

Framing:

Professional Artists Tell All

Artists from around the country weigh in on how they go about framing their pictures, as well as how they sort out the cost of doing so with their galleries and clients.

by John A. Parks

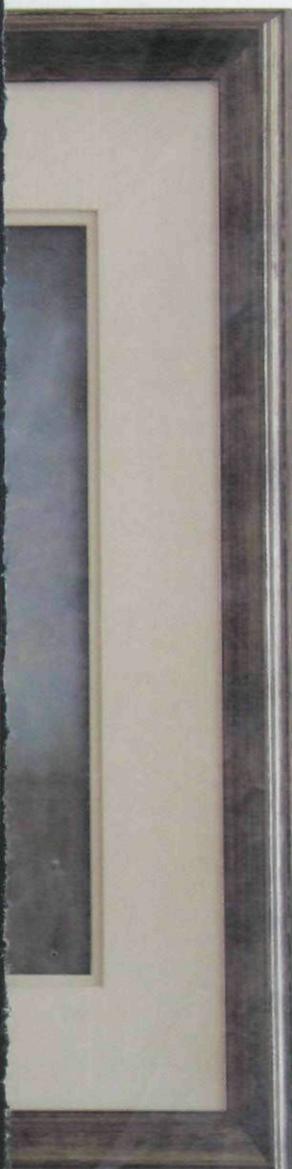
The frame around a picture can make or break a sale and, as most artists will attest, can significantly enhance—or detract from—the overall appearance of a work. Recently we asked a number of professional artists about their framing practices to find out how they go about framing and sorting out the associated costs with galleries and clients. In some respects the answers the artists gave were surprisingly uniform. All of the artists agreed that framing plays an important role in the presentation of a picture and understood that it can play a pivotal role in making a sale. Almost all of the artists reported using custom framers, and almost all frame their work to a high standard, giving great consideration to the color, weight, finish, and overall look of the chosen frame.

In terms of dealing with galleries, each artist we interviewed calculated the gallery commission without breaking out the cost of the framing (although some of them were considering changing the practice). Although seemingly



insignificant, a little rudimentary math quickly reveals the significance of this omission. For instance, if an artist pays \$1,000 for a frame and the gallery subsequently prices the painting at \$10,000, then the gallery commission of 50 percent would come to \$5,000. If the artist breaks out the cost of the framing, however, and calculates the gallery commission on \$9,000 instead, then the commission lost by the artist is only \$4,500. The extra \$500 the artist makes amounts to a little more than 10 percent of his income on the sale, a considerable sum indeed. In spite of the figures, however, most artists seemed to feel that they were not in a position to haggle for the extra margin. As one artist put it, "When I get famous and powerful enough, the first thing I'm going to renegotiate is that whopping 50-percent commission."

The artists expressed more varied views on other topics. When it came to the idea of uniformity in framing, a few reported using the same frame for almost every work, while



LEFT

White Roses I

by Ephraim Rubenstein, 2005, pastel on sanded board, 29 x 26. Courtesy Laurel Tracey Gallery, Red Bank, New Jersey.

This molding was chosen to pick up the cooler tones of the pewter vase.

BELOW

Cibilo Creek

by Don L. Parks, 2005, oil, 12 x 16. Private collection.

The artist chose this frame for its simple design and quality of gold finish.

RIGHT

Conch I

by Ephraim Rubenstein, 2004, oil on linen mounted onto board, 16 x 20. Courtesy Laurel Tracey Gallery, Red Bank, New Jersey.

