

Frames of Preference: A brief summary of the picture frames designed and used by Georgia O’Keeffe

Dale Kronkright, Head of Conservation, Georgia O’Keeffe Museum

Gokmconservation.org

dkronkright@okeeffemuseum.org

The exhibition installation photographs of O’Keeffe’s first solo exhibition in 1923 at the Anderson Galleries document the earliest frame profiles authorized by Georgia O’Keeffe. These frames were fabricated and finished by the Manhattan artist and picture framer George F. Of, whose shop was located at 126 West 57th Street, New York. Shown in the photos taken by Alfred Stieglitz is a flat face, “L” profile wood moulding with evenly rounded edges, gilded in 12K silver tone and also in a lacquered black finish. There were also frames executed using an Ogee moulding finished in 12K, and her now-famous “clam shell” moulding finished in 12K over grey bole as well as occasionally painted in black lacquer. A simple half-round face, bull-nose moulding, finished in 12K frame profile is also seen on several works. All of the frames included a sheet of glass to protect the works. There are extant examples of each of these four profiles in private and public collections, all with the order specification written in George Of’s handwriting.

One year later, the Stieglitz photographs of the 1924 exhibition demonstrate that all the frames appear exclusively in the 12K finish and that the clam shell and flat face profiles dominate, with the Ogee frame visible on only one work. While there are few Anderson-Intimate Gallery photos from 1925 – 1929, the flat face and clam shells are solely visible. Noteworthy is the fact that only the clam-shell profile appear in the frames of the 1930 American Place exhibition.

In the photos of the 1931 American Place exhibition, the clam-shell moulding again dominates, but two, stepped, rectangular, relief face profiles – today commonly associated with works by John Marin – can be seen on many of the New Mexico paintings. One work was presented in the Ogee profile and, for the first time, one work was installed in a narrow-faced, rolled “L” profile metal frame. The sides of the metal frame are painted to continue the designs and colors of the painting margins.

In the 1932 American Place exhibition, the pattern of clam-shell dominated frame profiles continued from the previous two years. Bull-nose, flat-faced and stepped-Marin styles are present, but the Ogee profile appears to have been absent. Also for the first time, O’Keeffe and frame fabricator George Of collaborated on an experimental way of supporting the weight of the glass within the clam shell frame by “wrapping” two clam-shell profiles in a bright sheet metal, one in chrome-plated copper (Horse’s Skull on Blue, 1931, catalog raisonné 776) and, somewhat later, one in brightly polished copper sheet (Black Mesa Landscape, New Mexico / Out Back of Marie’s II, catalog raisonné 730). Both these works retain these original “wrapped” clam shell frames today. There are no metal frames seen in the photos from the 1932 exhibition, suggesting that the metal frame profile remains experimental.

The photos from the 1933 exhibition at American Place exhibition include 5 works in the “L” profile metal frame in brushed chrome and copper finishes and two with matching-plated, sheet brass aprons around the frame. 12K finished clam-shell profiles and the stepped-rectangle “Marin” style frames remain on the works included in the exhibition from the 1920’s.

In the one extant Stieglitz photo from the 1934 American Place exhibition, bull-nose, metal, flat-face and clam-shell profiles in 12K dominate but a new profile is visible. This frame profile, installed on two abstractions painted by O’Keeffe 15 years before in 1919, (Black Spot No. 2 and Black Spot No. 3, catalog

raisonné 284 and 285), appears in the photos to be finished in white lacquer and has a broad, slightly scooped bevel rising from the wall to the site line and a slight scooped, inward tapering face.

In the Stieglitz images from the 1935 American Place exhibition, clam-shell profiles again dominate. In the photos, three metal frames are visible, as is a flat-face profile and two ogee profiles on large works done earlier in the 1930's. This indicates that the artist and her gallerist continue to vary and change frame profiles on some older works at public exhibitions.

In 1937- 1938, O'Keeffe employed George Of to surround the clam shell frame with various aprons of scalloped and punched sheet metal, some recovered as found materials. One such frame is featured in Ansel Adams' photograph, *An American Place*, 1944 and in the American Place 1937-1938 exhibition installation photos, (Lynes, *Catalog Raisonné*, p1128). In another metal-aproned frame style, two New Mexico works can be seen to have a steeply beveled, flat frame sides rising from the wall with a rounded-bead face site opening, possibly finished in 12K silver leaf with a brushed-chrome plated flat metal apron. For the 1938 exhibition, James L. Lane, writing in the magazine *Apollo*, notes that:

“In another respect the art of Georgia O’Keeffe is original. She designs her own frames, something in which she is not alone among painters, but she does more than that. She does more than that. She rummages around until she finds a piece of ormolu or bronze – say the fringe of an old table – of which she buys enough to frame one of her large paintings of steer skulls. She then employs a Russian (George Of) to work this motive out into a sort of filigreed, burnished apron beyond the real wooden frame... It was O’Keeffe, too, who developed most effectively for her flower paintings the silvered wooded frame, sized, with six different mouldings or curvatures”¹.

