

ITALIAN RENAISSANCE FRAMES AT THE V&A
A TECHNICAL STUDY



CHRISTINE POWELL & ZOË ALLEN

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ITALIAN RENAISSANCE FRAMES
AT THE V&A

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ITALIAN RENAISSANCE FRAMES AT THE V&A

By Christine Powell and Zoë Allen

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The Boulevard, Langford Lane, Kidlington, Oxford OX5 1GB, UK
30 Corporate Drive, Suite 400, Burlington, MA 01803, USA
525 B Street, Suite 1900, San Diego, CA 92101-4495, USA

First edition 2010

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN: 978-0-7506-8619-8

For information on all Butterworth-Heinemann publications visit our web site at books.elsevier.com
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Printed and bound in Italy

10 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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PHOTOGRAPHY & ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

PHOTOGRAPHY

Images of frames and images of tools and materials of gilding

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Frames 2, 4, 6–12, 15–19, 21, 23, 24, 25–27, 29–36

Ian Thomas, Photographer, V&A Photographic Department, V&A Museum, London

Frame 1 (front)

From VADAR (V&A Digital Asset Repository)

Frame 1 (back)

Victor H. Lopez Borges, Senior Sculpture Conservator, Conservation Department, V&A Museum, London

Frame 3

Colin Harvey, Photographer, Photographic Department, The National Gallery, London

Digitally edited for publication by Ian Thomas, V&A Photographic Department

Frame 4

Detail of inside return of right pedestal. Christine Powell, Senior Furniture Conservator, Conservation Department, V&A Museum, London

Frame 5

Richard Davies, Photographic Department, V&A Museum, London

Frame 13

Colin Harvey, Photographer, Photographic Department, The National Gallery, London

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Frame 14

Colin Harvey, Photographer, Photographic Department, The National Gallery, London

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Frame 17 (back)

Victor H. Lopez Borges, Senior Sculpture Conservator, Conservation Department, V&A Museum, London

Frame 20

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Frame 22

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Frame 28

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Frame 37

From VADAR (V&A digital asset repository)

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Annotated illustration of a tabernacle frame

Zoe Allen and Clare Johnson

Illustration naming parts of a frame

Zoë Allen and Clare Johnson

Digital image reconstruction image of Frame 21

Clare Johnson

Digital image reconstruction image of Frame 26

Clare Johnson

Annotated illustration of a Sansovino frame

Zoë Allen and Clare Johnson

Tables, charts and microphotographs in analysis

reports by Dr Brian Singer were supplied by

Dr Brian Singer, digitally edited for publica-

tion by Clare Johnson and Zoë Allen

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank Mr Timothy Plaut for the generous funding that made this book possible. His passion for, and appreciation of, Renaissance frames has been an inspiration. His generosity and continuing encouragement throughout the project were invaluable.

The authors also wish to thank:

From the V&A: Marion Kite (Head of Furniture Textiles and Frames Conservation); Ian Thomas, Clare Johnson, Christine Smith, Richard Davies, James Stevenson and Ken Jackson of the Photographic Studio; Victor Borges (Senior Sculpture Conservator), Tim Miller (Senior Furniture Conservator), Dana van Sabben (Furniture Conservator), Donna Stevens (Metals Conservator), Tom Barrow (Contract Frames Conservator), Peta Motture (Chief Curator, Medieval & Renaissance Galleries Project), Meghan Callahan (Kress Curatorial Fellow, Medieval and Renaissance Galleries Project), Melissa Hammett (Curator of Sculpture), Nick Humphrey (Curator of Furniture), Lucy Wood (Senior Curator of Furniture), Fergus Cannan (Collections Liaison Manager) and Dr Adam Bowett (V&A Research Fellow, British Academy Fellow: British Furniture)

From the National Gallery, London: Martin Wyld (Director of Conservation), Peter Schade (Head of Framing Department), Isabella Kocum (Frames Department), Dr Ashok Roy and Dr Helen Howard (Scientific Department), Astrid Athen, Colin Harvey (Photographic Department) and Carol Hambleton (Communications and New Media)

Satoko Tanimoto (Mellon Fellow, Department of Conservation and Scientific Research, British Museum)

Dr Brian W Singer (Senior Lecturer, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Northumbria University)

Dick Onians (Wood Technology and Carving Tutor, City and Guilds of London Art School)

Roy and Pat Thomson, for editorial assistance

The following individuals generously gave of their time, expertise and opinion: Thomas Knoell (antique frames dealer, Basel, Switzerland), Michael Gregory (Managing Director of Arnold Wiggins and Son, frames dealer), Olaf Lemke (frame restorer, connoisseur and antique frame dealer, Berlin, Germany), Lynn Roberts (artist and picture frame historian) and Achim Stiegel (Curator of the Furniture Collection at the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin).