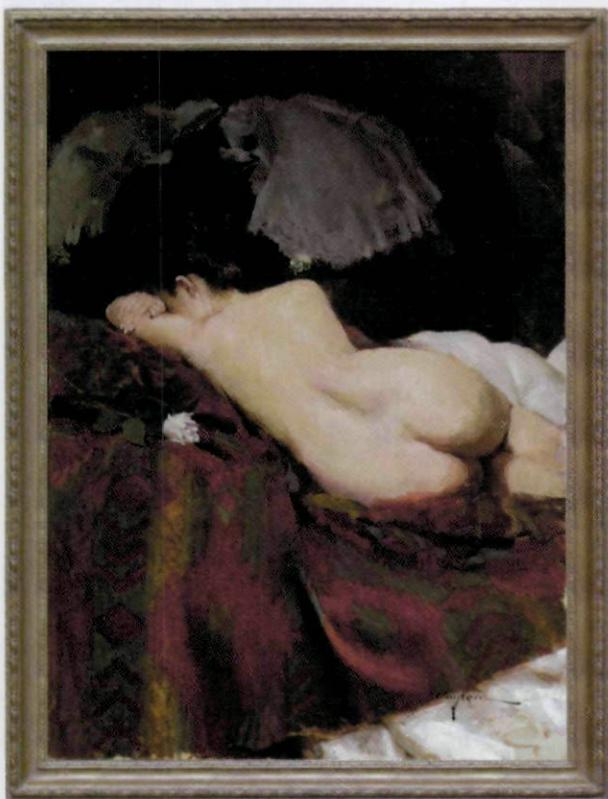


others said they enjoyed finding unique frames for individual works. The artists also reported widely different experiences regarding the demands placed by their galleries, with some telling of very specific framing requirements and others finding that their framing choices were accepted without question. The following are detailed descriptions of those artists' framing experiences:

EPHRAIM RUBENSTEIN frames his larger paintings himself using simple wood stripping. "I find that people so often reframe paintings after they buy them that it's simply not worth spending a lot of money on a big frame," he says. For his works on paper, however, Rubenstein uses the Sheppard Art Gallery, a framer near Baltimore. "They are really professional and do wonderful museum-quality framing," he reports. "It's important to find a framer with whom you can develop a good working relationship." For his pastels, Rubenstein requires frames with a lift or spacer between the

mat and the pastel so that any loose dust will fall behind the mat instead of on the bevel. "I don't fix the last layer of pastel," the artist says, "because I want the final strokes to look fresh. So before I send a piece to the framer, I close my eyes and give it a sharp tap on the back to knock off the loosest stuff. After that it's out of my hands." Rubenstein does not break out the cost of framing when calculating a commission with the dealer, although he says that on occasion, when an expensive frame has been asked for, he has insisted that the dealer bear the cost. All the galleries he has dealt with have expected the work to arrive framed and ready to hang. One problem he encountered arose when he was assembling an exhibition of a variety of works completed over a few years. The dealer wanted Rubenstein to present the show in uniform framing, but the artist refused to comply on account of the expense involved.

DON L. PARKS paints landscapes of the Southwest and frames his work in simple gold frames. He keeps a supply of standard-size frames on hand and generally buys 10 to 20 at a time. When finishing a painting he will look at it quite a bit in the frame as the final adjustments are made. That way he never has to wait on frames as a painting is being finished. Parks frames all of his work and has the equipment to make his own frames, but at present he prefers to buy ready-made frames to save time. His current sources are Hartford Fine Art & Framing, in Connecticut; Hackman Frames, in Columbus, Ohio; and JFM Enterprises, in Norcross, Georgia. "My galleries are in Texas and New Mexico and all seem satisfied with the frames I am now using," he says. "I have placed more expensive frames on some paintings and asked the owners of one



TOP

Wedding Night

by Clayton J. Beck III,
2003, oil on linen,
40 x 30. Private
collection.

ABOVE

Backwash

by Mike Barret Kolasinski,
2005, pastel, 24 x 36.
Collection the artist.

LEFT

Peony

by Mary Minifie, 2000, oil,
8 x 6. Private collection.

Santa Fe gallery what they thought and, to my surprise, they had no preference. Artists should, however, always use good frames. I shudder to think of the frames I used 20 years ago! Now I recognize that if the frame looks to be of average quality, the painting will look no better. As the prices of my paintings have gone up over time, I have moved to better-quality frames. Despite some galleries being satisfied with less-expensive frames, people who buy a lot of art know frame quality and expect good frames on their art purchases. You cannot predict every client's taste in frames, so I try to be accommodating on special ordering a frame to the client's taste if the frame becomes an issue."