This brings the total number of known O’Keeffe/Of mouldings to eight:

- the flat face profile, 12K and black lacquer finished
- the bull nose,
- the clam shell, without and with found and formed plated metal aprons, in 12K and black lacquer,
- the ogee in 12K,
- the stepped-rectangle face in 12K,
- the rolled “L” metal (painted and plated, without and with found and formed plated metal aprons,)
- the scooped-broad bevel faced in white lacquer,
- and the broad bevel and bead in 12K,

Many original stretchers of O’Keeffe paintings have George Of’s handwriting in pencil, indicating “Stieglitz 4” and “O’Keeffe # 6”, and so on, indicating the artist’s original preference.

In 1940, when O’Keeffe displayed the Hawaii paintings for the first time, most were framed in the clam-shell profile in a 12K finish, indicating that the clam shell remained the preferred frame. One work was framed with the brushed chrome-plated L-profile with a plated apron. In the installation photos from the 1944 retrospective at the Art Institute of Chicago, O’Keeffe appears to have installed every work, large and small, into a clam-shell profile with a 12K finish.

¹ Lane, James W. 1938. “Notes From New York.” *Apollo* 27 (60): 209-11

As noted above, in 1931, a rolled metal, “L” profile frame was fabricated by George Of. The frame is used on *Black, White and Blue*, 1930, a work 48” x 30”. It is shown in the 1931 American Place exhibition photos by Stieglitz and there is obviously a sheet of glass in the frame over the work. Correspondence suggests that the weight of glass, which O’Keeffe insists upon having on every work in public exhibitions through the mid 1960’s, was cracking the thin wood of the clam shell frame rabbets and O’Keeffe and Of were looking for a sturdier, but minimal solution. In January of 1935, the *Springfield Daily Republican* newspaper, reporting on an interview with O’Keeffe reports:

“... she has found a way to protect her pictures. The first external problem is that of finding a frame which will support a large area of glass. Her pictures are for the most part large canvases. A wooden frame will support, because of its tensile strength, only a limited area of glass. Why not metal frames? A metal frame will support four times the area or two diameters as much glass as a wooden frame of similar size. Thus the beautiful chromium frames which have been a feature of O’Keeffe exhibitions for several years now are by no means precious or chi-chi. They are functional in that they serve a purpose essential to the artist.²”

As a further reminder of the importance of glass as protection for works on public exhibition, O’Keeffe instructs Edith Halpert in 1952, “please would you not have anything of mine sent without either glass or Plexiglas covering. They just get to (sic) ruined if not covered and even Mrs. Keck can’t fix them.”

Interviews with and published journalism about O’Keeffe also indicate that she is aware of the shadow that the clam shell frames are creating over her works while on public exhibition. Magazine interviews with O’Keeffe indicate that she is pleased that the metal frames had the distinct advantage of bringing the face of the painting nearly parallel to the glass, diminishing the shadow.

In the 1931 rolled brass “L” profile frame, O’Keeffe had the frames painted to match the designs and colors at the edges of the painting. This is a finish that she frequently repeats well into the 1950’s. The O’Keeffe Museum’s analyses of the paints on the frames suggest that the painted frames were not executed by O’Keeffe at the time the paintings within them are executed and may that they may have been painted by George Of, as he would have certainly been capable and trusted to do so. It is important to note, however, that this painted finish seems highly selective. From the accounts in magazines and in her correspondence to friends, including Arthur Dove and Helen “Reds” Torr, plating frames in brushed and bright chrome, copper and brass became a preferred appearance for the metal frames through the 1940’s.

Doris Bry began working for O’Keeffe in 1946 to help organize the archives left by Stieglitz at his death. In 1950 O’Keeffe employed Bry to begin to compile the “Abiquiu Notebooks”, O’Keeffe’s personal inventory of her work, creating an updated version of the inventory work initiated by Irvine and the Whitney in 1944. In 1950, Bry was instructed by O’Keeffe to sell all but 50 -60 of her works through Edith Halpert at The Downtown Gallery. In 1963, Halpert and the Downtown Gallery were dismissed as gallery agents by O’Keeffe and Doris Bry became O’Keeffe’s sole agent through 1976. Bry frequently arranged to have rolled brass, “L” profile frames fabricated for paintings being sold after 1963, and the metal frames became the dominant frame for works newly sold by Bry. There is every indication from the correspondence with conservator Caroline Keck that the shift to all metal strip frames reflected O’Keeffe’s preference by the 1950’s. In a 1960 letter from Edith Halpert to O’Keeffe, the gallery owner

² Lane, James W. 1935. “News Of The Art World: Georgia O’Keeffe Is ‘Practical’, Too.” *The Springfield Daily Republican*. Springfield, Massachusetts. January 16.

notes that Doris Bry is having Feather and Brown Leaf, 1935 (catalog raisonné 854) reframed in a metal frame, reflecting the artist's preference.

