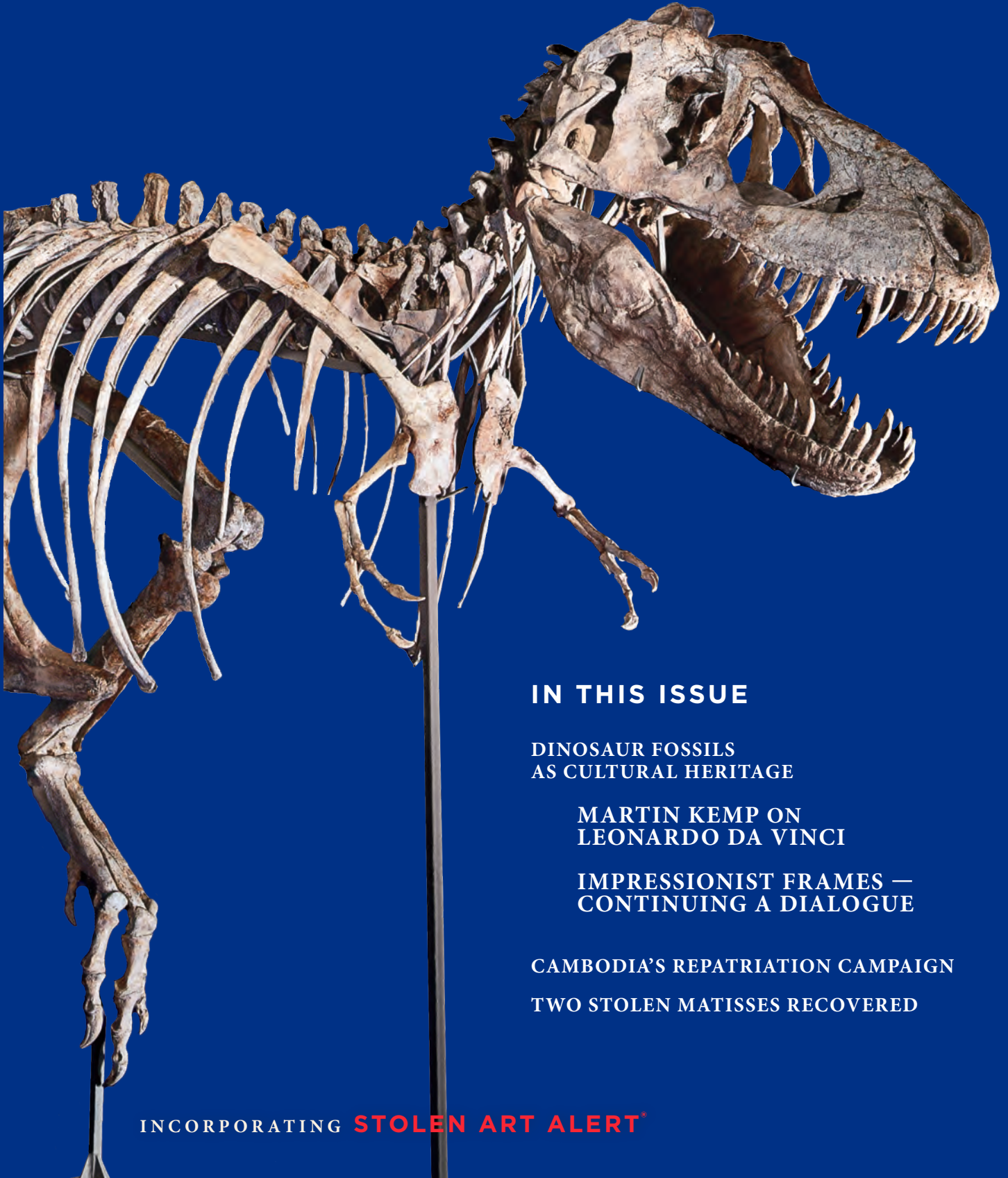


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COVER: *Tyrannosaurus bataar* (Late Cretaceous period). Image cropped. Photo: Heritage Auctions.
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FRAMING VAN GOGH'S *THE NIGHT CAFÉ*

JARED BARK*

Vincent van Gogh wrote frequently and articulately about the framing of his work. Yet the presentation of his pictures rarely reflected his preferences. A telling example is *The Night Café* (FIG. 1), a major work in the collection of the Yale University Art Gallery, whose framing was discussed at a recent *IFAR Evening* and in the *IFAR Journal* (Vol. 13, nos. 1&2).

