

Fine Art vs. Decorative Designs

No matter the category in which your customer's piece falls, it's important to have a reason behind every choice of framing materials and methods.

By Chris A. Paschke, CPF, GCF

There are two types of framing design: fine art framing and high-end decorative framing. The job as a fine art framer is to enhance and protect the art, while as

decorative framers we have carte blanche to embellish and ornament it with few limitations. Typically, they both may win awards, and be very well executed technically and by design, but one frames specifically for the art while the other often showcases the skills and talents of the framer or frame shop over maintaining the visual connection and focus on the art.

Framing competition is a whole other ball game. Over the years many companies have sponsored open competitions designed to showcase high-end

decorative aspects of what their products might reach, thus teaching framers to think outside the box, and far beyond the norm of a mat and glazing. That has resulted in fabulous pieces of award winning decorative framing, which in turn excites our industry. The 2024 WCAF Expo Design Challenge was a perfect example of high-end decorative framing with fabulous extrav-

agant designs that oozed technical expertise. These designs wowed popular choice voters and are loved by most of our clients as well.



● Above - Totem Bear features five principles of line, color, shape, intensity, and rhythm in a standard museum design. Right - Corner detail of Bear. Courtesy of Mark Van Stone, collector

PPFA COMPETITIONS

PPFA International PRINT and OPEN Framing Competitions have been designed to judge and award the best in design and technical execution. To review the process, the final judging begins with an elimination process to allow for the top designs to be singled out in a blind vote by three judges. The pieces that make the cut are then scored to determine the final top three winners. The pieces that did not make the cut are still all eligible for Judge Awards, Special

Awards and of course Popular Choice voting by show attendees and exhibitors. The interesting fact is that the 1st place PRINT and OPEN winners are often not the same as the Popular Choice winners. Maybe

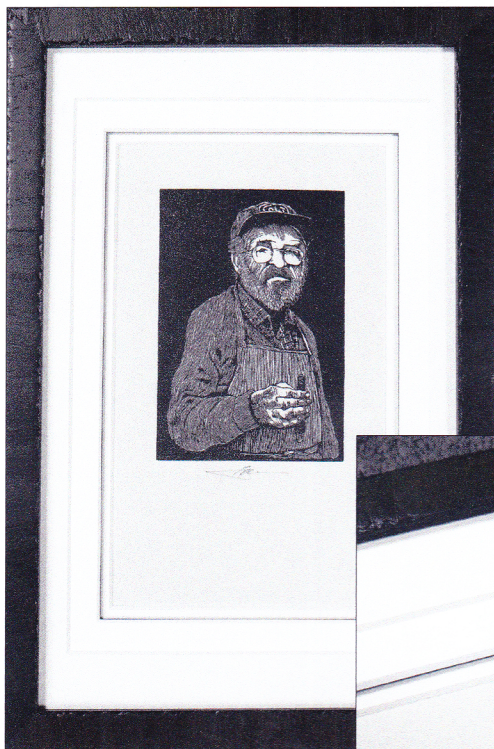
that is because we are framers and inspect the framing more than the art it should be showcasing.

FINE ART DESIGN

In the real world fine art design will generally use museum rag boards, reversible (not removable) mounting techniques, and decorative elements which will be neu-

tral pH and long term. The art always remains the visual focus regardless of any decorative elements which might include multiple angle frames, French mat lines, wrapped or painted bevels, spacers, multiple mats, tiered mats, and such. One of the major differences between fine art design and decorative design are the materials selected.

The principles of framing design are made up of elements and factors. Simply knowing the elements—line, color, texture, space, shape, intensity— isn't enough, you must also understand how to use them through use of the factors of proportion, emphasis, balance, and rhythm. Rhythm is the reintroduction of visual elements to establish a pattern, so rhythm is a factor that represents both repetition and pattern, but all three—rhythm, repetition, pattern—only count as one factor. Use of all the principles (elements and factors) in one design would no doubt feel very overdesigned, sometimes less is more.



