
Mat Design – Basics & Fundamentals

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You've gotta love picture framing! Picture framers have a unique profession, because their primary objective is to "create visual pleasure" or in other words - "make our world a beautiful place"!

For those new to the framing industry, the concept of mat design methods & techniques can be a bit tricky. However, there are some basic fundamentals which can guide one to tasteful mat design every time. This article will touch on some of those basic areas to help offer an overview on the concept. So let's start at the beginning -

So, what is a matboard? – Put simply, a matboard is the coloured piece of decorative cardboard that typically surrounds an image inside a frame, which is under glass.

Where did the concept of a matboard come from? - The original concept of "the matboard" was created during the Italian Renaissance (in the 15th century), when artists needed a practical folder for transporting and protecting their drawings and artwork on paper. This was before the concept of actually framing the paper artwork was ever considered. Initially, these "matboard presentation folders" served only a practical purpose, providing strength & protection to the valuable document within, however artists and art buyers soon discovered that the matboard could also be decorated to highlight the artwork stored within. Eventually (centuries later), these matboard presentation folders were displayed behind glass inside a picture frame.

Why is the edge of a matboard cut with a bevel? – This little mystery is a universal design feature of all matboards and has a couple of theories behind it's origin. One theory is that a bevel is used to help eliminate any distracting shadowing close to the image being viewed. Another theory is that it is a tradition followed through from the 15th century, when artists realized it was easier to cut a mat fallout at a bevel, rather than square (perpendicular), especially with considerably blunter implements than what we have available to us today.

What is the purpose of a matboard? - Today, the concept of a matboard within a frame serves a few purposes:

1. **Protection** - To support & protect the artwork. Most don't realise that one of the most important purposes of protection is to provide a safe space between the artwork and the glass. No artwork should ever come into contact with the glass, because even minor environmental changes can create condensation and moisture buildup on the surface of glass, which can then damage the artwork if it is in contact. Even if one chooses to frame an image without a matboard, provision will still have to be made by a professional framer to space the artwork away from the glass.

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2. **Focus** - To help the viewer to focus correctly on the image. I'm sure that you have all seen instances of a small artwork being effectively matted by relatively large space being created between the frame and the image. Determining the correct proportion of matboard can ensure the attention is drawn to the art, and the right level of balance between the image and the frame itself.
 3. **Enhance** - To enhance the artwork within its environment. No one can disagree that a framed image with a mat looks much better than one without. This article will cover the area of mat design – which is how one can provide the most suitable level of enhancement for their image.

Before we talk about mat design, let's step back first and look at "the bigger picture" of overall frame design (pun intended!).

Basic Frame Design

When it comes to overall frame design – disregarding cost, there are basically two directions one can head in determining the best way to enhance an image. The frame design can either be determined to specifically suit the image, and highlight features and colours from within the image, or... the currently fashionable approach is to choose a design which compliments or matches the décor of where the image will be presented (ie: furniture, curtains, bedspreads, etc). This helps create a theme. Of course, one can also create a design which represents a fusion of these two directions as well.

There are a few hardcore traditionalists that still believe the "one and only" way to design a frame for an image is to strictly adhere to the timeless principles of using off-white matboard and a gold frame, with no regard for the décor. However, most of these conservative framers are obsolete "baby boomers" who are now either retiring, or experiencing a huge downturn in business – because the current design trend of complementing the décor is now becoming the primary factor of consideration by today's consumer. This trend is driven by the powerful tastes and spending dollars of the new "Generation X" consumer, who is overtaking our previous "Baby Boomer" consumer market.

Basic Mat Design

The purpose of mat design is to create harmony and balance between the artwork, the frame, and the surrounding decor.

There are some basic areas, to ensure a good design -

Balance - The mat should balance the colour between the frame and the image. Balance is a combination between colour and distance. An unbalanced mat design could draw a viewer's attention away from the image. Ultimately, the image should "feel comfortable" in its surrounding design elements.

Enhance – The matboard should enhance and compliment the artwork, but never be “stronger” than the artwork. The golden rule to remember is “The mat should never “dominate” the image”.

Proportion – There are no set formulas for the border width of a mat, other than it should comfortably separate the image from the hard edge of the frame. Most images will appear “constrained” or choked in a frame which is too close. As a result, one should never use less than 30 mms as a minimum border width for mats. Anything less will be unflattering to the artwork – in other words – it will look cheap. If an image is relatively small, then try going really wide on the borders. Smaller images are “flattered” by wider mats and mouldings.

Double Mats – Double mats are common, and easy to design. It is also commonly recognised that a double mat will always highlight an image more effectively than a single mat. Usually, the typical conservative approach to a double mat design is to use a soft, muted colour as the top mat, and a bright, “accenting” for the bottom mat, with only a small reveal of 3-6mm. One might like to reverse the formula of “bright colour” on top, and “soft, muted” underneath for a more modern or contemporary effect?

