Mastering Mounting

Odd Ducks of 2007

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Mounting seemed so complex in 1970 that I thought I would never learn it. Some 30 years later I realize that it was so much simpler back then because all I had to learn were the basics of mounting paper, photos, and fabric. The profits would come when the bulk of mounting projects used instinctive mounting methods, which always produced the same predictable outcome. And only when the occasional odd duck came through the front door would there be a need to question the tried-and-true methods and come up with an alternative to standard cold or hot mounting. Then came the digital era.

Photo 1: Ilfochromes will show orange peel regardless of wet, spray, pressure-sensitive, or dry mounting as seen in the light reflection on the middle photo. The left half was dry mounted; the right half was spray mounted.

The 21st Century Framer

Over the last decade the digital art world has exploded and now even includes digital picture frames. The days of only needing to know how to correctly mount paper, photo, and fabrics are long gone. All paper used to be porous. Today you need to know if a paper is plain, coated, laminated, or even if it's paper at all. Without knowing the porosity of paper because of its technical make up, you are unable to select mounting materials that will always work. Today's mounting is way more of a crapshoot than ever before.

Until recently, the old reprographics industry of signage and advertising was far removed from the world of fine art and custom framing. The thought of a framer bonding any photo image to lexan, acrylic, aluminum composite, or even a 4'x8' sheet of 2" thick Gatorboard was unheard of. The boundaries between fine art and sign display have been drastically blurred, and today's framer may be asked to mount almost anything to almost anything.

Framing in the 21st century requires a more thorough knowledge of all art as well as desktop publishing and commercial imagery. Today's frame shop must also be capable of cutting, bonding, and even delivering oversized art. Not that long ago "oversized" meant images framed with 40"x60" boards, but today it could easily mean a photograph the size of a school bus. Many of the questions this year still surround digitals, but since this

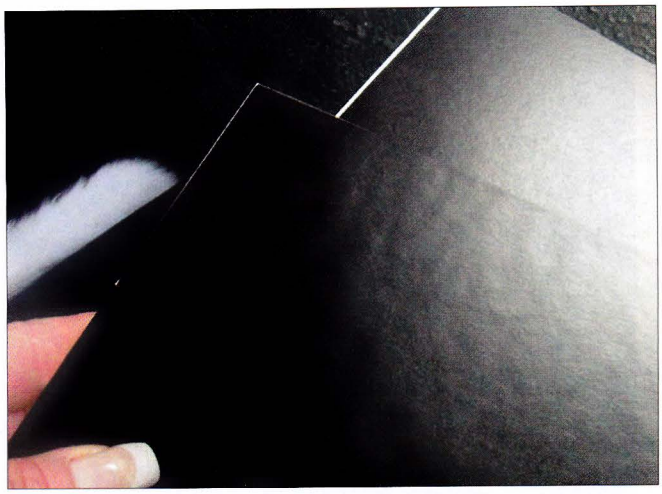

Photo 2: The bottom image was mounted to a lumpy heat-activated foamboard, while the top was mounted to a smoother clay-coated foamboard using tissue.

technology is evolving so rapidly it has been difficult to keep up.

What is it?

The five stages of design include definition, creativity, analysis, production, and clarification. All frame designs begin with the identification or definition of what is to be framed. When a photograph is brought in, it must first be determined what type of photo it is (i.e. color RC, dye-sublimation, RA-4, inkjet). Only then can the mounting of that photo be defined. Sometimes it's obvious; sometimes it's not.