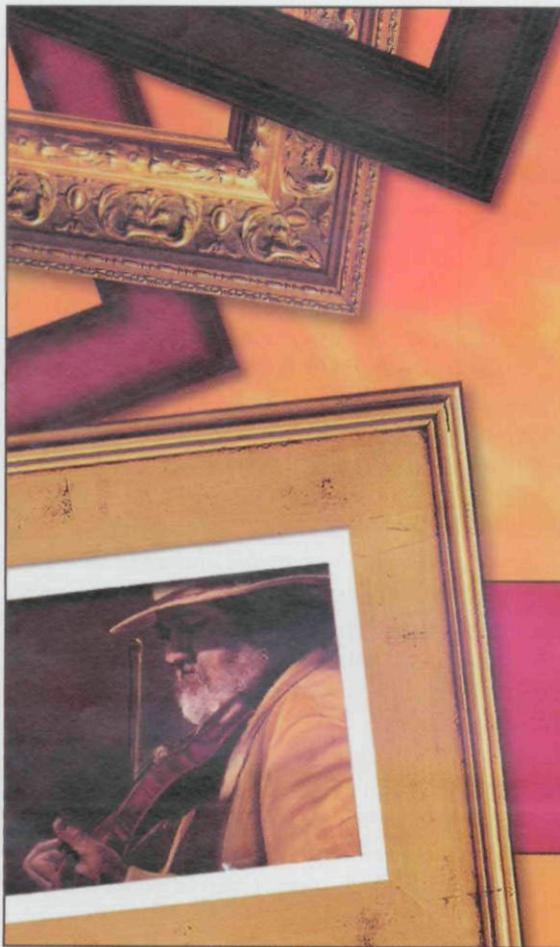
MIKE BARRET KOLASINSKI is a pastel artist who buys pre-cut parts from the Artful Framing Studio, in his native Chicago, and then assembles the frame in his studio. "I don't like to let an unframed piece out into the world at all," he says, "because I'm afraid it might get damaged at the frame shop." The artist has developed a good relationship with his frame supplier, which he has found to be understanding and responsive to his needs. He uses the same molding for most of his frames: a simple swan profile about 3" wide with a clean, contemporary feel in a warm wood veneer. He has found that using a linen liner gives the frame the depth that pastels need; and by including a fillet with the liner, he creates a small gutter to collect extraneous dust. All these parts are prepared by the frame supplier, along with the frame pieces, already cut to size. Since he tends to work in unusual proportions, Kolasinski rarely uses standard sizes. In dealing with galleries, the artist does not separate the cost of framing when calculating his commission. He says that sometimes galleries have asked for unframed pieces so that they can offer clients the opportunity to order frames to their own taste. This practice, the artist observes, can also net the gallery a larger profit.

MARY MINIFIE is largely a painter of commissioned portraits. As such, she does not include the price of framing in the commission but will usually work with the client to select a frame. She always recommends a gold-leaf frame of generous proportions. "You can't go wrong with gold leaf," she says, "and the framers have ways of getting a variety of color and brightness out of it." Minifie generally uses one of three framers: Guido Frame Studio and Art Gallery, in Boston; P.S. Art Frames, in Providence; or Powers Gallery, in Acton, Massachusetts. When dealing with galleries, Minifie does not break out the price of the framing before calculating a commission. "I consider what I need to get for the painting and then figure the cost of my framing before I agree on a selling price with the dealer," she says. It is well worth paying close attention to framing, Minifie argues, because the wrong frame can really detract from a painting, while the right frame can greatly enhance the viewing experience.

