his "compromise" frame. As he described it in letters to his son, the painter Lucien Pissarro, it was to have "a white margin of three centimetres around the painting, a flat surface of nine centimetres in oak, and, to finish, a three-centimetre band of gilded laurel leaf." In this way, he hoped "to create harmony between other framings and my own, without destroying the harmony of my paintings." Essentially, the sight edge of the frame would give Pissarro the white border he wanted, while the outer edge would placate dealers. But Pissarro's effort was wasted. As Easton told me, "The dealer gilded his white sight edge in the three days between when he delivered the frame and the first view."

A few years ago, Easton had a stroke of luck. She had gone to Switzerland to bring back a painting from an exhibition devoted to the work of Morisot. While there, she saw a Morisot on loan from the Davies Collection, at the National Museum Cardiff, in Wales. "I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw this picture," she said. The frame looked uncannily like what Pissarro had described.

The Davies sisters, she explained, were the granddaughters of a nineteenth-century Welsh industrialist; they never married, and they became voracious collectors of art. The origins of the Morisot frame are unclear, but Easton pointed out that many of the Impressionists used the same framers—in particular, a talented young framer named Pierre Cluzel, who fashioned many of Degas's tricky designs. (According to the staff of the Cardiff museum, the frame on the Morisot appears to be original.) Easton decided to use the frame as a basis for reframing the Brooklyn Pissarro. "First of all, it's something that Pissarro wrote about. Second of all, it gives you a lot of the same compromises that he wanted at the time." She also felt that the frame could pay homage to Pissarro's adventurous taste in frames. With the exception of two antique frames that Pissarro may have painted on, and one sketch with a painted border, none of Pissarro's frames have survived. But, working from the photographs and documentary sources, Easton hoped that she could bring one back to life.

Construction of the Pissarro frame took place at Gill and Lagodich's studio, in Tribeca. Gill and Lagodich met through frames. Fifteen years ago, Gill was a freelance writer who had a summer job working for a gilding supplier; Lagodich kept coming in to buy gold. "He told me he wanted to read my



"Be honest—how much are you exercising?"

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novel, and won me over—and he still hasn't read it," Gill claims. At the time, Lagodich was a landscape painter and frame collector who did gilding work on the side. (It sometimes seems as if everyone who works with frames began with pictures and then got sucked outward by the aesthetic equivalent of centrifugal force.) These days, Lagodich is in charge of restoration and fabrication, and Gill concentrates on research.

When Gill and Lagodich started their business, a few months after meeting, they ran it out of the loft on Duane Street where Lagodich has lived since the late seventies, but they now have a shop around the corner, which covers three floors. Their gallery is home to a large collection of European and American frames that spans five centuries. Almost everything is for sale, but there are some things they'd hate to part with. "There are certain frames that you just need to own, just to show that you're serious, that you have these objects," Lagodich said, as we looked at a huge gold frame, designed by Stanford White, that was an eye-popping mixture of Italian, German, and Dutch styles. "The problem is we started out as collectors," Lagodich said. "We like to keep nice things."

Construction takes place on Duane Street, and a month before the completed Pissarro frame was due Lagodich paced elatedly around the workshop, his clothes covered in white dust. The underlying carcass of the frame, a band of wood four and a quarter inches wide, was already complete; a concave section of its outer edge was being sanded by an assistant, using sandpaper wrapped around a dowel in order to get an even curve. Lagodich explained that the original frame would have been milled on a machine, so they were trying to re-create the effect by hand. "I like the challenge of these machine-perfect surfaces," he said, although the artisanal unevenness of a handmade surface that is actually meant to look handmade can be more fun. While the assistant sanded, Lagodich cast the laurel-and-berry border in plaster. (On the question of whether there would be a strip of wood between this ornament and the frame, Easton had prevailed: there was none.) The laurel band was mold-cast in sections, the joins masked by using a diagonal cut, so that a leaf overhung each crack. These sections allowed Lagodich to manipulate the pattern slightly, so that the laurel leaves fit the length of each side in a way that appeared organic and symmetrical.

While he waited for his work to dry, Lagodich, his fingers encrusted with plaster, ate a cookie and talked about the opposing dynamics of tradition and innovation in frame design. "I experiment with profiles all the time," he said, although, he added, "I feel like all profiles have been tried." He went on, "I have made so many frames for myself—and I have a lot in the basement, just my frames, that I've made—and they're all disasters, just disasters." He reflected on the curious way that a frame seems resistant to anything too stridently original. "I think that when you start changing the formula you're playing with forces that are very hard to control," he concluded darkly. Nonetheless, both he and Gill had become fascinated by Pissarro's attempt to balance different elements in a single frame. "It's a great transitional frame, where it still is nineteenth century but it's totally moving," Lagodich said. "I think that when this project is finished the painting's going to be sort of turned on *because* of the frame."