“Framing for this picture has not always corresponded to van Gogh’s vision of the subject or his attitude toward frames.”

The picture was painted while the artist was living in Arles, in September, 1888. As art historian Meyer Schapiro noted: “Van Gogh judged *The Night Café*, which he painted for his landlord to pay the rent, ‘one of the ugliest pictures I have done’. Yet, it gave him great joy to paint, and there are few works on which he has written with more conviction. ... He has gone here beyond the agreeable side of the café world, imaged by the Impressionists, to its darker disquieting moments.”¹ Framing for this picture, however, has not always corresponded to van Gogh’s vision of the subject or his attitude toward frames.

Van Gogh took an early interest in how his works were to be presented. He had drawings matted: “I feel happy using a brown passe-partout with a very deep black inside edge. Then many blacks that would appear too black in a white passe-partout look grey and the whole remains clear.”² He put painting studies “in black wooden frames — which I’m looking for at a carpenter’s here — I prefer to see my work in a deep black frame, and he makes them cheaply enough.”³ Cost figured in the equation, but his focus on how his work would be seen was central. He continues in the same letter, “No more than I approve of its just lying about, do I want my

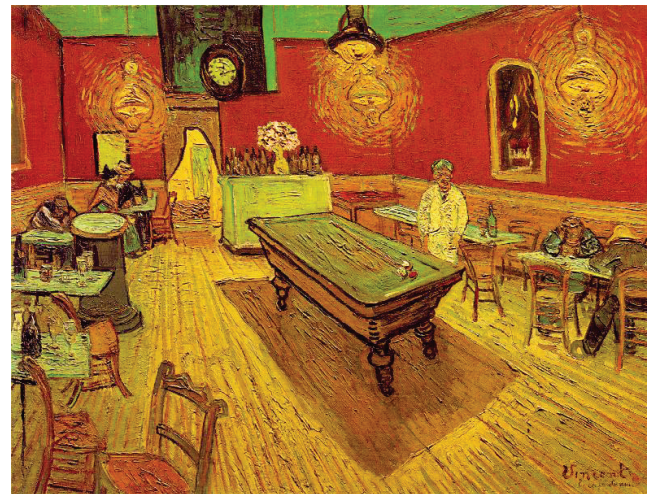


FIGURE 1. Vincent van Gogh. *The Night Café*, 1888. Oil on canvas. 72 x 92 cm. Yale University Art Gallery. 1961.18.34. Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark.

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¹ Meyer Schapiro, *Van Gogh* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983), p. 26.

² Letter to Anthon van Rappard. The Hague, 15 June, 1883, letter # 354. *Vincent van Gogh — The Letters: The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition*. Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker, eds. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009). Also at <http://www.vanoghletters.org>. Unless otherwise noted, all van Gogh letters cited in this article are to this edition.

³ Letter to Theo van Gogh. Nuenen, on or about Sunday, 2, March, 1884, letter #432.

be displayed in fluted frames in the leading galleries you see.” This is a revealing comment. Of the variety of standard gallery frames at the time, fluted scotia frames were among the most restrained. Though they boasted acanthus leaf flourishes in the corners, they were straight-sided and uncarved, and by no means as ornamental as the latter-day versions of Louis XIII, XIV and Régence-style “compo” frames that crowded the salons and galleries. Van Gogh favored simplicity beyond even the most austere conventions of the time.⁴



FIGURE 2. *Still-life with quinces, lemons, pears and grapes*, 1887. Oil on canvas. 48.5 x 65 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, F383. This work is in its original frame.