CLAYTON J. BECK III sometimes deals with galleries that frame his paintings but often organizes his own framing. He uses a variety of suppliers but recommends Stafford Frame Makers, in Peterborough, New Hampshire, as an excellent high-end framer. The artist finds that dealers ask for different designs of frames, often depending on where they are geographically. In parts of the West, for instance, many of his clients require a plain- or weathered-wood frame, while Californians and those on the East Coast seem to prefer a gold finish. In pricing a painting, Beck says that he would rather bear the cost of framing than haggle with the gallery. "I tell them that the frame is a gift," he says, "and the client can leave it in the gallery if he or she doesn't want to use it." This approach is useful as a gesture of generosity, which helps in the selling. Beck will often sell work unframed, wet on the easel, and in such cases will advise the client on framing. "Mostly I'm concerned with the weight rather than the style," he says. "I don't want someone putting a thin strip around a 4' painting. I tell them to make sure it's three to five inches in

width." Beck prefers frames with some modest decoration and with a finish that feels somewhat aged or stressed, a look that goes well with his lavish and lively pictures. "The frame should enhance the idea that the artist had when painting the artwork," he says. "If the point of the painting was color, then the frame should do what it can to bring that out. The painting may be based on values or texture or drawing or perspective. In all cases the frame should complement the artist's intent for the artwork and even enhance the concept behind it."

MAGGIE PRICE, a pastel artist, says that she buys molding in bulk through a local frame shop. "I buy several hundred feet at a time," she says, "and I always use the same molding so that my pieces are all uniform in presentation." The artist's husband cuts and joins the frame for her; she cuts her own mats and does the final assembly. "One of the reasons I like doing it this way is because it gives me an extra degree of control right at the end," she explains. "Sometimes I put the mat on the



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LEFT
Old Things

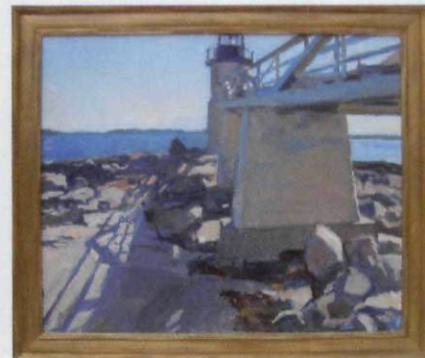
by Joseph Keiffer, 2005, oil, 12 x 16. Private collection.

This is an example of a metal-leaf frame the artist orders in bulk for pictures 12" x 16" and under.

BELOW
Port Clyde Lighthouse

by Jerry Weiss, 2005, oil on linen, 28 x 34. Collection the artist.

This picture is framed with molding from A.P.F. Master Framemakers, in Mount Vernon, New York. Antique-finish molding can be costly and is best purchased in bulk length.



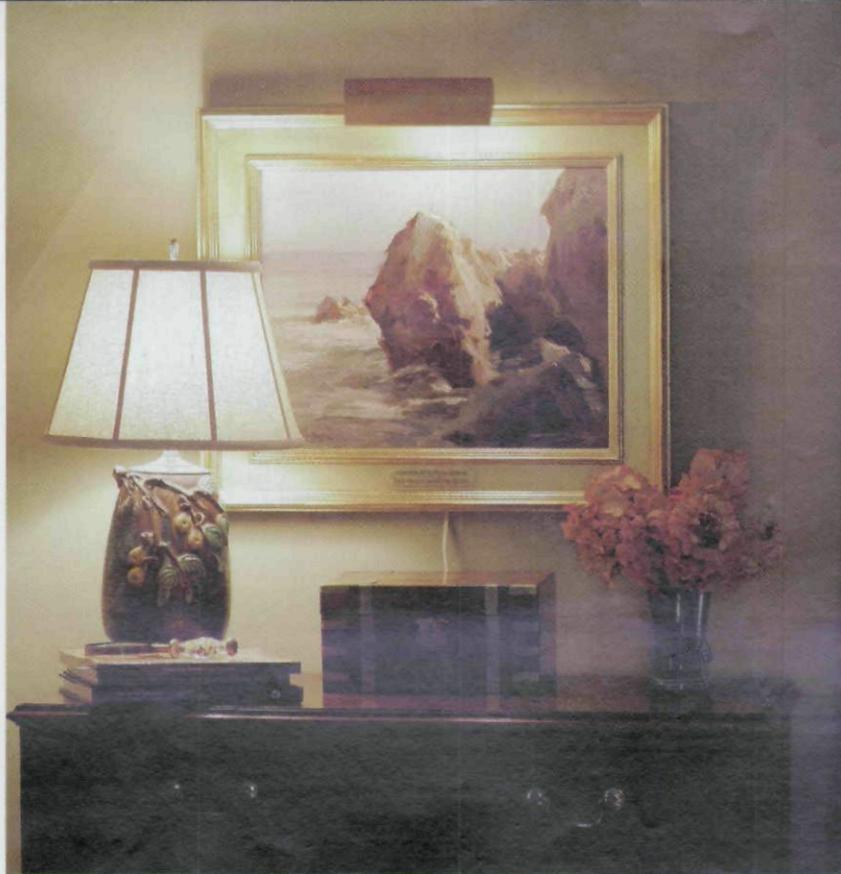
piece and the framed image doesn't quite suit me. I can then decide to crop the piece or move the mat slightly to get exactly the composition I want. I would never be able to do that if I gave the work out to a framer." Like many pastel artists, Price puts a spacer behind the mat to create a channel into which extraneous dust can fall. She points out, however, that working on sanded paper and being careful to not overfill the tooth means very little, if any, dust will fall after framing. In dealing with galleries, she includes the framing in the sale price. "It would be nice if galleries deducted the cost of framing before taking a commission," she says, "but those I have worked with don't do that."

