
The Art of **Framing Art**


A basic guide to professional picture framing techniques
for the uninitiated

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The Art of Framing Art
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 Okay, so you've just purchased a nice print or painting...now what? Well, if it hasn't already been framed by the artist, that's your next job - visit a framer who has the expertise to frame the work properly. Here's some basic information on what's involved.

FIND A FRAMER

First you need to know that, just as in every other facet of life, there are good framers and there are not-so-good framers. Personally, I'm a fan of the small "Mom and Pop" shop rather than the chain poster/frame stores you see in the malls. Based on my own work experience as a "framer's assistant", the family-owned frame shop is often in a better position to give your job the attention to detail that it deserves.

It goes without saying that the framer you choose should know archival framing techniques, which is the main focus of this article.

If your print was shipped to you rolled, carefully remove it from its tube and let it "relax" in a safe place for a few days. If the art is on paper and was shipped flat, keep it safely in its packaging until you can get it to the framer.

WORKS ON PAPER

Limited edition prints and original works on paper (regardless of medium) should always be matted and framed under glass or plexiglas (acrylic glazing). Unlike cheap posters, they should *never* be dry-mounted or otherwise permanently adhered to any kind of backing as this will destroy their value (and create other problems as well). The pre-

ferred method of mounting these pieces is to hinge them to an acid-free backing “board” (such as archival Fome-cor or rag museum board) using acid-free linen tape. The tape hinges are at the top only and allow the work to hang freely within the mat and backing “sandwich”. All papers and wood react constantly to the humidity in the air; they need to be able to expand and contract freely. This movement is imperceptible but very important. Any kind of dry-mounting or gluing prevents this and buckling or wrinkling is the likely result. Some framers may have slightly different approaches, but as long as the art is allowed to “float” as above, it should be fine. Avoid any framer that insists on anything else.

PICK A MAT

One of your tasks - with the help of your framer - will be to pick a mat or a mat combination (two or more colors) for the art. The mat is a sort of “window” that surrounds the art. It not only complements the piece, but serves to separate it from the glass or plexiglas. When picking a mat, the number one rule is...forget about matching the sofa! Your goal is to pick a mat and frame combination that complements the art without being a distraction. If you accomplish this, the art will look great no matter where you hang it. If you concentrate on matching your decor, the final framing job won't complement the art or the room it's hanging in. It will simply look out of place.

Your framer will probably have oodles and oodles of mat corner samples. The two major companies that manufacture matboards are Crescent and Bainbridge. I am most familiar with the Crescent line - they are the ones I use in framing my own work. (Nothing wrong with Bainbridge, I just don't have room to store that many more colors in my

little “framing room” downstairs.) Their “regular” boards are not considered acid-free all the way through. However the white surface on the back of the board (that actually comes in contact with the art) is acid-free and promises a long life of decades (although I can’t give you an actual figure).

In the last several years an increasing number of matboard colors (but not the full selection) have been made available in an acid-free version - for about twice the price of the “regular” board. This is a huge advance over the previous museum matboards; it used to be that the only acid-free boards available were whites, beiges, and creams - the natural color of the rags they were made from. (The old term for acid-free papers and boards was “rag board”, as they were made from cloth - not wood pulp.)

AESTHETICS

Mats should be cut with the top and sides the same size, and the bottom should be 1/4” to 1/2” deeper. This compensates for the peculiar wiring of the human brain which sees the “visual center” of an area a bit higher than the actual center. If the bottom of the mat is the same depth as the top and sides, it will actually appear to be 1/4” to 1/2” less. (Weird, huh?) Like the art, the mat should be tape hinged to the backing board at the top only, so that it too may “move” freely within the frame.

Prints are normally matted so that 1” - 1-1/2” of white margin shows around the image. (The bottom margin might be a little deeper if the print has been remarked.) Leaving too much margin visible will be distracting, however. In the case of original art (say, a watercolor painting), the mat should overlap the image by about 1/4” all the way

around. This ensures that no gaps or raw edges of the work will show in the mat window, leaving a nice clean look.

PICKING A FRAME MOULDING

After you've picked a mat, then you need to choose the wood or metal moulding that is the actual frame. I can't offer much advice here - the number of choices offered by your framer will seem overwhelming. They range from plain and simple to carved and ornate; they come in finished wood, gold or silver gilt or even colored metal. (Just as an aside, one of my jobs as a "framers assistant" was to "flyspeck" mouldings according to the wishes of the customer. We used to joke that we had highly trained flies that could "speck" your frame in any color you wanted!) Generally, because you will have 2" - 3" of mat surrounding the art, you will want a narrower moulding than you would choose for an oil painting that doesn't require a mat.

GLAZING

I do not recommend "non-glare" glass. First, it still "glares", just in a different way from plain glass. Secondly, it creates a diffusion that makes it hard to see the detail in the art or print, especially when used with a double or triple mat. And third, it's very expensive.

I know a lot of purists insist on glass rather than plexiglas, but I really don't see much advantage to glass. It breaks easily (and can damage the art in the process) and is very heavy. Acrylic is light weight and just as clear as glass. To the best of my knowledge, it's just as archival as glass. Show committees insist on it. Its major disadvantage is that it scratches easily. You should never clean plexiglas with Windex or similar glass cleaners;

these will eventually cloud the surface. Look for a non-ammonia cleaner or one that's specifically formulated for plastics.

HANGING

A good frame shop will even provide the hook to hang your art with. When you get your work home, make sure that the hook is nailed into a wall stud. Otherwise, use a molly-bolt in the wallboard. If the piece is especially wide, two hooks will be required. Never hang any artwork in a location where it will receive direct sunlight. Lightfastness of various pigments and materials has improved greatly over the last few decades, but it's still best to hang all work in indirect light. If you want to "feature" the art on your wall, consider getting one of those small picture lights to mount over the artwork. Many frame shops sell these as a convenience to their customers.

WORKS ON CANVAS OR PANEL

Framing an oil or acrylic painting on canvas or panel is a simpler proposition than framing a work on paper. No mat or glazing is required; you only need to pick a tasteful frame. The artist should have coated the painting with a protective layer of appropriate "varnish" for the medium. Oil paintings need to dry for 6 months or a year (really!) before receiving a final varnish; but a preliminary layer of "retouch" varnish offers good protection.

Because there is no mat, paintings generally demand a much wider moulding to look good. You might think about using a burlap or linen liner moulding as an accent. A good framer will have lots of options here.

IT'S A CUSTOM JOB

I suppose I should mention price...no doubt about it, good framing is expensive. That's because your framing job is unlike any other - it's one of a kind. The mats are custom cut, the frame "package" is assembled by hand. Some shops even color and finish the raw moulding for you - and let's not forget that stable of highly trained flies! But the end result, if it's carefully crafted by a framer that knows his or her business, is a well-preserved artwork that will be enjoyed for generations.