In roughly twenty-five letters, mostly to his brother Theo, van Gogh expressed his thoughts on framing his work. After arriving in Paris in 1886, he had been impressed with the framing innovations of the Impressionists, and like them, he generally chose painted frames. As well as specifying black frames early on, he occasionally expressed his preference for white frames; he wrote from Arles specifying that a study should be framed “with a simple all-

⁴ In the fall of the following year, van Gogh wrote his uncle Cornelis Marinus van Gogh, “If you perhaps have any old fluted frames that you don’t have an immediate use for, I should like very much to trade one of these 4 studies for a frame.” Even if we conclude that van Gogh, like the Impressionists, was not always consistent in rejecting conventional framing, a fluted frame is nonetheless simpler in design than a Louis XIV or XV style frame.

white frame” and “for the white orchard we need a cold and raw white frame.”⁵

He also chose frames painted in colors that were complements to the dominant colors of the picture.⁶ In this he was following the lead of the Impressionists as well. No black or white frames, or any painted in the complementary manner survive, although one painting, *Still-life with quinces, lemons, pears, and grapes* painted a year before *The Night Café*, still bears its original frame (FIG. 2). Except for the beveled inner band, the frame is a simple flat panel, painted by the artist in yellows similar to the tonal range of the picture. Parallel brushstrokes animate the plane of the frame’s inner edge and rough cross-hatched strokes are dispersed across the outer panel. The surface suggests, perhaps, the play of light on an ornamented gold frame, or a series of Japanese characters. What is more certain is that, unlike the brushstrokes in the painting, which conform to the rounded shapes of the fruit, the horizontal and vertical strokes on the frame echo the lines of the frame.

Soon after van Gogh moved from Paris to Arles, he was joined there by Gauguin. In preparing for his friend’s arrival, he chose walnut furniture for Gauguin’s bedroom. This, according to Louis van Tilborgh, “was also the wood he chose to go around his garden views, which he had painted specially for Gauguin.”⁷ He was particular about the species of woods he chose for frames. He referred to using walnut frames in several of the Arles letters, mentioned oak frames twice, and in one letter mentions chestnut and pine as well as walnut.

Although economizing on frames continued to be a consideration, it never appeared to outweigh van Gogh’s concern for the proper display of his work.

⁵ Letter to Theo van Gogh. Arles, 28 May, 1888, letter #615.

⁶ Louis van Tilborgh notes that *The Night Café*, while in Theo’s collection, was framed in red, “probably to bring out the green in the composition.” Louis van Tilborgh, “Framing van Gogh,” in *Perfect Harmony*, ed. Eva Mendgen (Zwolle, The Netherlands: Waanders Publishers, 1995) p. 170.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

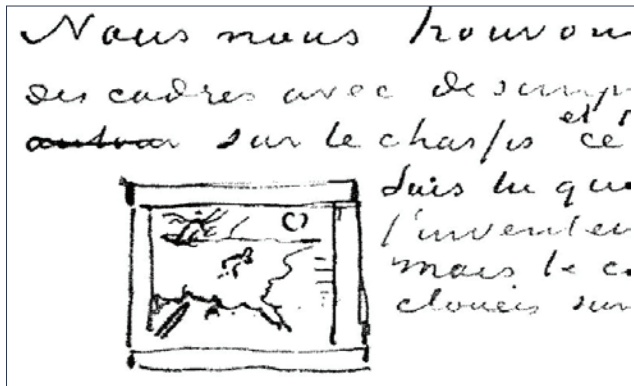


FIGURE 3. “We’re very satisfied with making frames with simple strips of wood nailed on the stretching frame and painted, which I’ve started doing.” Sketch from letter to Theo van Gogh, Arles, November 10, 1888.

In a letter to his sister he wrote: “The frames I use cost me 5 francs at the most, while the less solid gilded frames would cost 30 or more. And if the painting looks good in a simple frame, why put gilding around it?”⁸ He and Gauguin considered their simple frames carefully: “We’re very satisfied,” he wrote to Theo, “with making frames with simple strips of wood nailed on the stretching frame and painted, which I’ve started doing. ... we’re certainly going to perfect it. It serves very well, since this frame doesn’t stick out at all and is one with the canvas”⁹ (FIG. 3).