By 1947, through correspondence between O'Keeffe and conservator Keck, both were aware that the rolled metal frames, while holding glass well, left no room for paintings to be keyed-out in response to canvas stretch. Conservator Keck referred to them as O'Keeffe's "... g d metal frames, made to her satisfaction by George Of...but the bane of any future conservator." Several attempts appear to have been made to improve or refine the problems associated with the metal frames between 1931 and 1973. From 1931 to 1952, the metal frames were made and apparently painted and finished by George Of. Of fell ill in 1952 and died in 1954. In a letter to Edith Halpert in 1952 from Abiquiu, O'Keeffe wrote that she was going to have to find a new framer and O'Keeffe mentions "Lowe" and James Kelleber. In 1953, Edith Halpert writes O'Keeffe that several works have been framed by the frame fabricator H. Heydenryk, 141 West 54th Street, New York. In another letter from Halpert in 1954, Halpert advised O'Keeffe that the new "silver" frame design fabricated by the New York artist Peter Bayle, who owned the Costamp Metal Company 252 East 61st Street, New York, offered much better protection of the back of the work and that O'Keeffe should continue using this style. This framing system, similar to the rolled metal frames in appearance, used cast copper and bronze bar but integrated a heavy cast bronze bar backing with cross pieces, threaded in the ends to accept the frame side screws that formerly simply were wood-screwed into the sides of the painting stretcher. This sturdier and heavier backing system invented by Bayle suspended the painting between the front glazing spacer of the frame face and the backing system and supported the weight of the painting and glass without placing any loads on the keyable painting stretchers for support. Bayle could also provide the simple rolled and plated "L" profile brass frames in the manner that George Of formerly fabricated.

In a 1955 letter from O'Keeffe to Halpert, the artist asked Halpert to have a Calla Lily painting cleaned and varnished and placed into a copper-plated metal frame fabricated by Bayle. Bayle appears to then have become the frame manufacturer of choice from 1955 to 1973. In December, 1965 there is an invoice and notes from Dain Schiff picture framers on Madison Avenue to Doris Bry, noting that a brass frame is being stripped and repainted and that the wire glazing spacer is being re-fabricated, painted and that the new glazing is Plexiglas rather than window glass. In 1960, records show that Bry was purchasing Plexiglas for frames from Kulicke Frames, 508 East 73rd Street, New York.

In 1973, O'Keeffe began working with metal fabricator Clyde C. Honaker, 2819 Claremont N.E. in Albuquerque to fabricate off-white painted, rolled steel frames. In 1978, conservator Jean Volkmer, working for O'Keeffe, notes in her correspondence to a museum curator that O'Keeffe, Doris Bry and, now, Mr. Juan Hamilton prefer the thin metal strip frames to the original wood frames. Previously, in 1976, conservator Volkmer had indicated in a letter to Richard Madigan, Director at the Norton Museum of Art that the new metal frames provide far less protection than the old clam-shell wood frames that were O'Keeffe's preference previously. This further suggests that the original clam-shell frames of the 1920's to 1940's were being regularly replaced with metal strip frames at the time of sale in the 1970's when O'Keeffe was in her 80's and 90's. In 2010, Doris Bry related to O'Keeffe conservator Dale Kronkright that she had "dozens" of clam shell frames in her possession for paintings that had subsequently received plated metal frames.

Since 2006, the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum has reproduced the gilded flat-face "L", clam shell, stepped-face "Marin-Style" and Ogee mouldings in basswood. We also have reproduced the "L" profile frames in copper, brass, steel and aluminum. We have re-engineered our frames to include micro-environmental provisions to reduce the effects of vibration in transit and fluctuations in temperature and humidity.

This is especially important as stable moisture content seems fundamental to preventing the eruption and growth of lead ($2\text{PbCO}_3 \cdot \text{Pb(OH)}_2$) soap micro-protrusions and zinc oxide (ZnO) soap eruptions in works executed by O'Keeffe on commercially primed European linen canvases. We are currently working with the Art Institute of Chicago and Northwestern University on a study of these soaps in 20th Century modern paintings. The backing systems we have designed have closed cell, cross-linked polyethylene gasketing and conditioned silica gel sheet with dust-proof covers. Obviously, we no longer use glass as O'Keeffe instructed but are using Optium acrylic instead. Obviously, the frames can be used without the microenvironmental provisions, if preferred.

We fabricate these frames to fit works by O'Keeffe and others of the Stieglitz circle artists held by other museums and collectors. The Whitney, SFMOMA, Denver Art, San Diego and many other museums now have our micro-environmental frames on their O'Keeffe paintings and pastels, allowing them to archive the original frames and backings. We are working with these owners to carefully monitor the rate of Pb soap growth and deterioration in these frames as time passes.