Thanks also to Gerry Alabone (Head of Framing, Tate Gallery), Richard Hallas (Head of Framing, National Portrait Gallery, London), Caroline Tragett (Head of Framing, Guildhall Art Gallery, London), Stephen Sheasby (Head of Gilding Conservation, The Royal Collection, London), Jennifer Dinesmore (Conservator, Halahan Associates), Jürgen Huber (Senior Furniture Conservator, The Wallace Collection, London) and Hubert Baija (Head of Framing, Rijkmuseum, Amsterdam).

Christine Powell and Zoë Allen, London, 2008

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PREFACE

TIMOTHY PLAUT

In 1897, the Italian art dealer Michelangelo Guggenheim published a handsome series of plates illustrating 120 Italian frames of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹ No collection, with the exception of the stock of that magisterial Florentine mercato, Stefano Bardini, within Italy or without, was more richly represented than that of the South Kensington Museum.² Whilst Guggenheim's publication was not the first presentation of illustrations of Renaissance frames, it proved to be easily the most comprehensive and the one that has, in more than the century since its appearance, been recognised as best representing that apogee of late nineteenth and early twentieth century historicist interest in the decorative arts of the Renaissance as manifested in picture frames.³ For this volume to have singled out a dozen exempla housed in what is now the Victoria and Albert Museum underlines the importance of this museum's collection.

It is the Italian frame of the Renaissance, untrammelled by the standardisation of canvas sizes and the imposition of canons of ornamentation that came to characterise France and England in the course of the seventeenth century, that represents both the font of the disengaged frame and, far and away, its most exuberant range of decorative forms.⁴ With Louis XIV's commission to Charles le Brun in 1660 to standardise stock designs, the picture frame starts to lose something of its autonomous aesthetic life.⁵ As a result, the claim can be made with confidence that no period in European frame history has seen a comparable corpus of architectural and sculptural forms come into existence, to say nothing of the range of surface treatments and ornamental play, as was the case in Renaissance Italy.

Research into the genesis, commissioning, manufacture and range of Italian Renaissance frames, overwhelmingly a German and Italian domain from the late nineteenth century until it became a broader pursuit in the course of the last few decades, was able to identify two phenomena that indicate the importance attributed to those picture frames utilised for fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian sculpture and painting.⁶ The first indication lies in the number of highly prominent painters – including Fra Angelico, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Pontormo, Leonardo and Raphael – who designed frames or painted upon frames for their own panels or canvases. A second indication emerges from the sheer number of frames either signed or in which contemporary records secure the name of the master frame maker.⁷ These included sculptors of the standing of the de Maiano family.⁸ Far from being viewed as a menial craft, the carver along with the gilder were regarded as essential to the formation of a spatial border and context for the enclosed panel or canvas.

Today's perspective is deceptive. It was the eighteenth century that saw the emergence of the artist or name frames (Canaletto, Longhi, Lely, Wright, Morland, Whistler, Pissarro, to name a few).⁹ The nineteenth century witnessed dual depredations of the picture frame. Firstly, the triumph of the standardised and uniform gallery frame. This practice was initiated in Mannerist Florence in order to stamp a degree of homogeneity upon the hanging of the Medici collection in the Pitti Palace. In the course of the wave of foundations of national picture galleries before and particularly after 1800, this movement was the occasion for the greatest

single destruction of original frames as paintings were rehung in especially commissioned, consistent and formulaic new forms.¹⁰ Secondly, the Industrial Revolution served to commodify and bastardise the art of frame making.

As with the decorative arts as a whole, the post-Vasari world has been characterised by a diminution in the standing of the frame maker and, with the prominent exception of that most visionary of all nineteenth century museum curators, Wilhelm von Bode, a degree of indifference towards original frames in the public hanging of old master paintings.^{11,12}