The next stage in the framing process is gilding, and this was done a week later by a gilder named Tom Middleton. There are two types of gilding—oil-based and water-based—and both were being used on this frame. Middleton, a thin, intense man with his hair in a ponytail, is, like Lagodich, a painter when he isn't working on frames. He circled the frame, waiting for oil that had been applied on the straight sections to acquire the right degree of adhesiveness for the gold to stick, while he burnished the water-gilt corner pieces with an agate stone and explained the mysteries of the gilder's craft: "It's almost a lost art now." Like many lost arts, gilding involves an esoteric set of tools, materials, and procedures. The bole, the layer of colored clay over which gold leaf is applied—this is often red, and frequently shows through old or deliberately distressed gilding—is made with rabbit-skin glue that smells like a pet store on a hot day. Gold leaf is traditionally cut on a pad made of deerskin or calfskin and protected from the wind with a flap of parchment. Before mechanical production techniques, when gold-beaters still hammered the metal, gold leaf was thicker, but modern gold is generally less than one micron thick; when Middleton held a piece of it up to the light, the fire escape outside was visible through it. Gold leaf weighs so little that if you pick it up with your hand it will instantly coat your fingers. So it is applied with slender brushes made from squirrel hair. As Middleton worked, he periodically stroked his arm with the brush, thereby picking up just enough oil from the skin to make the gold adhere to the bristles.

"This is tacking up now," he said, feeling the layer of oil with his hand. "The gold I'm using today is the most commonly used, twenty-three karat." Gold is a substance of almost limitless variety; there are different karats, different thicknesses, and different alloys, with names like régence and citron, and these differences, together with the bole and the burnishing, determine the final color. An alloy of silver brings a lemony tone, while a copper alloy yields a pinkish hue. Tracy Gill's favorite alloy is a French one, now rare, which contains palladium and appears tinged with violet. Middleton began to move quickly around the frame, pushing the gold down around the leaves and berries of the laurel border. Gill had mentioned that in some periods it was common to burnish those things which are hard in nature—the stems but not the petals, the quill but not the rest of the feather—but here the aim was to re-create the slightly dulled appearance of uniform oil-gilded surfaces prevalent at the time. The shinier effect of a burnished water-gilding would be reserved for the corners—a historically accurate choice, but also one that, aesthetically, would emphasize the rectangular structure of the frame, giving the curve of Pissarro's path something to contrast with.

After the arcane craft of gilding comes a process that is freer and more like art: toning the gold and distressing it, so that the frame does not look new. This involves scratching the surface, but, as with many other aspects of framing, the aim was to conceal the artifice. Middleton noted how adept the human eye is at spotting anything that seems patterned or intentional. Different people have different ways of mimicking the effect of chance. Lagodich likes using his keys; Middleton prefers stones. "Sometimes, on more beaten-up things, I've taken them outside and rubbed them around the sidewalk," he said. The goal is to create the illusion of haphazardness. "You want it to seem as if the object was hit randomly over the course of a hundred years," he said. "If I can fool the eye for a minute, I'm happy."

The completed frame arrived in Brooklyn only the day before it had to ship out to MOMA. In the peaceful precincts of the museum's conservation department, the de Keyser, now mended, sat on an easel, and the Pissarro wore its new frame. A few crumbs of gold leaf still clung to the cracks of the laurel border. The most immediate impression was that of informality. The expanse of wood in the sides of the frame implied something rustic. The bright white strip next to the canvas picked up the color of whitewashed houses in the middle distance, and the shallow step in the wooden section drew the eye inward, guiding it through the trees to the roofs beyond.

Easton was uneasy, in the manner of someone who gets an adventurous haircut, then suffers a failure of nerve. "It just looks too new," she kept saying. The wood color, now that there was a whole frame's worth of it rather than just a corner sample, seemed too light. She asked a conservator to open the blinds so that she could see it in natural light. The sun streaming through the south-facing windows enhanced the play of color within the picture, but she still thought that the frame needed more warmth to bring out the tones of the roofs. Pissarro's roofs are a spectrum of reds and browns, an attempt to mimic the effect of a sunny day, so this was a trickier matter than simply matching a color. Easton asked if the frame's tone could be adjusted. The conservator touched the edge of the wood with his thumb. "It will certainly take some stain," he said.

Lagodich was brought back to work on the finish, further darkening the wood and distressing the gold. Even after the picture had gone to MOMA and the show was being hung, he was tinkering with the frame. Eventually, it looked as Easton had hoped it would, offering a subtle rebuke to some of the more ostentatious Baroque confections on display.

"I think it was more striking than any other frame in the exhibition, even though it was unassuming," Easton reflected later. "But that apparent simplicity was so much more difficult to realize than something more obviously sumptuous." The whole exhibition has since begun to tour. The reframed Pissarro is currently on display at the Musée d'Orsay, in Paris, home to perhaps the world's greatest collection of Impressionist paintings. "It's strange," Easton said. "We worked right up to the last minute, and now I won't get to see it again for almost a year. By the time it reënters the Brooklyn collection, it will seem almost like a new acquisition." She was looking forward to it. "The white next to the canvas really did enhance the play of color and light within the painting," she said. "And the area of unarticulated wood emphasized the blockiness of the palette-knife areas. And the gold edge attracted your attention to it." She added, "Ultimately, we did the things that Pissarro said he wanted." ♦