

MATTING WITH



TEXTURE & DEPTH

Most framers think of matting as a decorative element in frame design, but its original purposes might have been purely practical. A mat provides an important separation between the artwork and glazing. When museums and galleries store paper artwork unframed, a mat package provides a compact, protective container for it, consisting of a window mat hinged to a sturdy backing board to which the art is mounted. This more-or-less disposable package provides a separation between the surface of the artwork and other matted artworks that might be in the same drawer. A mat package also provides a way to adapt many different-sized artworks to a few frame sizes, saving a gallery or museum from having to build a different-sized custom frame for every paper artwork.

Matting enables framers to use all sorts of decorative features in frame design. Color may be the most obvious, as matting is used to emphasize or de-emphasize colors in an image or to help the art look better in its display environment. While there are plenty of rules-of-thumb about how colors may be used together to achieve certain effects, the decorative uses of color are largely subjective.

Color can be very useful, but it can also be detrimental. When matting seems to overpower the art, too strong a color is often to blame. Because the eye is attracted to the strongest colors, the main (top) mat color should have less intensity than the colors in an image. Using a contrasting mat color is a good way to create visual interest--so long as it doesn't become the main attraction in the frame.

MATTING OFFERS ALL SORTS OF DECORATIVE FEATURES, INCLUDING COLOR, TEXTURE, FILLETS, AND LAYERS



These inlaid circles create an interesting visual effect without overpowering the image when the same mat color is used throughout.

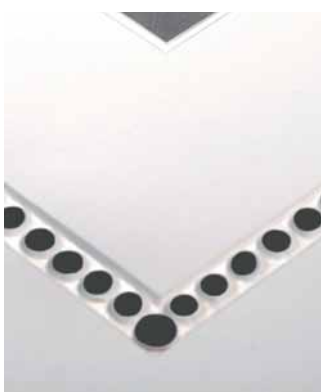
by James Miller, MCPF, GCF



These framed gallery models show how matting can affect the appearance of an art image. The small, unmatte print on the left may be okay for an empty corner in a hallway or half bath. But if that image is intended to be a visually prominent feature in the room, say, above the fireplace mantel, then the widely matted example on the right would be more appropriate for the purpose.



3/8" diameter circles of 4-ply matboard are placed in a recessed panel. This relatively simple design would be almost impossible to cut by hand and still very time consuming with a traditional oval mat cutting machine. But a CMC cuts the circles from scrap matboard in a short time, and then it's a simple matter of gluing the dots into the panel.



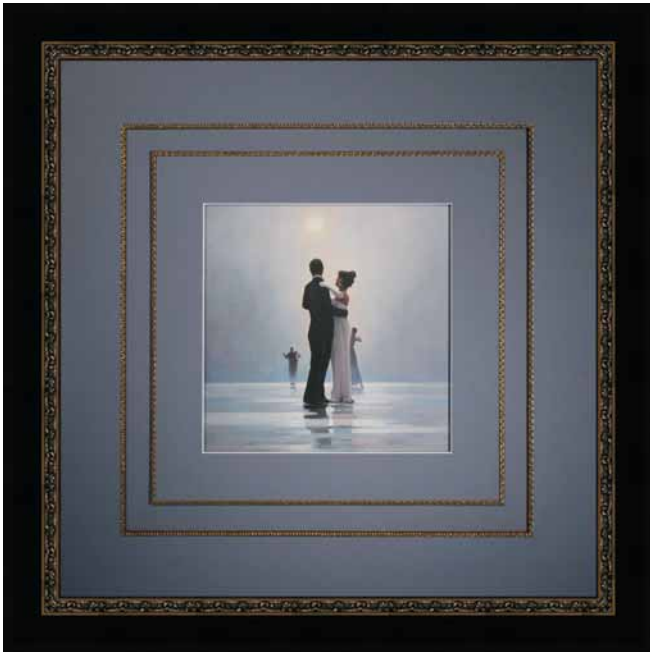
Slightly contrasting colors in this mat design would bring more emphasis to the decorative feature, but strongly contrasting colors could easily overpower the image.

Wide mat margins are essential to decorative matting. When a customer wants to use a narrow mat in a frame design, the usual reason is, "I don't want the matting to overpower the picture." What mat width actually does is not overpower a picture but it provides a background, a clear field of view. A common mistake of frame design is trying to de-emphasize too strong a mat color by reducing the width of mat margins. This generally doesn't work. If a mat overpowers an image, the problem is probably related to color, not width.

