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Cornice and Cornice: Italian Debates around Picture Frames

Flavia Crisciotti

Whether one is referring to the crowning element of a building or the frame of a painting, the word *cornice* is used to describe it in Italian. Architraves, entablatures, friezes, ledges, moldings, picture frames — all belong to the domain of *cornice*. The reciprocal relationship between these objects is such that, when looking at a picture frame like that enclosing



Paolo Veronese's *Feast in the House of Levi*, one can legitimately consider it as an architectural component. ^{fig. 1} The director of the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Gino Fogolari, intuited this intersection between frame and cornice when, in 1924, he envisioned the display of the *Feast* and ordered the assemblage of architectural fragments into one huge, continuous piece together with the painting: an architectural cornice above a painted arcade. The resulting cornice evoked the original setting of Veronese's masterpiece in the refectory of Santi Giovanni e Paolo in Venice, spanning the entire width both of the canvas and the room (12.9 meters). In this way, the scale of the picture frame and the entablature merged into each other — they became one. But not until architect Carlo Scarpa was this equivalence consecrated and brought into the limelight in much more direct language. In Scarpa's remodeling of the Gallerie dell'Accademia, the cornice not only took a step toward acculturating the viewer to Renaissance aesthetics but went further and created a dialogue with the modern setting. Scarpa placed little emphasis on the artifact itself, concentrating instead on its interactions with the room. For example, he eliminated the wooden boiserie, thereby lowering the hanging height of the painting. This downward shift also detached the architectural cornice from the ceiling of the room, revealing that it was a later addition. Mounted at eye level, the pictorial space of the *Feast* came into the realm of the spectator.

This is what Erika Groth-Schmachtenberger captures so well in her photograph of the arrangement: the visitors seem to move freely in and out of the painting; they are all invited to the banquet.

Scarpa's strategy for displaying the other canvases was to replace the lavish frames with narrow, plain profiles. The aim was principally to give the interior a uniform impression and draw attention to the art collection. The old frames, largely classified as ornament or antiquarian imitation, were relegated to storage. That framing might be discarded in interiors had been established a decade earlier in various architectural magazines, such as *Quadrante* and *Casabella*. The prominent director of the Istituto Centrale del Restauro, Cesare Brandi, had continued the argument by questioning the function of frames. By the mid-1940s, critics and historians tended to place great emphasis on the physical display of art in exhibitions. To expect a radical reframing or even a de-framing project in the Gallerie dell'Accademia was therefore not unreasonable.

However, the rule of rejecting all old frames a priori would be proven by the exceptions. The prominent presence of the frame of Veronese's *Feast* clearly shows Scarpa's appreciation for the piece. Another similar instance was the frame of Titian's *Pietà*, a sixteenth-century ceiling cornice that was reconfigured to match the format of the masterpiece in the 1920s. What the two artifacts fundamentally shared was the evolution from cornices to picture frames:

both were conceived architecturally and ended up adorning canvases. Here the notion of *cornice* — and its oscillation between cornice and frame — returns. One might surmise this semantic richness is why the two artifacts, albeit manipulated and ornamental, continued to inhabit the 1946 arrangement.

Neither the origins of an object in the collection nor the multiple meanings of *cornice* would have been unknown to Scarpa. Educated at the Academy of Fine Arts, and thus familiar with the



history of art and architecture, Scarpa made the cornice the backbone of his work and his lectures in Venice. He often brought “closing elements,” such as the “cymatium” or the picture frame, to the attention of his own students. But he did not isolate the





issue of frames as a topic. Instead, this was a matter that his contemporary Franco Albini addressed in the 1950s. For the latter, the picture frame was not an object but the site of interaction between a work of art and its setting. In Albini's eyes, the term *cornice* took on a broad range of meanings, from the mounting mechanism via the aura of the painting to the architectural framework.

Like the frame, the cornice also attracted increasing attention both in architectural magazines and practice. In 1952, the architect and editor of *Spazio*, Luigi Moretti, reassessed the value of moldings in a series of articles published in his magazine. Similarly, the editor of *Casabella*, Ernesto Nathan Rogers, engaged in a definition of ornament. The architect Franco Minissi contributed to this discussion when he made a spectacle out of the display of cornices from the ancient Falerii Veteres temple in the Villa Giulia, the national museum for Etruscan art. fig. 2 Installed on a white metallic grid, the cornices could be seen twice by museum-goers: first from the ground floor, as they appeared in situ; then from a new, intimate perspective, from a first-floor bridge that crossed the double-height room. Looking more closely at the fragments led to a distorted experience of scale in which the cornices could have been either crowning elements of a building or picture frames.

This shift in the perception of the term had already been anticipated in Albini's arrangement of the Palazzo Bianco from 1949 to 1951. A photograph

shows the Flemish Old Masters floating in the museum interior. ^{fig. 3} The mediator between them and the setting is no longer an adorned frame but a technical device. Apparently disconnected from the wall, the canvases are anchored at two points to a metallic picture rail. Following the long vertical lines of the cables from the painting to the ceiling, however, one discovers a stucco cornice. In strong contrast with the sobriety of the interior, the cornice, with its exquisite marine details, attracts attention to itself as much as to the collection. If architecture had become the frame of the frameless paintings, the architectural cornice had become an object on display in its own right.

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fig. 1 Frame of Paolo Veronese, *Feast in the House of Levi*. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice. Arrangement by Carlo Scarpa; photographer: Erika Groth-Schmachtenberger, 1953/1960
Source: Image 14.227/11, courtesy of Bildarchiv Foto Marburg / Erika Groth-Schmachtenberger

fig. 2 Cornices of the Falerii Veteres temple, Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome. Arrangement by Franco Minissi; photographer: unknown
Source: courtesy of Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia. Archivio Fotografico

fig. 3 Mounting mechanism of the Flemish Old Masters, Palazzo Bianco, Genoa. Arrangement by Franco Albini; photograph: Paolo Monti, 1970
Source: Creative Commons