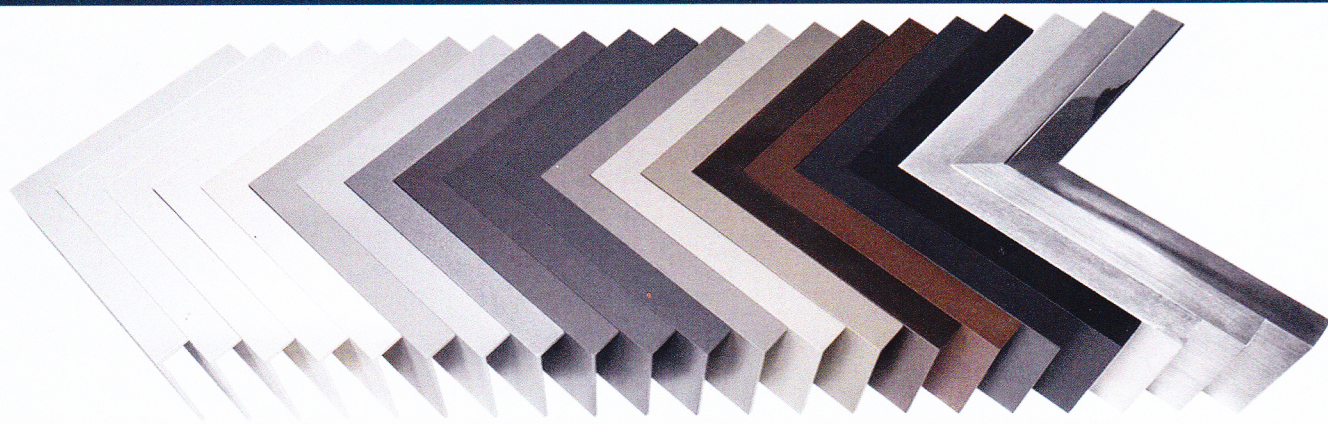
● Above - Cigarman is a black ink etching showing five design principles: line, color, intensity, proportion, and rhythm. Right - Corner detail of Cigarman. Courtesy of Mark Van Stone



The idea is to use select principles as a guide in just the right amount, and by controlling how many are used. Too few can be boring, too many could create chaos. Often the selection of three to five principles is the best guide. The goal is to achieve a cohesive and unified design where the framing continues to relate to the art. "Totem Bear" was framed for a collector who wanted museum quality with a little extra umph. The design features five principles, with a narrow 1/8" cream torn paper accent under the top mat—line, color, shape (torn paper), intensity (space between mats), and rhythm (frame to bear)—in an otherwise standard design.

"Cigarman" is a step up in design showcasing a triple rag mat using Asian proportions stimulated by a weighted bottom border. The black ink etching is on warm white paper, so the top mat reflects the paper color while the inner two are white for contrast. A wider center boarder also features under tiered charcoal paper to help draw the eye into the etching, and the striations in the frame relate to the apron. There are five principles represented including line (under tiering), color, intensity (spacer), proportion

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(Asian top-bottom-sides), and rhythm (frame to apron). Since the etching itself has the visual weighted bottom it part of the art and not a counted principle.

DECORATIVE DESIGN

Special design techniques use the above elements and factors while appearing to be a whole separate item of their own. Brian Wolf, John Raney and I judged a competition back in the dark ages, and as we stood before one piece, Brian said, "I taught them how to carve mats." John said, "I taught them the glass etching." And I said, "I taught them the tiered matting." All of these wonderfully executed techniques were in one framed piece. Unfortunately, it was so overdesigned that I don't even remember what the art was! The bottom line is if the techniques draw the eye away from the art and never bring the eye back around into it, then the design has failed.



● Left - Little Birds as an example of decorative framing and never a candidate for Framing Competition 1st Place, could bring in additional impulse sales. Right - Detail showing double freeform deep wrapped mats of heavy bark paper.



That is not saying decorative doesn't have a place in framing design and would never be loved. A good example is "Little Birds," a piece I framed decades ago as a booth showpiece for Seal Products. It was meant to show the uses of film adhesive in a creative way, but still adheres to five elements. It uses color, texture, shape, space, and intensity. Adding the three pieces of white torn paper atop the wrapped bark paper helped keep it in visual balance and proportion, while emphasis and rhythm control the eye movement between the barnwood frame, bark mats, and the prints.

The bird prints are there, but the frame design could make a perfect sampler of what you can do, and as a

decorative art piece it may sell over and over again. One framer told me he'd sold his sampler five times when I saw him at the next show. Back in the 1990s, this piece sold for \$250; the three prints sold for \$15.