Mat width also has a psychological effect because it denotes the importance of the image on display. The wider the mat, the more visual emphasis is given to the image within. For instance, if a family photograph were to hang in a grouping with several other framed pictures, attention would be drawn to it by using a wider mat. Using an intensely contrasting mat color would attract attention, too, but that might also overpower the image in the frame. Conversely, the framed picture would tend to get lost in the group if its mat were narrower than the mats in the frames around it, especially if its color were neutral. Just as a wide mat makes a framed image seem more important, a very narrow mat tends to make a framed image seem less important.

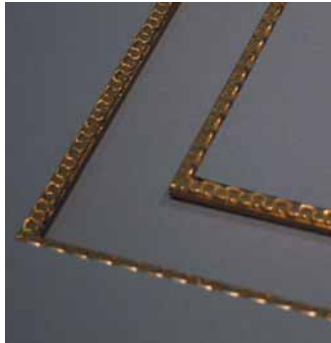
Mat color and width should work together to attract attention to an image without overpowering it. This can be demonstrated in gallery or frame shop by displaying several copies of the same art print with different framing designs.

The decorative matting examples presented here illus-



The fillets provide texture and depth, while smoothing the transition from the top mat to the recessed panel.

This recessed panel would be a subtle decorative feature if it were created with beveled edges. Lining the panel with fillet gives the panel a completely different visual effect.



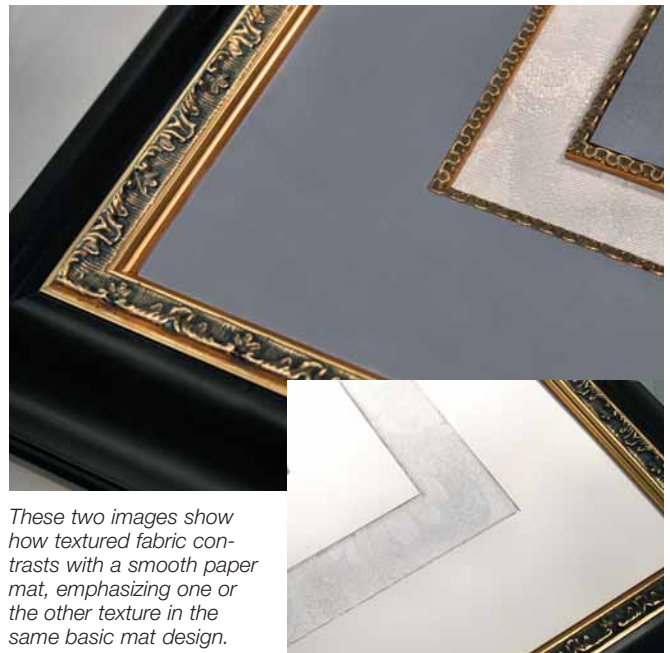
trate the use of texture and depth. Like color, mat texture can be subtle or bold, plain or fancy. Even when the use of any contrasting color could overpower an image, texture can be successfully used as a decorative feature. All sorts of materials can be used to create texture in a frame design. Fabric-covered mats provide a wide range of textures, from finely woven silks to coarsely woven canvas. The contrasting textures of a smooth paper and a fabric can be emphasized by using them together. A fabric-covered panel in a smooth paper mat or a smooth-surfaced panel in a fabric-covered mat can create interesting decorative effects, especially if contrasting colors are used.

Textured laminating films, such as linen or canvas texture, can also be applied to smooth mat surfaces to provide a subtle contrast of texture. The acrylic gel used to texturize prints can be applied to mat surfaces or to other materials, such as clear polyester film, paper, or fabric, which can be applied to the mat.

Clear polyester film, Melinex 516, is a useful mounting material that can also be used as a decorative matting feature. The smooth, glossy film creates contrast with the dull, fibrous surface of a mat. And since it is transparent,



Although no color is used, the textured panel of clear film in this mat makes a unique decorative feature.



These two images show how textured fabric contrasts with a smooth paper mat, emphasizing one or the other texture in the same basic mat design.



