

Transforming the Aesthetic Appreciation of Paintings

An Interview with Eli Wilner,
Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Eli Wilner & Company

EDITORS' NOTE A former William Cullen Bryant Fellows member of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, Eli Wilner serves as an American Art Forum and Director's Circle member of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC. He holds a BA in fine arts from Brandeis University and an MA from Hunter College of the City University of New York.



COMPANY BRIEF Founded in 1983 and located on Manhattan's Upper East Side, Eli Wilner & Company (www.eliwilner.com) is internationally regarded as a leading dealer, restorer, and collector of 19th- and 20th-century European and American frames. The firm, which employs 26 master craftspeople, has restored and replicated antique frames for a variety of prestigious auction houses, institutions, and museums over the years, including Sotheby's, Christie's, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, and the White House.

Has your business been affected by current economic conditions?

My business focuses entirely on the billionaires of the world, so I was surprised at how slow June was for us. However, January through May were extraordinary, and we are 64 percent ahead of last year, year-to-date, so we're having a phenomenally good year. We have upped our staff to 40 employees, and we have opened up several new areas of interest to our clients.

How critical to your success is your relationship with the museums, and how do you work to build those relationships?

The museums are extremely important to us. From a personal perspective, it's important to me because I love being able to see the work I've done up on their walls. Something new we've done this year is to collaborate with museums throughout the country on a gifting program. We try to help museums that don't have funding. We have just restored approximately 20 frames for the New-York Historical Society and loaned them about 30 frames for their current exhibition. So I'm reaching out to institutions that don't have deep pockets, but making sure that our name and their names are intertwined. The consciousness of curators

has grown tremendously, and they all want their exhibits to look their best.

How has art-buying evolved over the years?

There are two levels of art-buying. In the contemporary world, the buyers are voracious, buying from art dealers, art fairs, auction houses – they have advisors combing every source imaginable. In the Old Masters world, the auctions are still the leading purveyors because they have access to great examples. Plus, in the

Old Masters world, people gravitate toward high-quality paintings they believe will withstand inflationary times ahead, making art an alternative investment vehicle. Even if people love art and they truly feel like they're collectors, there is a part of them that wants to know that in 10 or 20 years, they can resell the art or gift it at a much higher value than what they paid for it.

Do people understand the value a frame can provide?

The trendsetters, who are the museum curators, museum directors, and auction house department heads, are extremely aware that frames transform the aesthetic appreciation of paintings. The collectors, on the other hand, are just beginning to understand it. So the good news for my business is that I have decades of growth ahead of me as the information filters down.

Are you happy with the scope of your collection?

I'm extremely happy with the collection. We probably spend two hours per day actively searching for frames, and we place about 100 ads per week countrywide searching for frames. The results have been very good in this environment. People need money, so we have been able to locate some wonderful frames. I've also shifted the business a tiny bit. It has always been my intention, since the supply will run out eventually. Right now, at least half our business is in the construction of replica frames, where we use our frames as a library source and make nearly identical copies of them. We're able to lead in this area because of the inventory I've built up and the craftspeople I employ.

Have your clients' needs and expectations evolved?



Contemporary art has grown tremendously, so we created a unique way of framing de Koonings and Jasper Johns that has never been done before, utilizing ancient frames as models, but simplifying them and coming up with finishes that are extremely unique. We also teamed up with a group to sell fiber-optic lighting because many people have extremely valuable works on paper that have to be protected from light sources. This fiber-optic lighting does not emit any infrared, heat, or ultraviolet. We're also using a special kind of glazing that is shatter resistant, has no reflection, and protects the artwork from ultraviolet light. In addition, we've been asked to install collections on yachts, on planes, and in people's homes, and we have done more of that recently than in the past. Another growing segment is the restoration of frames belonging to museums and private collectors. These are all small segments, but they add up to quite a lot of business at year's end.

Are the multimillion-dollar frames and paintings your niche, or do you serve a broader market?

We're focused. We are the leading framer in the world, and I want to continue that. Your entire organization suffers if you start diluting your focus and taking on more projects than you can handle comfortably. One of my competitors now has a turnaround time of 18 months. My normal turnaround time is several weeks at most, and sometimes as little as overnight if I can make it happen. So we just keep on adding employees and growing the business, because one thing our clients want is immediate gratification.

Are you surprised by the success you've experienced since starting the business 25 years ago?

I started this business with \$6,000 in 1983, and I had one employee. I wonder how this thing evolved. I wish I'd kept a diary because it's an amazing transformation. We've now framed almost 10,000 paintings, many of them in institutions. On some spiritual level, I've made the world a more beautiful place by framing these works of art. ●

Dora Maar au Chat, by Picasso, in a frame by Eli Wilner