THE NIGHT CAFÉ

The Night Café was given to the Yale University Art Gallery as part of the bequest of the American collector Stephen Carlton Clark in 1961 (FIG. 4). The picture had been in the collection of Russian industrialist Ivan Morozov and then in Moscow’s Museum of Modern Western Art before being sold by the cash-strapped Soviets in the 1930s. A short time later, it was bought by Clark from the

Knoedler Gallery in New York. It stayed in Clark’s frame until 2009 (FIG. 5), when the Yale Art Gallery decided to review its presentation and consider the artist’s predilections for the framing of his work.

Clark’s carved and gilded frame was of the same genre that Impressionist and Post-Impressionist dealers, beginning with Durand-Ruel, preferred to the austere frames the artists chose or designed themselves. Gold paid homage to the way academic paintings had always been presented, and thus seemed to exert both a civilizing influence on these radical canvases and a note of reassurance to ambivalent collectors.¹⁰

Van Gogh describes *The Night Café* as “a place where you can ruin yourself, go mad, commit crimes ... in an ambience of a hellish furnace, in pale sulphur.”¹¹ It is a harsh scene, shocking in both subject and execution, and painful to contemplate. Critics have noted: “It is difficult to imagine how Stephen Carlton Clark, who made a gift of it [to Yale], could have managed to have it in his home. Was the gilded frame his idea, I wonder? Did he think to make it presentable?”¹²

The impulse to moderate or make acceptable the impact of a passionate, unsettling painting by means of elegant framing may evolve over time into an intention to honor the work, now appreciated as a chef d’oeuvre — and these diverse goals may be attained by the same impressive frame. As Nicholas Fox Weber wrote in 2007, “*The Night Café* has achieved the status of a masterpiece, and most viewers of the canvas in its ornate gilded frame are aware of its virtually inestimable financial worth.”¹³

¹⁰ This point has been made much more forcefully: “Framing a picture is an act of appropriation. Framing an acquisition offers the opportunity to the private owner to embrace his conquest, to domesticate it, to adapt it to his own ambience, and finally to subject it to his own taste.” Fred Leeman, former chief curator of the van Gogh Museum [“the Art of Framing” in *Christie’s International Magazine*, March–April 1990.]

¹¹ Letter to Theo van Gogh. Arles, Sunday, 9 September 1888, letter # 677.

¹² Stephen Vincent Kobasa, “Curing Iconophobia,” *New Haven Advocate*, 7 Aug. 2008.

¹³ Nicholas Fox Weber, *The Clarks of Cooperstown* (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 296.

⁸ Letter to Willemien van Gogh. Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Monday, 21 October 1889, letter #812.

⁹ Letter to Theo van Gogh. Arles, Saturday, 10 November 1888, letter #718. In several other letters from Arles, van Gogh used the word “simple” in describing his frames: in his letters to Theo van Gogh of 28 May, 1888; 8 October, 1888; 23 May, 1889; and to Willemien van Gogh, from St. Rémy, 21 October, 1889.

Whether moderating or honoring, to employ such a frame ignores van Gogh's designs for framing his work. What is more, this frame was formally at odds with the picture. In describing *The Night Café*, Meyer Schapiro noted "the absorbing perspective which draws us headlong. ... To the impulsive rush

“Her primary intention was that a frame be created that more closely reflected van Gogh’s framing preferences than had any of its known predecessors.”



FIGURE 4. Stephen Clark's gallery at the time of his death showing *The Night Café* on the left wall. All six pictures bear Louis XIV frames. ©Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA. Photo: Michael Agee.



FIGURE 5. *The Night Café* shown in Stephen Clark's Louis XIV frame, as it was formerly exhibited at the Yale University Art Gallery.

of these converging lines he [van Gogh] oppose[s] the broad horizontal band of red..."¹⁴ The center and corner decorations of the Louis XIV frame, however, impose a static structure which, by drawing the eye to the center of the canvas, counters the artist's dynamic composition.

