Far more paintings survive than their frames, and the more sought-after an artist, the more likely his or her work changed hands—the frame replaced by each new owner. A picture and its original frame were nearly destined to part company as collectors reframed works to suit personal taste, complement domestic interiors, or visually suggest the high price of the canvas. "When people think of a very nice frame, they tend to think of an ornate Louis XV-style affair, with audacious gilding and dramatically carved elements," says NCMA Frame Conservator David Beaudin. "They may think it worthy of any fine work of art." But setting a younger painting in an older frame, or vice versa, not only places the work in the wrong historical context but can interrupt a painting's complete expression or overwhelm its composition.

In some cases, even an original frame might not be the best match. Claude Monet, for example, consistently delivered his paintings to his Paris dealer unframed, giving him carte blanche in selling the works. The dealer often intimately knew the homes of Monet's well-heeled clients and framed his paintings to suit buyers' preferences. As a result, many Monets are found in frames that better complement the earlier, more traditional European paintings in their collections than the modern aims of impressionism.

"We're very lucky if a work arrives in a historically accurate frame that reflects the painting's aesthetics," says Curator of European Art David Still. Art museums are always faced with the challenge of finding a suitable frame or leaving what is there for protection until the right mate is found.

Such was the case with one of the NCMA's most popular American works, Frederick C. Frieske's The Garden Parasol (1910). Although it appeared to have been made for the painting, its scale was appropriate to the work. Its 1960s-style commercial gallery frame had a wide linen gauze that both Curator of American Art John Covery and Beaudin felt created a "dead space" between picture and surround. Although it is hard to detract from the pleasure of the artist's lush garden scene, a historically complementary frame would present the proper window through which to fully appreciate this surpassingly beautiful example of Frieske's art.

After some research, Beaudin found the perfect match in a Washington, D.C., gilder's shop: an antique 1908 American frame handcrafted by one of the most revered frame shops in the country, Carrig-Rohane, founded in 1903 in Boston by accomplished painters and artisans Hermann Dudley Murphy and Charles Prendergast. The only setback was that the frame was too small.

Because so few antique frames survive, or those that do may not fit a painting, museums commission replica frames, if the right model can be found. Beaudin directed the project, taking into consideration Frieske's composition and the painting's rich color. "Two important decisions had to do with the frame's scale and gilding tone," says Beaudin. "The painting is very warm, so we didn't want the gilding to exactly match or compete with that." He chose a lemon-gold leaf for the finish, about 18 karats, a little less than the more common 22-karat leaf. And he used the size of Sarah Frieske's face—it is the artist's wife who sits under the dazzling parasol—to determine the width of the frieze. "One can't always establish an adequate, or a complementary, molding scale by the size of the central figure's face," says Beaudin, "but in this case that formula worked quite well."

Beaudin felt that reframing The Garden Parasol in a faithful Carrig-Rohane replica was particularly appropriate because Frieske completed the painting at a time when American frame making was truly coming into its own, not merely copying European styles. Creating novel forms using time-honored techniques (the process of water gilding, for instance, hasn't changed much since its invention in ancient Egypt), Hermann Dudley Murphy developed what is now widely considered the classic American impressionist-style frame. He reintroduced the 19th-century Venetian cassetta form—a wide, flat frieze bordered by inner and outer moldings—and updated it with narrow, subtly carved corner decorations, just like those seen on The Garden Parasol's new frame.

Murphy also took inspiration from American expatriate James McNeill Whistler and other artists of the day who began designing (if rarely producing) their own frames, understanding the frame as an extension of its painting. The English artist and aesthete Dante Gabriel Rossetti put the finishing touches on his paintings only after they were mounted in frames he carefully designed. Elevating the frame to a work of art, Whistler even went so far as to sign the front of some of his frames with his famous butterfly monogram and was known to take a painting back if he learned an owner had reframed it.

Proud of his craftsmanship, Murphy, like Whistler, signed his frames with a cipher (an encircled M and stamped the words Carrig-Rohane (Irish for "red cliff") on the back of his creations. Though no such cipher or stamp appears on the back of the NCMA's Carrig-Rohane replica, Beaudin feels confident the influential frame shop would highly approve of The Garden Parasol's new setting.

Next time you visit the 19th-Century Gallery, containing many of the NCMA's impressionist works, take another look at Frieske's resplendent depiction of an idle summer afternoon. Using The Garden Parasol's new "home" as a point of reference, see if you can spot in the same gallery an original Carrig-Rohane frame surrounding a lovely landscape by another engaging American artist, Willard Leroy Metcalf.

Karen C. Kelly, Preview Editor

The reframing of Frieske's The Garden Parasol and other American paintings in the Museum's collection has been made possible by a generous grant from the Henry Luce Foundation, Inc.

For conservators' advice on framing fine art, visit www.ncartmuseum.org; click Collections, Conservation, and Display.
ABOVE: Conservator David Beaudin carefully examines The Garden Parasol’s frame before setting the painting in its new home.

TOP RIGHT: Renowned American architect and gallant of the Gilded Age, Stanford White designed gorgeous fine art frames in his spare time, claiming to have never taken payment for his efforts. A favorite frame designer of John Singer Sargent, White also designed frames for the paintings of his close friend Thomas Wilmer Dewing, like the one shown here on the NCMA’s Winged Allegorical Figure (about 1888).

BOTTOM RIGHT: Once the NCMA’s portrait of Eleonora de’ Medici was beautifully restored, Beaudin was faced with how to properly dress it. Employing the same techniques and tools a Tuscan frame maker would have used in the 16th century, he hand carved a replica portrait frame, smoothing the wood with shards of glass in lieu of sandpaper and polishing it with natural beeswax. On view in the European Gallery.