

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Monday, April 27, 2015

The Challenge of Reframing the Whitney's Masterworks

Figuring out historically correct frames involved some detective work



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Bark Frameworks in Long Island City, a fine-art framer regarded for its historical research, was charged with replacing frames for several of the Whitney Museum of Art's important paintings. Here, an employee works on a custom frame in advance of the opening of the museum's exhibition, 'America Is Hard to See.' ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



By Andy Battaglia - Updated April 27, 2015 4:47 p.m. ET

When the Whitney Museum of American Art opens on Friday, the event will follow much deliberation over how to reframe its collection—literally.

In addition to building a gleaming \$422-million tower in the Meatpacking District and conceiving new practices as a museum for the future, the Whitney took on a smaller initiative to give 20 of its most renowned paintings—by Edward Hopper, Georgia O’Keeffe, Jasper Johns and others—new frames that are custom-designed, hand-crafted and as historically correct as possible. All will be part of the inaugural exhibit, “America is Hard to See.”



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Jed Bark, president of Bark Frameworks, and Eric Knutzon, Bark’s design director, discuss the reframing of some of the Whitney Museum’s paintings, including classics by Edward Hopper, Georgia O’Keeffe and Jasper Johns. ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



“We weren’t happy with the frames they had,” said Carter Foster, the Whitney curator who helmed the project to replace frames that clashed with pictures aesthetically or were of dubious taste. “Something like Edward Hopper’s ‘Early Sunday Morning,’ which is an icon of our collection, deserved a better home.”

The job went to Bark Frameworks, a fine-art framer regarded for its historical research. That background was needed given how few records the Whitney had about the artworks' original frames or even period-faithful profiles from the first half of the 20th century.

"Because the history is tenuous and evanescent, people grasp at straws," said Jed Bark, who began as a framer in SoHo in 1969 and built his namesake business into a large operation now based in Long Island City, Queens. Very few paintings remain in their original frames as they move through collections and as visual and decorative trends evolve, said Mr. Bark.



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Bark's Larry O'Brien with plans for the wood milling and construction of a new frame for Edward Hopper's 'Early Sunday Morning.' ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Even original frames, he added, might have come not from an artist's desire but from a dealer's arbitrary choice.

Some of the Whitney's frames were inappropriate for the subject matter—like the frilly gold one used for Thomas Hart Benton's 1948 "Poker Night (from A Streetcar Named Desire)," a dark, seedy scene of drinking and card playing.

“The mistake is usually over-framing,” said Mr. Bark. “If it’s important work, it gets gold—that’s a given.”

Other works were marred by regrettable alterations. Part of an otherwise fine frame around Everett Shin’s “Revue” (1908) had been painted black for reasons museum officials couldn’t discern.

‘The mistake is usually over-framing. If it’s important work, it gets gold—that’s a given.’

—Jed Bark, founder and president, Bark Frameworks

“We don’t have great historic records about frames, but no institutions really do,” said Mia Curran, a curatorial assistant at the Whitney. A goal of the present project is to fill those lapses.



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Frame samples for ‘Early Sunday Morning’ painting ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL
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To that end, the Bark Frameworks staff researched the Whitney's chosen paintings through old photographs and visits to other museums to see how similar works were framed. In the case of Hopper, three of whose paintings figured in the initiative, Mr. Bark visited collectors whose families were given works by the artist himself, to see how he chose to present them.

For "Early Sunday Morning," an empty street scene completed in 1930, they found a photograph of Hopper with the painting in 1953 and another, in a '60s-era Life magazine, of the work hanging in a former Whitney director's office. Both featured what looked to be the same frame, which was different than the more recent, less-flattering one.



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Ferid Agi hand finishes a frame for the Whitney Museum. ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"It had been reframed we think several times, with no reference to the actual image," said Mr. Bark. The most recent frame beveled at a soft slant back to the wall—"at odds with the quality of the picture, which is so frontal and filled with right angles in the sidewalks, the street and the rooflines."

Taking the photos of the original as inspiration, Mr. Bark and his design director Eric Knutzon made more than a dozen different frame samples for “Early Sunday Morning” alone. Together with Whitney staffers, they agreed on a design with a more assertive linear profile.

A few weeks ago, that frame was being crafted at Bark Frameworks’ 27,000-square-foot shop. Upstairs from the showroom, with the sound of saws buzzing all around, it sat in pieces on a table, awaiting further work.



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An employee sprays gesso, a chalk primer, on a frame at Bark. ADRIENNE GRUNWALD
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“We wanted different grains on all the wood, so we had to break it down into component sections,” said Larry O’Brien, a Bark employee who cut into the wood at different angles to achieve different looks. Asked for his title, he said, “I’m just the wood guy—no, the special miller.”

From there, the frame would move to a different area to be sanded and then treated with three separate finishes, to give it an ashy gray look and accentuate the soft, flowing variations in the grain.

The next stop would be the gilding room, where a small part of the frame would be layered with gold leaf, tiny pieces of which are laid on the frame individually and then wetted and smoothed with a burnisher made of agate stone.



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A frame for Charles Sheeler's 'River Rouge Plant' is gilded by Yelena Budylna.

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"They've been doing this the same way for centuries," said Mary Helen O'Brien, in the midst of work on another Whitney painting, Charles Sheeler's "River Rouge Plant." The gilding on that frame alone would take 30 hours.

The reframed works have now made their way to walls of the new Whitney.

One, another Hopper painting, "Railroad Sunset" from 1929, had been relieved of its misguided gold-leaf frame. "The gold was jarring with the intense colors of the sunset and deadened them in a way," said Mr. Bark, whose replacement is dark and dusk-like to emphasize what he called the colors' "vividness and aliveness—their burning fire."



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Wood supplies at Bark Frameworks. ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Clearly he thinks like an artist," Mr. Foster, the curator, said of Mr. Bark's work, which can be seen in other institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum, as well as the city's top galleries and collectors' homes. Prices at Bark Frameworks range from \$400 to \$25,000 for custom frames.

Peering at the work hanging on its new museum wall, Mr. Foster was pleased. "It's good but not our greatest," he said of Hopper's image. "This turned it into a better painting."