In late 2007, Jennifer Gross, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Yale University Art Gallery, whose interest in frames and framing is long-standing, asked my company, Bark Frameworks, to collaborate in a re-framing of *The Night Café*. She sent us pictures of it in its gilded frame; and as it was framed previously in Moscow in a black frame with straight sides, a curving profile and a narrow gilded strip at the inner edge (FIG. 6). Knowing *The Night Café*'s framing history was of interest in conceiving a new frame, but her primary intention was that a frame be created that more closely reflected van Gogh's framing preferences than had any of its known predecessors.

Designing or choosing frames for pictures of the Impressionist period and of the art that followed raises issues that rarely come up in framing works of earlier periods. As well as organizing and installing their own exhibitions, the Impressionists rejected the framing conventions of their time. Degas was an active and inventive frame designer and Pissarro took control, as much as the galleries would allow, in the framing of his work. Their framing innovations are well documented.¹⁵ Less well known, but discussed in reviews and correspondence of the time, were the framing innovations of Cassatt and Morisot. From the Impressionist moment forward, it was no longer

¹⁴ Meyer Schapiro, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹⁵ See Easton and Bark, *op. cit.*; and Mendgen, *op. cit.*

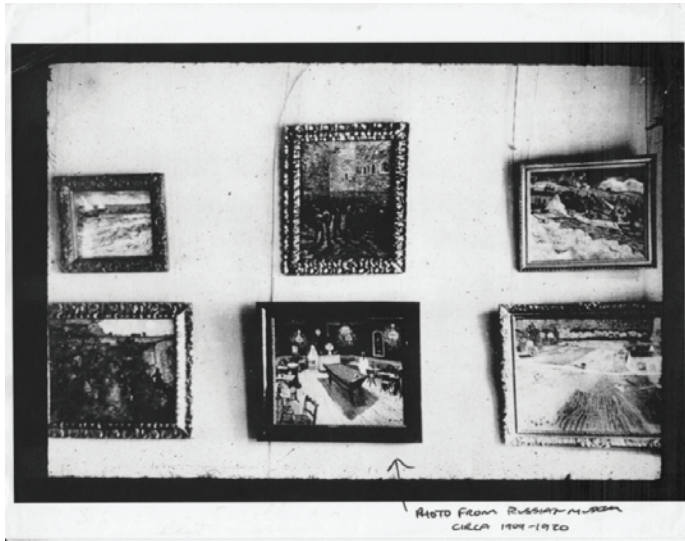


FIGURE 6. Museum of Modern Western Art, Moscow, c. 1918-20 showing *The Night Café* (bottom row, center) in a more austere frame than those of its neighbors.

unusual for artists to be actively engaged in designing frames for their work.

In the case of van Gogh, the artist created a written record of his framing experiments, commenting on those he found most successful.

In addition, there is the one extant example of a frame designed and painted by the artist, on the still-life referred to above (FIG. 2).

In taking on the design and making of a frame for *The Night Café*, there was no specific indication of how the artist would have presented the picture; there was guidance in his letters and sketches, to be sure, but that could lead to many possible interpretations. The design process doesn't constitute finding one solution to a puzzle; there are many potential frames. Above all, the frame must achieve a certain harmony with the picture, and must present it in its best light,

so that the work will be clearly seen and so that the frame does not call attention to itself. The frame we designed for *The Night Café* carries multiple meanings as well. It is evident that the frame is not original to the artist's time; it is of modern fabrication and was conceived with full knowledge of the artist's interest in frames; the designers of the frame made particular choices based on their interpretation of van Gogh's own practice and the demands of framing this specific picture.

