

Framing Guide for Fine Art

INTRODUCTION

Artwork fills up empty walls, ties a room together, and enhances your surroundings. Most people don't think about how their new piece will look in ten or twenty years, but if not properly assembled, it can look old before its time. A good job of mounting, matting and framing can keep your art looking good for many years, and save the hassle of re-framing it down the line.

Whether you are purchasing a framed piece from an artist or taking your unfinished artwork to a frame shop, here are some notes about what to look for, what to be wary of and how to find the framing job that suits your needs as an art owner.

FRAME SHOP VS. ARTIST

At an art show you will usually get the artwork mounted and matted, or mounted, matted and framed. There, you are at the mercy of the quality standards of the artist. For economical reasons, some artists will use cheaper materials. If you take your artwork to a frame shop to be finished, you have much more control over what kind of materials you would like to use. The shop will have corner samples, and gives you a price for each option. However, you will pay more for this level of customization.

It usually makes sense to buy matted and framed artwork from the artist, assuming of course that the artist uses good quality materials and you like the mat and frame choices. Most artists earn a living selling their art and offer matting and framing merely as a way to present their work and offer a more finished product to their customers. Typically they do not have to charge what a frame shop charges, because the frame shop has to mark up the materials and framing costs to make a profit, usually resulting in a much higher cost than an artist would charge. In other words, an artist makes a living creating artwork and a frame shop only makes a profit on the materials they sell.

A. MOUNTING

The first step to successfully framing a piece of artwork is to secure it on a mounting board. Artwork may be mounted on foam, cardboard, pulp mat or museum mat, depending on the size of the piece and the method used. Artwork may be attached with some pieces of tape at the top to hold it up, dry-mounted with a heat-sensitive adhesive sheet, or glued with spray adhesive. Different methods are appropriate for different media. The most important thing is to make sure that the substance used will not damage the artwork or lose its effectiveness over time.

B. MATTING

Aside from the purely practical purpose of keeping a photograph from pressing against the glass when framed, mats provide a way to add to the overall look of the photo by complementing the colors of the photo, the frame and your décor. The choice of the mat “face”, i.e. suede, linen, watermark texture, as well as the traditional white, will affect the price, but this choice is simply a matter of taste. The most important thing to look for when choosing a mat is what the core of the mat is made of and how it has been prepared.

The cheapest way to mat is to use a pulp mat board, basically very thick paper. Over time, the acids in the paper will cause it to brown, especially along the cut edges framing the artwork. The next step up is an acid buffered white core mat, to which chemicals have been added to reduce the effects of the acids. While this does slow the process, browning will still occur, as the acids are not completely neutralized.

By contrast, the beveled edge of a completely acid-free, museum-quality cotton rag mat board will stay clean and crisp looking for decades. At the wholesale price, a museum rag mat costs only about \$1.25 more than the cheapest paper mat for a single 16”x20” mat. If the mat is 32”x40” the wholesale difference in cost is still only about \$5.00.

While the simplest way to mat a picture is to use a single mat, many artists or frame shops may use double or triple mats in different colors in order to pick up various tones in the picture and result in a more dramatic presentation.

C. FRAMES

There are many different frame choices out there, reflecting diverse tastes and various budgets. Metal frames are clean and modern-looking. They are generally moderately priced. A downside is that they are thin, and can sag over time if the frame is large (say 32”x40”) and not properly wired. Wood frames can be simple and traditional, or molded with interesting designs and given any number of metallic or aging finishes. They vary in price, depending on the style, thickness, finish, and where they were made. Frames made in the U.S. or Europe are usually more expensive than those made in developing countries. Plastic lends itself to the most ornate designs, as the decorations can be molded right into the frame. Plastic frames are typically lower in cost, but it is important to get joints that are well-secured, as they tend to fall apart at the seams.

D. GLASS

Glass protects your artwork from dust, moisture, and UV light, which will fade the color over time. Standard glass or premium clear, as it is often called, will reduce UV light

by about 50% and is usually a good way to go. It keeps the cost of framing down and, unlike certain types of frosted non-glare glass, will allow you to see the artwork with a minimum of distortion.

A step up, and a great choice for valuable artwork, is museum glass. It has a special coating on the inside which will reduce UV light by 97-99%, and is available in premium and non-glare.

“Denglas” has an antireflective coating, and although it imparts a slightly greenish cast on the glass at a certain angle, for the most part the glass is almost invisible. This is an excellent though very expensive choice. Few artists offer it because its wholesale cost is six times that of standard glass.

E. SEALING & FINISHING

A good framing job should not only keep the photo and glass securely attached to the frame, but keep dust and airborne grime from getting between the mat and the glass. On a white mat, dust and particles end up looking like reverse dandruff. When using a wood or plastic frame, the first step to securing the matted piece is inserting staples around the inside of the frame which hold the mat against the glass and the lip of the frame. This ensures that the picture and glass will stay in the frame, but staples may loosen with handling. This may cause the glass to shift with time, letting in dust. You may have observed how crystal left for a few months in a closed china cabinet develops a layer of film and must be washed before use. Similarly, framed artwork that is stapled but not sealed can develop a film under the glass over time. Since you can't easily take apart your artwork to clean it every few years, it is a good idea to seal the back of the frame in the beginning and eliminate the problem altogether.

Taping over the top of the staples to create a seal is one way to keep dirt out, although many tapes will not adhere for a long period of time unless applied to a very smooth surface, such as smooth paper-backed foam board. The most reliable method is the traditional dustcover – paper attached with double-sided tape or adhesive around the edge of the frame. It not only provides a good long-term solution to protecting your artwork, but gives it an attractive and professional look.

F. HANGING

The type of hardware you use to hang your artwork will depend on the size and weight of the framed piece, as well as the kind of frame used. The hardware used should be well-attached and strong enough to support its weight. Some methods and materials are much better than others, especially when dealing with heavier pieces.

For a wood frame, an inexpensive option is the saw-tooth hanger attached to the top of a frame. Attached to the frame with nails, it typically loosens up over time if attached to a heavier object and may fall out.

Another option for a wood frame is to use eyelets that screw directly into the inside of the frame and are attached to a hanging wire. The problem with this type of hardware is that the wire may pull at the outermost part of the eyelet loop, causing it to bend and loosen up over time.

The best way to secure a wire to your artwork is using round or triangular metal loops that screw into the frame. They are much less likely to loosen up than the lighter screw-in eyelets, and can support a large amount of weight.

One way to hang a metal frame is using snap-in loop hangers. It is the cheapest option, and also the least secure. They will loosen up eventually, making it hard to hang the artwork, or possibly dropping it several inches down the wall. Overall, the screw-in loop hangers are the best option for metal frames.

The biggest problem with large metal and wood frames is that they may warp over time, which will let in dirt and moisture, and in extreme cases could cause the glass to fall out. This can be prevented by using a triangular wire attachment to the back of the frame. In this, two hangers are attached at the side as usual, and a third is screwed into the bottom at the center. The wire is strung through both of the top loops and both ends are secured at the bottom. This insures a more even distribution of weight and prevents the bottom from sagging and the sides from warping. Larger double-screw hangers and thicker wire are of course needed to support the weight of a heavier piece.

Finally, we suggest you place small felt or silicone pads on the back corners of the frame to prevent wall damage and minimize the amount the framed piece shifts on the wall.