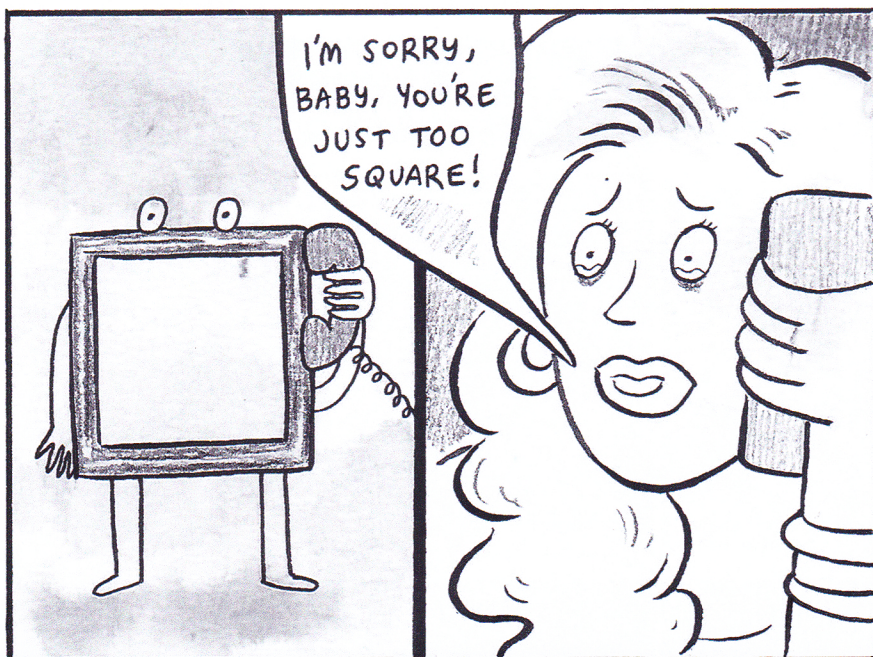
"Irises" is another decorative design meant to showcase framing skills that clients love. It features five layers of 3/16" acid free foamboard bevel cut and stacked into a perfect

deep bevel slant, which was then wrapped with wrinkled mulberry paper. Dry pastels were rubbed into the strips of mounted paper as they were being bonded using dry mount film and a taking iron, so the pigment reached all the creases of the wrap.

At first glimpse, all you seem to see is the deep bevel wrap and painted top mat bevel, but the very deep 3D cast paper art speaks for itself in person, showcasing use of line, color, texture, and intensity.

Just be careful when designing for decorative art so that you never lose sight of what the art is, and that it is able to still hold it own within the design. If all you see is the fabulous hand crafted frame or the in-

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ner decoration, even use of five fundamentals can be too much.

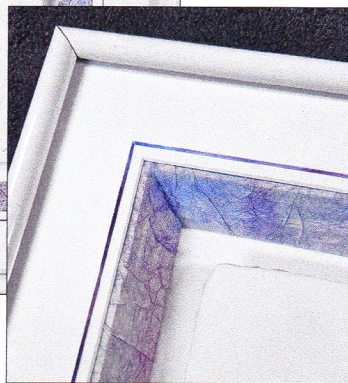
WHAT, WHERE, WHY

There must always be a reason for every element or factor selected, regardless of fine art or decorative. “Cottage” was a reframe, and although a triple mat for a small etching could feel like overkill the base paper is large requiring it’s wide borders. A narrow gold frame was selected for accent and color--drawing the eye to the house (emphasis)—and the fillet was added to break up the mat expanse also impacting eye movement. The 1/2” liner mat—slightly narrower than the exposed print borders—is there to allow for Mylar sealing of the fillet away from the art, a technical necessity. The wide top mat felt distracting by itself, so the narrow top mat (1/4” exposed) was added to attract just enough visual attention to break up the expanse, which is counted either as space or proportion but not both. So, this uses line, color, texture, emphasis, and proportion.

Always remember that all framed pieces have “giv-



● Above - *Irises* is a extreme deep bevel shop showcase piece to illustrate design potential. Right - Corner detail of *Irises*, showing line, color, texture, and intensity.



ens,” or the basic things necessary for framing: wood frame, single mat, border width, color, and texture. These are a baseline, but principles are counted when they identify additional uses of these, remembering each new item may only be counted once. A simple double mat of a different color, with a white

bevel and differently textured surface, counts as three elements: line, color, and texture.

When adding something really showy like glass etching, try to control what’s going on under the glass or in the frame. And keep in mind that collectible art is of-

ten saying plenty on its own, and our job is to enhance and protect it. **PFM**



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Chris A. Paschke, owner of Designs Ink in Tehachapi, CA, is a professional picture framer with over four decades of experience. She is an artist, a National Conference educator, has authored numerous magazine series, including *The Essence of Design*, *Design Concepts*, and *Digital Directions* for PFM, and has four self-published books on mounting. She currently writes the *Mastering Mounting* column for PFM and is a contributing writer to *The Artist’s Magazine*, *The Pastel Journal*, and *Watercolor Artist Magazine*. She was honored with the PPFA Award of Distinction for Leadership 2008, the Vivian Kistler Recognition for Innovation Award 2010, and the PMA Distinguished Service Award 2012.



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