After Ms. Gross visited our shop and looked over various wood samples and profiles with us, we decided to make some trial corners — simple and very dark or black. We designed four profiles

in several species: red oak (quarter sawn and flat sawn), pine, and basswood. We made several test finishes as well. Over the next few months, after extensive back and forth between us, Ms. Gross,

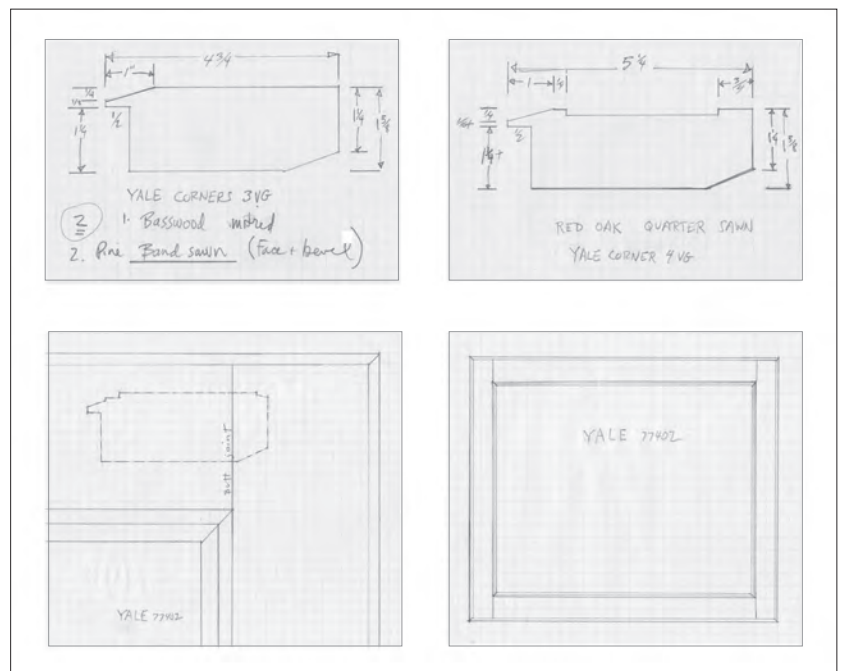


FIGURE 7. Shop drawings for *The Night Café* frame, Bark Frameworks. The drawings at the top are of two early profiles that were rejected. The one at the upper left is very similar to the frame on *Still-life with quinces, lemons, pears, and grapes*. The two bottom working drawings represent the frame as it was to be made.

and her colleagues, we added walnut to the selections (as noted above, van Gogh often used walnut for frames when he was working in Arles), experimented with band-sawn surfaces, and made butt joint corners as an alternative to mitered joints. All told we produced about a dozen corners before the design was set in all its details (FIG. 7). The realized frame is made of walnut,¹⁶ the front surface band-sawn, with mitered inner and outer profiles and a butt joint panel. After joining, the frame was stained with a water based stain and waxed so that it is virtually black.

We milled the moulding from walnut stock that had been sawn about ten years previously and set aside for a special project. To select the lengths from which the frame would be made, a number of boards were laid out on the shop floor. After the four lengths were chosen and marked out, they were re-sawn on a band saw as noted above. The lines of the band saw cuts are still visible in the surface of the wood since the boards were not planed or sanded.¹⁷

In several respects the framing choices we made reflect aspects of van Gogh's various framing notions: the use of walnut, whose figure and grain are apparent in the finished frame; a beveled inner edge; the raw wood surface; and above all, simplicity. Since the corners of the wide panel are butted rather than mitered (FIG. 8), the diagonal lines of miters don't interfere with the picture's strong assertion of perspective, as the center and corner cartouches of Clark's Louis XIV frame did.

“In taking on the design and making of a frame for *The Night Café*, there was no specific indication of how the artist would have presented the picture; there was guidance in his letters and sketches, to be sure, but that could lead to many possible interpretations.”

¹⁶ We used American walnut, similar to the European walnut with which van Gogh would have been familiar.

¹⁷ Jennifer Gross instructed us at one point “to vary the surface...It is too regular and mimics the floorboards in the painting.”

