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A Picture Frame by J.E.H. MacDonald

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FIGURE 1. J.E.H. MacDonald, *Wild Ducks*, 1917, 51³/₄" × 63¹/₄". Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre.



FIGURE 2. J.E.H. MacDonald, *Wild Ducks*, detail of corner showing carved frame of white pine. Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre.

Little attention has been paid to the identification and documentation of picture frames designed and carved by Canadian artists.¹ We know of a frame by Henry Sandham of the late 1870s;² its "rugged quaintness" was judged in "excellent taste" by a contemporaneous critic who considered that it "assisted in no small degree the general effect" of the

picture.³ From the catalogue of an exhibition held in May 1899 by the auctioneers C.J. Townsend of Toronto, we learn that Lucius O'Brien "added the instinct of a decorator" to "the feeling of an artist" and that "he carefully considered the design of every frame in relation to the picture it encloses. How far he succeeds in this will be judged by the present exhibition." However, this does not necessarily indicate that O'Brien designed his own frames.

The sketchbooks of J.W. Morrice in the Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal, contain numerous designs for frames. William R. Watson records that Maurice Cullen carved simple and elegant frames out of chestnut wood.⁴ Two other Quebec artists, Jacques de

¹ I am greatly indebted to Mr. Charles Hill of the National Gallery of Canada for having told me about the sketchbook and for providing the photographs of the drawings; to Dr. Percy Waxer for permission to reproduce the drawings; and to Mrs. Frances K. Smith, Curator of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, for her help and for permission to reproduce *Wild Ducks*. The photographs of the frame and the enlarged detail from it were made by the Photographic Services of the Art Gallery of Ontario.

² The frame was made for Sandham's diploma picture *Beacon Light, Saint John Harbour*, 1879, which is in the National Gallery of Canada. See S. Pantazzi, "A Canadian Picture Frame," *Canadian Antiques Collector*, X, 6 (Nov.-Dec. 1975), 53-54.

³ Arthur J. Graham, "The Ontario Art Society's Exhibition," *Rose Belford's Canadian Monthly and National Review*, V, 1 (July 1880), 99.

⁴ William R. Watson, *Retrospective* (Toronto, 1974), 34.

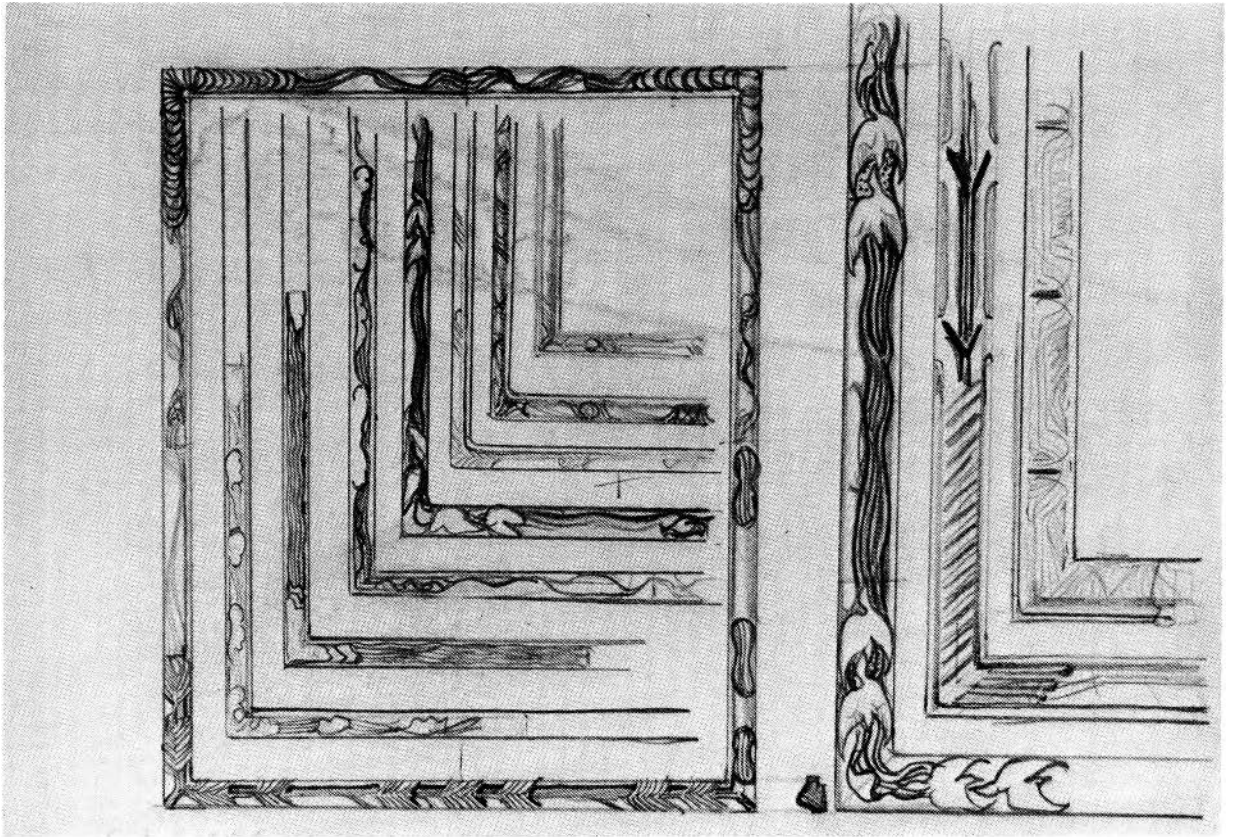


FIGURE 3. J.E.H. MacDonald, *Frames*, pencil drawing from sketchbook, ca. 1915–20, 9¹/₄" × 7¹/₄". Toronto, Collection of Jessie and Percy Waxer.