JERRY WEISS orders custom-made frames from a local framer, Nancy Pinney, in Old Lyme, Connecticut. "Nancy is a painter and former student at the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts, where I teach," says Weiss. "She has a good eye, and I've grown to trust her judgment." Over the years Weiss has reduced the number of frames he uses to a small group of standard moldings, which he generally has finished in gold or metal leaf. He explains that although custom framing frees him from standard sizes, he often uses his favorite sizes so that he can put a frame he already has on the new painting to see how it will look. Galleries can sometimes be picky about the framing, Weiss says, because they have a sense of the particular market they are dealing with. Some prefer more old-fashioned frames, he continues, while others are anxious to have a pared-down modern appearance. The artist does not break out the cost of framing when settling on a commission with the gallery. "Galleries generally expect the artist to bear the expense of framing," Weiss says.

"Commissioned work is another story. When a portrait is commissioned, through one of my other reps, or even privately, the client always pays for the framing."

MARY WHYTE has the good fortune of being married to a professional framer, Smith Coleman, with whom she also owns an art gallery. "As soon as I finish a piece I send it directly to the gallery," she says. Naturally she does not have to worry about working in standard sizes. Being a partner in a gallery, however, Whyte sees framing from the other side of the business, too. "Sometimes artists send us paintings in frames that are very low quality, based on the assumption that a cheap frame will lower the price of the painting and make it easier to sell," she says. "We always insist that paintings be framed to the highest possible standard. I have never seen a sale of a painting fall through because the frame was putting an extra \$500 on the price." Conversely, she notes, a poor framing job can make a painting much harder to sell. When Whyte's gallery does the framing for an artist it represents, the artist is simply billed for the cost of the framing. For her own work, which is largely in watercolor, she prefers a hand-wrapped linen mat. "Very few professional framers know how to do this properly," she says, "but I think it is the most beautiful way to present a watercolor." For the frame she prefers a very simple molding with a distressed gold-leaf finish.

JOSEPH KEIFFER has his frames custom-made in Central Falls, Rhode Island, and in Orangetown, New York. He has never had a gallery insist on a certain type of frame; instead he has found his galleries have been pleased with the frames he has supplied. Generally the artist's frames exhibit a kind of



house style, a simple molding in a gold finish, although generally not in gold leaf, and he will frequently place an order for a frame over the phone. Since he has his frames custom-made, Keiffer does not have to work in standard sizes nor does he negotiate the gallery's commission based on his outlay for the framing. "I've heard of such arrangements," he says, "but I've never been in a position where I wanted to demand it." When it comes to expense, Keiffer says that he would like the framing costs to be around 5 percent of the selling price of the picture, but often finds they are between 5 percent and 10 percent.