The picture was first exhibited in its new frame in 2009 (FIG. 9), where its new presentation was quickly recognized. As one New Haven writer wrote:

“Recently returned from loan to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, van Gogh's *The Night Café*” is not what it was — but there is no damage to report, only revelation. It has a new wall in a reconfigured space at the Yale University Art Gallery and the gilded pretension of its previous frame is gone. Jennifer Gross, curator of modern and contemporary art, has seen the painting in all its impossible clarity, and now we can too. This is not just a matter of restoring the piece to what the period of its making would have required, although it's that too. The real change is simply the muted gloss of the black wood that flings the furnace door of that infernal room wide open.”¹⁸

A painting in the Yale gallery by van Gogh's friend, Emile Bernard, also from 1888, is in its original frame and serves as a helpful reference for artists' frames from the period. Comprised of flat panels with a beveled inner band, the Bernard frame is similar to van Gogh's framing preferences. The pieces are butt-joined, and the entire frame has neither decoration nor carving to relieve its simple severity. And it suits this picture, *Night Festival* (FIG. 10), well. Like the framing of *The Night Café*, this restrained presentation allows the picture's radical artistry to be the primary focus of the viewing experience.

The installation of *The Night Café* in its new frame in 2008 has provoked considerable discussion and comment, notably in the *IFAR Evening* “What Frames Can Tell Us” in 2011, documented in the *IFAR Journal*. In his closing remarks, Laurence Kanter noted: “The issue is not what a van Gogh painting needs around it, but what it is that we are saying about the painting when we put one frame rather than another around it.”

There are many considerations that may inform the decisions of frame choice for a picture, such as

¹⁸ Stephen Vincent Kobasa, “Van Gogh Returns: *The Night Café* returns to Yale improved,” *The New Haven Advocate*, February 5, 2009.



FIGURE 8. Corner of the finished frame, showing the butt-joint panel and mitered inner profile.



FIGURE 9. The finished frame installed in the Yale University Art Gallery.

a collector's desire to have the picture blend with the décor of his home or to harmonize with the other pictures in his collection. A museum gallery is freed from the pressures of interior decoration, but competing agendas will influence framing decisions. Similar to a private collector, a curator might consider the harmony of the picture frame to others in the gallery. Or the choice might be to retain a collector's signature framing, as in the case of the Degas works in the Camondo bequest at the Musée d'Orsay. There are examples as well of curators re-framing a whole collection in a single frame style (as when William Rubin notoriously removed all the frames and replaced them with strip moulding at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984).

But framing a work by van Gogh presents a rare and propitious opportunity, for seldom do we have the benefit of the artist's written descriptions of the framing of his work. In this instance, there is a special privilege to be able to present the dark, brooding *The Night Café* within a border conforming to those about which the artist wrote with such clarity and emphasis. The resulting collaboration between curator and framer produced a frame that reflects the artist's intent. Beyond that, reframing such an important icon in the collection of the Yale University Art Gallery provides the university with a provocative alternative to conventional practice in the presentation of pictures. As such, it not only allows students to learn about the history of art

from the paintings in the collection, but also to become aware of the history of frames, of taste, and of the intentions of the artist in the presentation of his work.

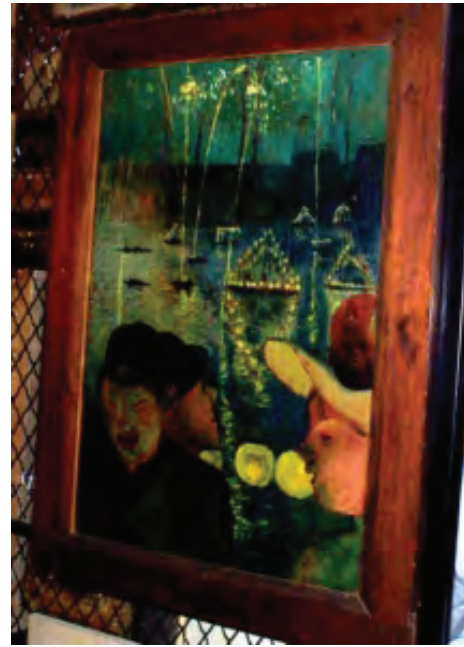
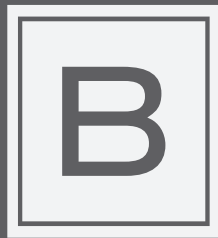


FIGURE 10. Emile Bernard. *Night Festival*. Oil on panel. Unframed: 87.6 x 59.1 cm. Yale University Art Gallery. 1972.120.1. Gift of Arthur G. Altschul.

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