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## Museums

**The perfect frame complements art without competing against it**



Courtesy Phillips Collection - Image on left: Felix Vallotton, "On the Beach," 1899, Oil on board 16 1/2 x 18 7/8 inches, Private collection, Switzerland; Top: Felix Vallotton. "Beach at Etretat," 1901. Modern gelatin silver print, 2011, from original negative. Private collection; Bottom: Felix Vallotton, "Beach at Etretat," 1899. Modern gelatin silver print, 2011, from original negative, Private collection.

By Lonnae O'Neal Parker, Published: August 17

WALKING through the Phillips Collection, Jed Bark stops to point out rare works of art by late 19th-century masters van Gogh, Cezanne and Degas. He urges closer inspection. He speaks authoritatively about tone, color and styling.

“It’s grand, opulent, imposing,” Bark says. And just look at the impressive gold surround.



(Bill O'Leary/WASHINGTON POST) - Master art framer Jed Bark.

He’s not talking about the paintings.

“These are the frames you almost always see on the van Gogh,” Bark says.

Bark is a master framer. He opened his New York workshop in the mid-1960s and has framed impressionists including Monet, Pissarro and Degas as well as modern and contemporary artists —Warhol, Jasper Johns and fashion photographer Richard Avedon. His frames take about four weeks to make and cost from \$300 to tens of thousands, depending upon the size and detail. He’s framed nearly all the photos for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the past two decades, and when the Phillips Collection needed 200 individually designed frames for its exhibit “Snapshot: Painters and Photography, Bonnard to Vuillard” earlier this year, it turned to Bark.

Framing decisions are both practical and philosophical. How will this frame work in the space, and how do we best honor the artist’s intention for his or her work? And they can often be existential: How does the framer navigate the tension between wanting his or her work to be seen, and wanting only the artwork to be seen?

“The frame can be virtually invisible; well-made and unmemorable,” Bark says, “or it can take a more active role and have a certain resonance with a picture.” And when you start from scratch, when you design a frame singularly, to work in concert with a piece of art, you can have something powerful, he says. “You can have a dialogue.”

At the Phillips, Bark discussed the framing rationale behind some of the museum’s most important works. Van Gogh frames, usually called Louis XIV frames, are decorative to the point of hyperbole because 19th-century

dealers had to convince buyers that impressionist and postimpressionist works were consequential, and they used the showiest frames to help make the case. The painters themselves often designed much simpler frames but many of those have been lost.

It's Bark's second time visiting the museum solely to look at frames. The Phillips has a large collection of artist-designed or -commissioned frames including ones by European artist Paul Klee, and American modernists John Marin and Arthur Dove. And Bark says that makes it something of a Mecca for people like him. "Most museums have tossed artists' frames and most collectors did, too. It's rare to find any picture from the last 120 years in its original frames, especially if it was an original artist's frame," Bark says. "One thing that's lost is the artist's vision for how he or she intended people to see that artwork." That has changed, however, as "more and more scholars are interested in what decisions were made by the artists themselves."

"The Phillips is exceptional particularly in its artists' frames, or frames that have been chosen by the artist for his or her work" says Chief Curator Eliza Rathbone. The frame complements and augments the artist's vision, she says. "It's the transition. It can make a huge difference as to how the viewer sees the work."

Local experts agree.

"It is true that many painting have been reframed over the ages because the curator did not like the original artist's frame and changed

it," says Dare Hartwell, the Corcoran Gallery of Art's head of conservation. "But there's now a great deal more respect for the original frames." Of the 102 paintings in the Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945 collection, Hartwell says, "we believe at least 35 to be in original or artist-selected frames," including frames on paintings by Thomas Cole, George Bellows, and Edward Hopper. Pieces by James McNeill Whistler and George Bellows are among the few originally framed works in the The National Gallery of Art collection.

Until recently, museums had never really talked about the frames, says Martin Kotler, frames conservator for the Smithsonian American Art Museum, which has frames by Carrig-Rohane, a New England landscape artist, as well as Charles Pollock and Alexandre Hogue, representational artists with abstract tendencies. "Some of these artists made their own frames shortly after the Depression," Kotler says. "There are very few artist-designed frames. It's a specialty area and those are very, very rare."

In the original dining room at the Phillips, two paintings, "Cows in Pasture," and "Me and the Moon" by Arthur Dove, considered America's first abstract painter, are in their original Dove-designed frames. They have two beveled planes — the inner frame next to the picture edge shoots out assertively and the outer plane falls back toward the wall. They are very direct, Bark says, with strong edges and borders. They "don't call attention to themselves, while calling attention to the painting. And that's very effective."

A frame for a third painting, “Waterfall,” is a Dove style that Bark calls a homage frame, the making of which can be tricky. Framers “don’t want to make copies of [artists’] frames because that’s like making a copy of their painting, in a way. It’s an original work.” Instead, the trick is “to stay true to his vision, without becoming a forger of his designs.”

Earlier this year, when the Phillips decided to do “Snapshot,” a collection of informal late 19th-century photographs by renowned European painters, Bark designed frames that were artist- and scene-specific. Photos are often framed in simple black or white, which can emphasize the grouping at the expense of the individual photo. But “Snapshot” was centered around artists experimenting with the new medium of photography, and curators wanted each photo considered. The frames had to do much of that heavy lifting.

For Bonnard family photos, Bark chose modest matting and framing with “a welcoming quality,” to invite viewers to look at very small images. For the Vuillard nudes, he resurrected a 10-year-old black reeded design that had “sinuous and delicate quality that is resonant with nude photographs.”

“The reason Jed’s frames worked so well for ‘Snapshot’ is because they were individually chosen, but they all had a kind of elegant simplicity,” Rathbone says. They were “small and delicate or bold with lots of contrast. Different groups were framed with different profiles and that set them apart, and gave them a kind of identity.”

Bark recalls a March trip to the Museum of Capodimonte in Naples, where he was transfixed, but only by the Italian and Northern European artworks. If you’re looking at 16th-century paintings in a 16th-century frame, they might be nice, “but by and large, there is nothing remarkable about that,” he says. But 20th-century art “has no established tradition for which frame goes with which picture,” so again and again, Bark tries to come up with designs that seem so perfect, you almost can’t imagine the art without the frame it comes in.

It’s like when a singer works with an accompanist for a long time and their performance is nuanced. “There’s a frequency, a vibration they share,” says Bark.

It’s just like a compelling frame, on a beautiful piece of art.