Strips of clear polyester film may be texturized with acrylic gel, and used as an appliqué or panel liner. Light and shadow are incorporated in this decorative feature, where the texturized strips of clear film are elevated above the panel, which is recessed below two 4-ply mat layers.



Separating the collection of whistles into four groups is a way to increase the decorative value of the presentation. Elevating the window mat instead of using shadowbox sides also increases visual depth.



When you don't want a plain background, adding a low-contrast double mat amounts to a decorative feature that doesn't compete with the framed objects in this shadowbox. Notice how increasing the mat width gives the framed collection more visual importance.



The presentation changes when the window mat contrasts with the background mat. Like a single-opening top mat, the V-groove in this presentation unites and encloses the four groups.

clear film can be used with light and shadow.

Fillets are another great way to add texture and depth to matting. Available in many profiles and finishes, they can be used either in the frame moulding, the matting, or both. When a fillet is used as a matting element, it usually matches or coordinates with the perimeter moulding. But fillet designs and colors that contrast with the primary moulding can create interesting decorative effects.

Multiple mat layers create depth, of course. But when frame rabbet depth is limited, inlays and overlays can provide similar visual effects and stay within a restricted rabbet depth. Small shapes, such as circles, rectangles, and triangles can be cut in multiples from 4-ply matboard or even from paper and then applied to the surface of a mat. Marbled paper, for example, can be used to line an open V-groove, with a bevel-edged panel cut into the top mat revealing some width of the second mat.

Matting is useful in framing three-dimensional objects as well as in framing paper and other two-dimensional

items, and the same general rules apply. However, because objects generally have plenty of visual texture and depth, decorative matting features that are too elaborate or eye-catching can create visual distractions in the presentation. That is especially true if a number of items are framed together. Sometimes, when framing an object or a collection of objects, the best presentation is the simplest one.

A secondary issue in using decorative features in object framing is their effect on the size (and therefore the weight) of a frame. For instance, a typical 20"x24" frame for paper artwork might weigh 10 pounds. Adding a few inches of mat width and decorative features along with a larger glass size might add two or three more pounds. Even so, nearly any combination of materials would be easily supported by standard hanging hardware. But if a shadowbox frame of those same dimensions contains, say, a pair of dueling pistols, the weight could be 30 pounds or more. Increasing the size of a heavier shadowbox by a few inches might add

enough weight to require reinforcement of the frame or heavy-duty hanging provisions.

Inks, paints, powdered pigments, pastels, fabrics, fillets, and all kinds of other materials can be used in mat decoration. For decorative art prints that have no lasting value, anything goes. But if an item to be framed is an original or otherwise valuable artwork or an irreplaceable document or photo, then it is important to consider the implications of chemistry in the framing. Chemical migration in a closed-up frame package could cause destructive chemical reactions with photo emulsions or certain inks and paints used to make the art, photo, or document. When decorative matting is ordered for such items, it is better to frame a high quality digital copy and keep the original in safe storage. (If an item to be framed is copyrighted, be sure to obtain permission to reproduce it.)

Lignin-free alphacellulose mat boards are recommended for decorative matting because they're chemically stable and won't discolor with age. The bright, white bevels of an alphacellulose mat will stay white, but the bevels of an "acid free" mat will darken over time. Alphacellulose mats generally have better surface sizing, which is a benefit when liquids are applied. Also, the pigmented colors of

high quality mat boards are less susceptible to light damage.

Generally, water-based acrylic paints and pigment-based inks are inert and stable. Fabrics may contain dye or sizing that might be chemically unstable, so they should be thoroughly washed and rinsed. Better yet, fabrics should be used that are known to be safe for framing from one of the commercial fabric suppliers in the framing industry.

Even when there is no chemically related threat to a framed item, offgassing of decorative materials could deposit an unsightly haze on the inside of the glazing, necessitating eventual cleaning and refitting. When in doubt, verify the chemical stability of decorative materials. ■



James Miller, MCPF, GCF, founded his framing business, ArtFrame, Inc., in suburban Columbus, OH, in 1988, where he specializes in the preservation framing of art, heirlooms, and three-dimensional objects. He is also an accomplished calligrapher. Miller, who holds a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration, has served as chairman of the PFA Certification Board, where he helped develop the MCPF exam, and has been chairman of the FACTS Education Committee. He also teaches at numerous industry venues and writes regularly for PFM.



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