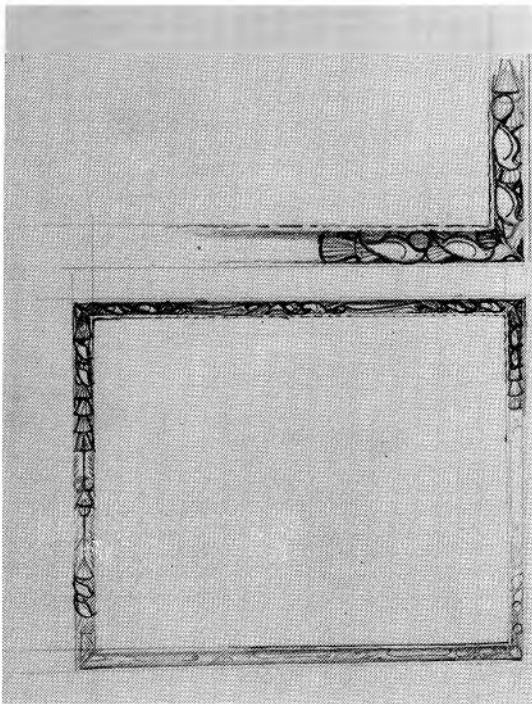


FIGURE 4. J.E.H. MacDonald, *Frames*, from sketchbook. Toronto, Collection of Jessie and Percy Waxer.

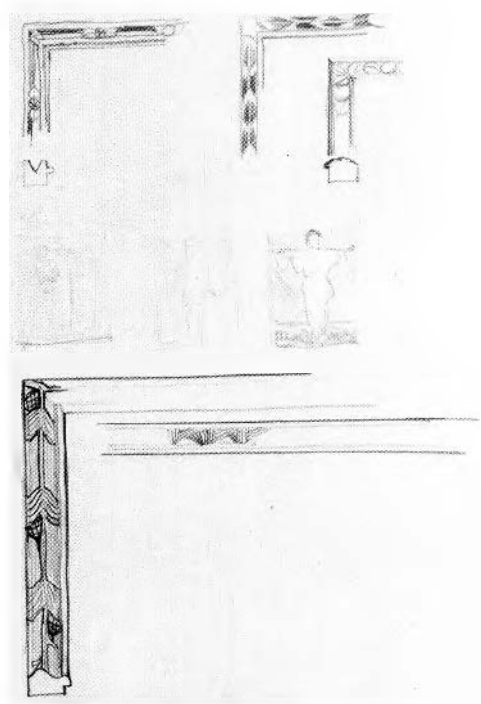


FIGURE 5. J.E.H. MacDonald, *Frames*, from sketchbook. Toronto, Collection of Jessie and Percy Waxer.

Tonnancour and Gabriel Filion, are known to have made their own frames; the latter had a picture-frame business, "La Boutique," in Montreal.⁵

It is hoped that the accompanying illustrations documenting a frame designed and carved by J.E.H. MacDonald will stimulate research and lead to the discovery of further examples of this form of applied art by members of the Group of Seven and other Canadian artists.

MacDonald's frame for his painting *Wild Ducks*, 1917 (Figs. 1, 2), is one of several designed by him. On one sheet in a sketchbook of ca. 1915–20 in the Jessie and Percy Waxer Collection, Toronto, are two versions of the *Wild Ducks* frame, one small and the other enlarged (Fig. 3). On two other sheets are seven more designs for frames, one of which has a bird motif (Figs. 4, 5).

The rhythm of the repeating motif of stylized ducks

linked by wavy lines (symbolizing water) is not unlike that of certain designs by MacDonald for book decoration.⁶ The rough carving of the white pine, which is painted brown and varnished, is reminiscent of Indian carvings.

Thoreau MacDonald confirms that his father "designed and made many of his larger frames 21 × 26 inches to 48 × 60 inches." He adds that "unlike many artists, my father was very good at manual work both wood and metal."⁷ From the same source we learn that "most of the framing for the Group was done by A.J. Boughton,⁸ a very capable person and a friend of the artists."

A remark made about Dante Gabriel Rossetti (who designed some beautiful and original frames) could also be applied to J.E.H. MacDonald: "He took the question of workmanship in the frame as seriously as in the canvas."

*Art Gallery of Ontario
Toronto*

⁵ J. de Tonnancour, Agnès Lefort, and Gabriel Filion, "A Symposium on Framing," *Canadian Art*, XIII, 1 (Autumn 1955), 205-209.

⁶ See, for example, the endpapers for Pauline Johnson's *Legends of Vancouver* (Toronto, 1922), reproduced in the *Bulletin of the National Gallery of Canada*, IV, 1 (1966), 16.

⁷ Letter to the author, dated 18 February 1976.

⁸ Alfred J. Boughton, gilder, 104 Eaton Avenue, is listed in the Toronto City Directories for 1915–20. His stamp reads "Alfred Boughton / Picture Frames . . . Toronto." In the MacDonald sketchbook discussed in this article there is a note that reads "receipt from Boughton, Mar. 13, 1916, 58 frames."