The preceding three decades have been characterised by a modest reversal of this trend. A number of prominent museums have curated exhibitions of their key original frames: Munich's 'Italienische Bilderrahmen des 14.–18. Jahrhunderts' in 1976; the Rijksmuseum's 'Prijst de lijst: De hollandse schilderlijst in de zievendiende eeuw' in 1984; the Art Institute of Chicago's 'The Art of the Edge: European Frames 1300–1900' in 1986; the Metropolitan Museum's 'Italian Renaissance Frames' in 1990; Berlin's 'Schoene Rahmen: aus den Beständen der Berliner Gemäldegalerie' in 2003 and Copenhagen's Statens Museum's 2008 show 'Frames: State of the Art'. The V&A has yet to show its singular collection of Italian Renaissance frames, although some from this volume are exhibited in the Medieval and Renaissance Galleries. This inclusion is welcome, for as Philippe de Montebello noted, Italian Renaissance frames are now appreciably rarer than paintings, sculpture, drawings or any other comparable category of object from the period.¹³

It is the intention of this publication to bring to light a body of significant frames from this Museum's rich collection of Renaissance *objets d'art*. The authors should be commended for

their fine documentation of the collection. In so doing, they recall an earlier era of scholarship in the European decorative arts at the Victoria and Albert Museum, one exemplified by Hayward and Thornton in furniture, Rackham in ceramics, Wigfield-Digby in tapestries and textiles, Ward-Jackson and Reynolds in Prints and Drawings and John Pope-Hennessy in sculpture.

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3. Julius von Falke. *Sammlungen des K. und K. oesterreichischen Museums fuer Kunst und Industrie; Abteilung Rahmen*. Vienna, 1892; Julius Lessing. *Rahmen, Vorbilderhefte aus dem koeniglichen Kunstgewerbe-museum zu Berlin*, Volume 1: *Italienische Renaissance* and Volume 2: *Italien und Deutschland XVI Jahrhundert*. Berlin, 1888. Alexander Schuetz's *Die Renaissance in Italien: Decoration in Holz*. Hamburg, 1882, deals mainly with architectural ornamentation but includes a number of photographs of significant wooden frames of the period. Adalbert Roeper's *Bilder- und Spiegelrahmen von Albrecht Duerer bis zum Rokoko*. Leipzig, 1897, was published in the same year as Guggenheim's volume.
4. Louis Sambon refers to the frames of the Italian sixteenth century '... debordant de sensualité, a librement mis dans des bordures des tableaux tous les motifs de stylisation dont il disposait.' Louis Sambon, *Exposition de cadre ancien*. Paris, 1924. p. 2.
5. Timothy Newberry. *Frames and framing in the Ashmolean Museum*. Oxford, 2002. p. 16.

6. On the rather thin scholarly or curatorial literature pertaining to the history of frames, see Jacques Foucart. *Etude critique de l'encadrement. Revue de l'Art*, 76, 1987. p. 8.
7. It was the contribution of Burckhardt's pupil, Elfried Bock, in his doctoral dissertation *Florentinische und venezianische Bilderrahmen aus der Zeit der Gotik und der Renaissance*. Munich, 1902, to initiate the collation of attributions of particular frames to particular craftsmen, based in large parts on contemporary records, notably Vasari. What is striking is how little subsequent research has been pursued on this topic, so that many of the names of frame makers from the Quattro- and Cinquecento still hark back to Bock's work: Bartolomeo da Settignano, Giuliano da Sangallo, Baccio d' Agnolo, Jacobo de Faenza, Antonio Barile, Andrea di Pietro, Giacomo and Giuliano del Maiano. See F. Conzen and G. Dietrich. *Bilderrahmen, Stil Verwendung, Material*. Munich, 1983. p. 50.
8. Renato Baldini, et al. *La cornice Fiorentina e Sienese*. Florence, 1992, p. 14. Patrizia Zambrano observes how in the Quattrocento the articulation of a language of tabernacle frames was inseparable – in development and often in person – from the emergence of architecture and sculpture at the highest level; see her essay in Franco Sabatelli. *La cornice italiana dal Rinascimento al Neoclassico*. Milan, 1992. p. 27.
9. Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts. *A history of European picture frames*. London, 1996. p. 13.
10. Marilena Mosco has documented the original seventeenth century reframing projects of the *Medici in Cornici dei Medici: La Fantasia Barocca al Servizio del Potere*. Florence, 2007, while Tobias Schmitz's *Analyse und Bewertung gegenwaertiger Rahmungsmaßnahmen ausgewaehlter Museen*, PhD Dissertation. Bonn, 2002, touches on the substitution of original frames in the nineteenth century German museum world in particular.
11. A recent analysis of the initial rupture along the lines of purportedly intellectual rather than manual pursuits between painting, sculpture and architecture on the one hand and the other visual arts on the other around the formation of the Accademia del Disegno in 1563 has been provided by Marina Belozerskaya. *Luxury arts of the Renaissance*. Los Angeles, 2005. Chapter 1.
12. The most detailed recapitulation of Bode's programme of reframing the Berlin collection, particularly in the case of the Italian Renaissance paintings, with original frames bought over a number of decades, is presented in his *Die Ausstattung der Gemaelde im Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum mit alten Rahmen*. In *Amtliche Berichte aus den koeniglichen Kunstsammlungen*, Berlin XXXIII, No. 9, June 1912. Bode published a number of further essays on the topic, of a less programmatic character, conceived rather as contributions to the nascent art historical enquiry on the topic, of which the earliest was his *Bilderrahmen in alter und neuer Zeit*, in Pan, Berlin, 1898.
13. In his Foreword to Timothy Newberry et al., *Italian Renaissance frames*. New York, 1990. p. 8.

