

elements of a frame." The service has been used by curators at the White House and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

On Paris's Right Bank, Amedeo Montanari, usually seen sipping a glass of champagne while choosing a border for a Matisse, Cezanne, Gauguin or Picasso, is unlikely to play with the elements at all. He will not restore an antique frame. Specialising in frames from the 15th to the 18th century, he prefers to leave them in the condition in which they were found - for philosophical reasons.

"It's the quality of the object that matters. The frame to me is like a painting," he says. "In each frame there is a story. Not one piece is like another." He will only concede to cleaning a frame before adding it to his collection.

Montanari's gallery displays frames in glass cabinets or mounted precisely on the walls, like precious works - which they often are. There are frames made of tortoise shell and of ebony and ivory, and others featuring alabaster medallions painted with religious or pastoral scenes and set into 17th century carved surrounds.

Looking pleased with himself, and immensely proud of his collection,

Montanari sweeps you through 15th century Venetian frames, Spanish, Dutch and Flemish samples, then through the Italian Renaissance and the reign of Louis XIII. He asks whether a collection this fine could be found anywhere else in the world. Probably not, which may be why the Louvre - which has its own framing department - often uses Montanari as a source for framing its masterpieces.

Frames of this quality come with a hefty price tag - a 17th century Venetian tabernacle frame costs FF170,000 (£15,900/\$23,200), an Italian 16th century carved and gilded frame about FF200,000 - and it is sometimes difficult to find the exact size of frame to suit your painting.

Montanari will make adjustments to size if the frame lends itself to discreet changes of dimension, but you get the feeling he would prefer to cut down a Renoir.

■ *Amedeo Montanari*  
*Artcadre* (+33 1 47 03 93 56).  
*From early December the shop will move to: 8 & 19 Rue de Miromesnil, Paris 75008* (+33 1 49 24 07 42 and +33 1 44 51 97 81).

■ *Eli Wilner and Company*,  
*1525 York Avenue, New York*  
(+1 212-744 6521).

■ *The Lacy Gallery*, *203 Westbourne Grove, London W11* (020-7229 6340).