Triple Mats – Taking the double mat formula even further, one can use a triple mat design, where the middle mat colour is typically chosen as an “in between” balance of colour between the contrasting top mat and bottom mat.

Mat Colour Choice - The choice of colours can be influenced by many factors. Colour themes in matting may be monochromatic (variations on one colour) complementary (from opposite sides of a colour wheel) or contrasting (strong outside mats).

Following fashion, one could also use the design trend of introducing a colour or texture in surrounding décor, to create a suitable harmony where the image will be displayed. Because these are two different directions in design (to either suit the image or suit the décor) , it is always critical to discuss these options and directions with the client, and find out what they would prefer.

In considering the conservative approach – in order to draw a viewer’s attention to the image, the choice of colours should create an effective “visual tunnel”. This means that design elements which are further from the image (ie: outer mats) should be lighter, duller and offer less contrast, whilst the closer design elements (ie: inner mats, mat decorations, fillets) should become increasingly brighter, with more contrast and intensity.

Rectangles?

Historically - 95% of all matboards have been rectangular - but this trend is starting to change due to the recent introduction of computerized matcutters. It is now becoming more popular to see new mat designs incorporating ovals, arches and multi-sided polygons, especially in “multiple opening collages”. The rectangle

however will always be the dominant basic shape due to the fact that most frames are constructed rectangular as well.

Multiple Opening Mats

A matboard with more than one opening is commonly used to help display a collage of images all relating to the same theme or "story". It is a current trend for today's consumer who likes to "tell a story" with their choice of framed artworks on their wall, so the popularity of multiple opening mats has dramatically increased over the last 5-10 years. This trend co-insides with the dramatic increase in popularity of computerized matcutters, which help make this previously difficult task simple.

Weighted Bottom Mats

Many centuries ago, artists discovered an illusion of visual perception that whenever an image was framed and matted with borders of equal width – the bottom border appeared to be narrower than the other three, when the framed artwork was viewed at eye level on a wall?

As a result, it is commonly acceptable to see an image framed with a "weighted bottom mat!".

This illusion is even more noticeable when pictures are hung higher up on tall walls. So if you know the framed image is going to be hung in a house which has high ceilings (ie: Victorian style houses), then it is probably best to use a weighted bottom mat.

So, how much wider should the bottom border be? – Well, there are those that like to refer to Fibonacci's golden section of 1:1.618 (as recently made famous to readers of "The Da Vinci Code") as the proper formula to use for calculating this difference. However, there is really no hard & fast rule as to how much difference one should create between the bottom border and all other borders, but most agree that generally 10-25% wider at the bottom is acceptable.

Weighted bottom mats are also frequently used on artwork where part of the bottom border shows the artists signature is under the image (eg: watercolours, giclees, limited editions, etc). In this case, it is also a rule to reveal some of the white boarder around the other edges of the print. Further to this, it is also a general guideline to allow the top and side borders to remain equal width, while the bottom can be approximately 20-30mm wider than the other dimensions.

A few definite exceptions to the "weight bottom" mat would be as follows -

- when the artwork is square, the integrity of the squareness wants to be maintained
- when there is a "reveal" for an artists signature (ie: limited edition giclee), that requires a reasonable proportion of the artwork's border exposed under the image.

Fillets

A fillet is a common mat design feature which is a thin timber moulding that can line the inner edge of a matboard inside a frame. Fillets are also usually gold and/or ornate. A fillet can help "formalise" an image to give it a touch of warmth, and the fillet is usually used in combination with a frame which offers a matching highlight or edge as well.

Creative Elements

There are many elements of creative mat design such as ornate corners, French matting, deep bevel mats, hand carving, gilding, fabric wraps, etc, but most of these would warrant their own article.

However, creative mat design is recognised by consumers as a sign of a framers creativity and skill. Some framers still want to repel from mat decoration because they believe to be too gaudy to use seriously, however the key is to using creative mat design is simply for enhancement, while exercising subtly, so one does not break the golden rule of "never dominate the image".

Summary

Mat design is highly subjective; much like the art itself, it can be expressive and unique, however it is important to remember that at the end of the day, most consumers will want their framed artworks to express a feeling of emotion, and once we know what that is, the best method for finding the right design is usually to trust your feelings, and let them guide you to the right option. Even then, the decision at the end of the day must still lie with the customer. There is more than one way to tell a story, and as most will know, there is also more than one way to "perfectly" frame a picture as well.

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With over 15 years experience in the framing & graphics industry, Jared Davis CPF, GCF has covered the wholesale, commercial and retail aspects of the business. His previous sales, marketing & training experience gives him an understanding of the changing opportunities for retail businesses, and he offers an up-to-date approach on new methods and techniques now required by today's business owners, to be able to successfully market, merchandise and sell their services to consumers. Jared is also a featured educator at major international industry tradeshows & conventions.