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INTRODUCTION

The V&A holds an important collection of Italian Renaissance carved, painted and gilded tabernacle, cassetta, Sansovino and tondo frames. Those featured here represent the majority of this collection and date from the mid-fifteenth century through to the end of the sixteenth century. All are of Italian origin with the exception of one thought to be French and one thought to be Flemish. The V&A also has examples of nineteenth century Renaissance style frames, some of which are included for comparative purposes.¹

The ideal way to build a more complete picture of a frame's origin is to combine art historical knowledge with technical examination. With this in mind, information is provided on the original materials and techniques used to make frames. This is followed by a discussion about how an understanding of deterioration and alteration of frames combined with scientific analysis can be used to inform the process of authentication.

Each of the frames examined has an individual entry, including images of its front and back. Examination of the rear of a frame can reveal construction, hanging devices, alterations, labels and inscriptions. Additional photographic details offer insight into the nature of the surface decoration and emphasise the sculptural and decorative beauty of these frames. Detailed dimensions of all the elements of a frame are included together with profile drawings. The sight size, rebate size and object accommodation size are given, as these may enable a frame to be linked to the object for which it was originally designed.

In each entry, a description of the structure and decoration enables the original appearance of each frame to be described and later additions and alterations to be identified. In some cases, digital reconstruction has been used to give an impression of how the frame would have appeared without alterations. Each entry also contains a description of ornament

using terms from architecture and framing nomenclature. The description of ornament helps to navigate around the frame and identify the parts described when discussing the materials and techniques. Annotated illustrations of frame types and a glossary are provided to aid the reader.

According to Bisacca and Kanter, 'Very few frames can be independently documented to a time or a place, and fewer still to a particular artist or artisan. Only a small number of surviving frames remain together with the object they originally contained and of these only a fraction are still visible in their original context ... having been removed from the sites they were intended to embellish'.² Most of the frames in this volume were acquired by the Museum in the nineteenth century. The majority were acquired as decorative art objects in their own right, while a few came with paintings and sculptural reliefs that were not original to the frames. Since acquisition, some objects have been removed from the frames with which they were acquired.

It is hoped that this volume will facilitate the comparison of frames from public and private collections with those at the V&A. Recognition of similarities of style, material and technical characteristics may allow more detailed attribution of frames. The images, illustrations and the descriptions of finish and structure of the frames in this publication will add to the broader knowledge and understanding of the subject and will assist curators, collectors, conservators and frame makers.

References

1. Information on frames at the V&A can be found at www.vam.ac.uk
2. Bisacca, G. & Kanter, L. *Introduction to Italian Renaissance frames*. Exhibition Catalogue. New York: Metropolitan Museum, 1990. p. 30.

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PART I
RENAISSANCE MATERIALS AND
TECHNIQUES

A BRIEF BACKGROUND TO RENAISSANCE FRAMES

The widespread demand for both religious and secular images during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries resulted in a growing market for frames to house them. Painted or sculpted images of Christ, the Virgin and saints adorned every altar, and both traditional and new forms of altarpiece required framing solutions. Christian imagery was also not just confined to the church, but was found in a variety of public and more intimate settings. For example the small relief with Eve on the base, that was originally part of a triptych Frame 9 (6867-1860), probably belonged to a woman who would have used it in her devotional practice at home or perhaps when travelling. In addition to prompting devotion, such images often carried talismanic associations. In fifteenth century Florence, for instance, Fra Dominici suggested that an image of the Virgin and Child should be kept in every bedchamber as an example. Virgin and Childs were also set up on street corners as neighbourhood protectors.¹

These Madonnas often took the form of sculptural reliefs made of terracotta (fired clay) or stucco (a type plaster), which were then painted and gilded to create colourful and naturalistic images see Frame 4 (57:2-1867) and 7 (93-1882). One of the advantages of these materials, which were cheaper than stone or marble, was their malleability, allowing them to be cast in moulds to produce replicas of the same scene. Although little is known about workshop practice, it is clear that such reliefs were reproduced widely: a vast number of Virgin and Childs survive, testifying to their popularity and significance. Five frames in this volume still contain what appear to be their original sculptures.