MICHAEL SHANE NEAL primarily paints commissioned portraits and uses the services of a custom framer. "I'm very lucky to know Rick Guthrie, who is really a kind of personal framer," he says. "Rick actually comes to my studio, and we discuss what type of frame a new piece will need. He has a great eye and gives great attention to every detail of the business. He even gets involved in hanging the painting in clients' homes and can be very helpful advising them about which frames and works of art will work with their décor." The artist does not include the price of framing in a commissioned portrait but puts a clause in his contract saying that he would prefer to supervise the framing with the client's consent on pricing. "Years ago I used to simply let the unframed painting out of the studio," he says, "and then one day I went to a client's house and saw that they'd framed a portrait in a



TOP
Finished painting
Morning Light
hanging in an
interior.

by Michael Shane Neal,
2003, oil, 16 x 20.
Private collection.

ABOVE
Lilly

by Michael Shane Neal,
2004, oil, 20 x 16.
Private collection.

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BELOW

Messengers

by Susan Grossman,
2005, charcoal and
pastel, 49 x 67.
Courtesy DFN Gallery,
New York, New York.

RIGHT

Ina

by Debbie Sutton,
1997, pastel, 22 x 18.
Collection the artist.



cheap plastic frame. I was horrified. I couldn't understand why they would do that." Although Neal uses a wide variety of frames to complement his paintings, he says that for a woman's portrait he prefers something with a little more movement, perhaps even a carved frame if the client can afford it. Portraits of men, on the other hand, he finds work best with a cleaner look. Although the color of the finish depends on the nature of the painting, he has a preference for distressed-gold finishes. "I tell the client that the frame should feel like it has been given the same level of attention as the painting," he says. "A good frame can really make a painting sing." When framing his landscapes, Neal will sometimes take advantage of standard sizes. "My framer can come over with a bunch of different frames of the right size and we pop the paintings in them," he says. Obviously this approach also slightly reduces the cost. "For a portrait the framing generally costs 20 percent to 25 percent of the cost of the painting," he says. "When I frame up my landscapes the percentage is probably between 10 percent and 15 percent." Like most of the other artists in this survey, Neal does not break out his costs of framing when calculating a gallery commission.

SUSAN GROSSMAN makes very large charcoal drawings that require custom framing. "I'm so fortunate to have a great framer in Manhattan called Skyframe," she says. "They pick up the piece from the studio, and I go over to their workshop and work with them until the glass is put on the piece." Grossman uses a simple black frame and has the drawing floated clear of the edge. "The idea is that the frame is fairly neutral and doesn't interfere with the drawing," she explains. This kind of framing presents various challenges. For one thing, the drawing itself must be glued onto a sup-

port using archival glues, and a very big piece of Plexiglas must be substituted for regular glass because of weight considerations. "I use a Plexiglas that has been treated to reduce static electricity, which can pick up particles of dust," she says. The artist reports that she has often consulted with her gallery dealer about framing ideas, and that the look she uses is the result of this close cooperation. In calculating the gallery commission, Grossman says that she believes the drawing and frame together constitute her product, and therefore she is happy to have the gallery commission based on the whole package. "The important thing is to have a gallery to show the work," she says, "otherwise you are just a tree that falls in the forest that nobody hears. If the gallery is working for you and promoting you and carrying a big overhead, then they deserve to make their commission."

DEBBIE SUTTON uses custom frames and a linen liner for her original paintings and canvas giclées but will often employ standard-size, ready-made frames with a double mat for her lithograph prints. Her paintings are usually too big to fit in standard sizes, she says, but using ready-made frames for her prints makes them less expensive and easier to sell. Sutton buys most of her frames from online retailer Graphik Dimensions (www.pictureframes.com), and she frames all of her original work herself. "I try to keep a supply of my most commonly used frames on hand," she says. "Frame prices vary widely. Artists should be careful where they place their orders. Also, if artists are giving their local frame shop a lot of business, they deserve a special rate!" ■

John A. Parks is an artist and teacher who frequently contributes to American Artist, Drawing, Watercolor, and Workshop magazines.

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