Tabernacle frames were used to house many of these religious subjects. Sansovino, tondo and cassetta

frames were also used in this way, but equally housed secular images, such as the portraits and mythological scenes that increasingly decorated public buildings and the homes of the nobility and growing merchant classes.

Although many of these sculptures or pictures and their frames were commissioned, Renaissance artists also produced a stock of uncommissioned works to sell.² It is also possible that they kept a supply of the separate elements needed to make the frames, such as lengths of uncarved mouldings and a selection of moulds for ornamental cast work.

Research has suggested a close relationship between painters and wood workers.³ They were employed to produce or decorate a range of images and objects, from altarpieces and portraits to candlesticks and furniture.⁴

Thus comparisons can be drawn between the materials, techniques and practice used in the fabrication of altarpieces, panel paintings, furniture and related objects of the time and those used on frames.

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3. Gilbert, C. Peintres et menuisiers au debut de la Renaissance en Italie. *Revue de l'Art*, 37, 1977. pp. 9–28; Newbery, T., Bisacca, G. & Kanter, L. *Italian Renaissance Frames Exhibition Catalogue*. New York: Metropolitan Museum, 1990. Dunkerton et al., op cit. pp. 122–141.
4. Dunkerton et al., *ibid.* p. 122.

WOOD

Definitive identification of wood usually requires microscopic identification of anatomical features and typically requires a cubic centimetre of sample to be removed from the object.¹ Such interventive sampling was considered inappropriate for this project, particularly for the smaller frames. Identification of the hardwoods listed in the frame entries was therefore based on visual examination of gross anatomical characteristics.² Accretions or coatings often obscure the characteristics required for identification and limit the accuracy of visual identification. Softwoods, for example pine and spruce, are relatively easy to distinguish from hardwoods but cannot reliably be distinguished from each other without microscopic identification. Whereas walnut and oak have distinctive characteristics that are visible to the naked eye, lime and poplar can be difficult to distinguish from each other by eye alone. In some instances, both woods are suggested in the frame entry, with the most probable wood listed first.

Woods used by Italian Renaissance frame makers and craftsmen are discussed elsewhere.³ Mitchell suggested that the identification of species of wood used in frames can, as for furniture, be an important guide to a likely region of origin. Analysis of woods in seventy Italian frames in a 1976 exhibition suggested that Venetian frames were generally made of pine or fir with fir backs. Florentine frames generally had walnut for carved mouldings, as well as poplar and lime, with poplar or pine back frames, whereas in Bologna and Naples poplar was normally used.⁴ Woods found on the V&A frames include the following softwoods and hardwoods.

Softwoods

Found on the back of several frames, softwoods have distinctive early and late-season growth rings

that produce alternating soft pale and harder dark stripes in the wood.

Hardwoods

Poplar (*Populus* spp.) is a creamy white to pale brown, medium-density and comparatively lightweight timber. It is straight grained with a fine uniform texture. Poplar was an abundant, relatively cheap wood in Italy. Its texture made it a suitable substrate for painted and gilded decoration. White poplar (*Populus alba*), which grew to a size from which large planks could be obtained, was the wood most commonly used for panel paintings.⁵ Poplar was observed on many of the frames and was used for structural work, simple mouldings or carving.

European lime (*Tilia* spp., principally *T. vulgaris*) is a pale yellow wood that turns light brown on exposure to light. It is soft and has a fine uniform texture that makes it an excellent wood for carving detailed and delicate work. Lime was observed on the more intricately carved parts and front mouldings on some of the frames.

European walnut (*Juglans regia*) is a chocolate to grey-pink brown medium-density timber, in which dark streaks and patches are often observed. The sapwood is pale in contrast to the heartwood, which fades when exposed to sunlight. Walnut has visible growth rings and a medium texture. Italian walnut is paler than English. Walnut was valued for its rich colour and was generally used where its appearance could be seen and appreciated. It is good for carving and was often partially gilded, as seen on Frames 20 (7694-1861) and 23 (682-1883).

Fruit woods, such as pear or plum, were sometimes substituted for walnut, either because their

particular colour and texture were preferred or simply because they were more readily available.⁶

Pear (*Pyrus communis*) is typically a pinkish-brown colour with a straight grain and a fine, even texture. Pear was thought to have been used for the finer detailed carving on Frame 10 (1079–1884).

European oak (*Quercus robur*, *Q. pedunculata*, *Q. petraea*, *Q. sessiliflora*) is yellowish-brown, with light coloured sapwood. It darkens with age. It is generally straight grained but varies with growth conditions. It has a characteristic coarse grain, and distinct growth rings with alternating zones of open-pored early wood and dense late wood. Distinctive broad silvery rays are present in quarter-sawn material. Oak is very rarely encountered in Italian frames. The two frames made of oak are thought to be French (Frame 12, 649-1890) and Flemish (Frame 27, 1605-1855), partly for this reason.

Tools

Renaissance craftsmen had an extensive range of woodworking tools, similar to those found in specialist carving, framing or cabinet-making workshops today. Olga and Wilmering provide a detailed account of woodworking tools used in Renaissance Italy.⁷

Wood Finishes

Oils, varnishes and stains were in use in the sixteenth century to adjust tone, to enhance colour or to give a shiny or matt finish to wood. Juniper resin, walnut and linseed oil have been mentioned as ingredients for varnishes.⁸ Original wood

finishes can be difficult to distinguish from varnishes and waxes applied during later repairs and restorations.

Wood had been left deliberately exposed on Frames 20 (7694-1861) and 23 (682-1883), which are sixteenth century partially gilt walnut. A stain, wax or varnish may have been applied to enhance the colour of the wood on these frames.

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7. See Olga, R. and Wilmering, A. *The Gubbio Studiolo and its conservation*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001. pp. 43–59. This section is rich with illustrations of tools and their use.
8. *Ibid.* pp. 40–42.

METHODS OF CONSTRUCTION

Most Italian tabernacle, Sansovino and cassetta frames were made of a joined back frame that formed a rigid structure onto which the decorative elements, for convenience called the front frame, were applied. The back frame usually consisted of four wooden members, two vertical sides and a horizontal top and bottom. The wood used for the back frames was smoothed flat, although not highly finished. The back frames utilised simple joints such as the corner bridle or T-bridle joint, which were sometimes pegged through (*cavicchio*). Alternatively, a lap or halved joint (*mezza piolla*) was used.¹ The keyed dovetail half lap was also found. Larger parts of the decorative fronts of the frames were usually butted up to each other and fixed on to the back frame with glue and nails. Butt mitre joints were used for the corners of the sight mouldings.

Mouldings

The sight edge mouldings, whether integral or applied, were mitred at the corners. Other running mouldings, for example the cornice moulding applied to an entablature, were shaped in lengths, cut to size, mitred to fit the frame and then fixed with glue and nails.

The profiles of the moulding most commonly found on the frames were:

- Astragal: a small semicircular moulding, sometimes ornamented by bead or reel
- Cavetto: a concave moulding of more or less quarter round profile
- Cyma recta, or ogee: a moulding of S-shaped profile, concave over convex
- Cyma reversa, or reverse ogee: a moulding of S-shaped profile, convex over concave
- Fillet: a small, flat component, rectangular in section, separating one moulding from another

- Ovolo: a convex elliptical or quarter round moulding
- Quirk: a small channel or recess between mouldings
- Torus: a large convex moulding, sometimes called a round, generally used in column bases.

Tabernacle Frames

In most cases, regardless of size, the front frames of the tabernacle frames were constructed following architectural models, with separate parts for pediment, entablature, capitals, columns or pilasters, plinth and predella. Imposts and pedestals were often made from additional pieces of wood with vertical grain, as opposed to the horizontal grain direction of the main parts of the entablature and predella to which they were fixed. Running mouldings, and the frieze relief could be integral or applied and were often mitred at the corners. In contrast to this model, Frame 11 (7820-1861) utilised half lap joints and did not have a back frame.

Sansovino Frames

The front frames of the Sansovino frames were generally made up of four main pieces. Like the tabernacle frames from which they were loosely architecturally and structurally derived, the sides were butted between the top and bottom pieces, relying on the joined back frame to which they were attached for stability. The corner-mitred sight edge moulding was integral or applied.

Most of the Sansovino and tabernacle frames used a single depth of wood for the main parts of the carved front frame. Where this was not the case, additional wood was added to create a thicker dimension. Smaller pieces of wood were often

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