Nothing is as it seems. Paper may or may not be paper at all; photos are a hybrid of silver halide and digital receptor coating; and canvases...well, are they oil, acrylic,

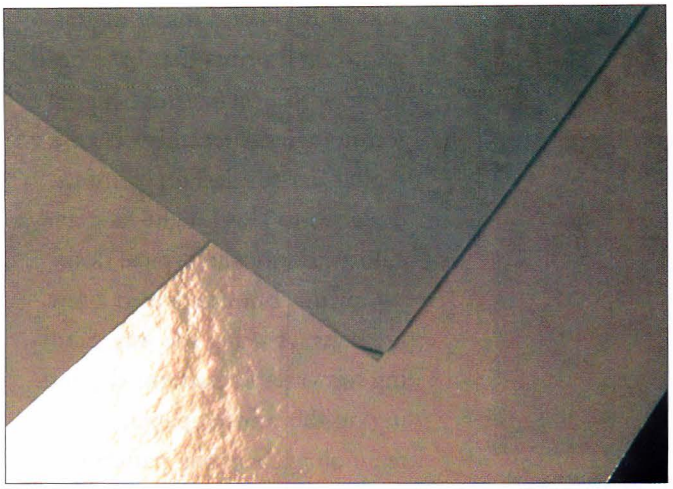

Photo 3: Commercial release boards are paper permanently mounted to a gray board with a lumpy surface. These boards may transfer that texture to the surface of a photo or digital image.

or digital? The photos, canvases, and inkjet prints being framed must first be identified before deciding how to mount and frame them without damage. And damage seems to be one of the biggest issues this year. It is often because a framer does not know what the art or photo image is in the first place that damage can occur by mishandling.

What's the difference between orange peel and scuffing?

Many framers still do not fully understand the difference between orange peel and scuffing damage. Orange peel is the creation of a textural pattern on the surface of a photo or print during the mounting process. Traditionally it was seen most often when mounting RC photos to lumpy substrates. The resin coated backing of a photo would bond to the surface, showing all the irregularities of the board beneath.

This is very visible with high-gloss photos, such as Ilfochrome Classics (a.k.a. cibachromes), and occurs to some degree regardless of the mounting method (Photo 1). Because true porous paper prints often have a thicker base than digital photos, there is more cushion to help absorb the unevenness of a lumpy substrate. Inexpensive open-edition paper prints and poster-quality images are thinner and more sensitive to lumpy substrate surfaces. By selecting the smoothest board available, the mounted image will be visibly smoother (Photo 2).

Sometimes lumpy orange peel damage is not the result of a substrate but a commercial release board placed on top of the mounting (Photo 3). These boards may transfer their texture to the surface of a photo or digital image. Pay attention to the image surface and use smoother release paper rather than a board for sensitive images.

Scuffing is occasionally incorrectly identified as orange peel. It involves damage to the ink or emulsion surface directly rather than from substrate texture being pressed through from behind. There are actually two kinds of surface damage referred to as scuffing. The first is damage caused when the coated silicone on release paper prevents the paper from sticking to the mounting project. This occurs most often with high gloss RC photos.

The second type is damage to

Photo 4: Scuffing has variable patterns depending on the printer, paper, and technology. This is a linear striped pattern from a dye-based HP Designjet960c printer on Kodak photo paper for desktop printers.

Photo 5: This dry-mounted photo shows a more mottled, evenly placed pattern on the same dye-based HP printer as in Photo 4, but printed on Canon Photo Paper for inkjet.

How do I protect the sensitive surface of a digital image?

Pigmented giclée fine art prints and photos are very susceptible to scratching as well as scuffing. Scuffing is a heat reaction, while scratching is the result of mishandling and carelessness (Photo 6). The immediate-dry pigmented inks and porous receptor coatings in piezo printing technology are very surface sensitive (Photo 7). It is impossible to tell just by looking whether an image is pigment- or dye-based or has a swellable or porous receptor coating, so just assume that any digital image will scratch and scuff.

During the design process, any uncoated inkjet image must be protected from direct contact with mat and moulding corners by a sheet of Mylar. An uncoated image is one that has not had any liquid laminate layered over the ink. Many wide-format images are routinely coated by printmakers with a liquid laminate after the print has been allowed adequate drying time.

Pigmented inks are said to be instant drying, but even they will take a week or two to dry thoroughly and should not be clear-coated or enclosed in a frame until that time. Though these inks will generally tolerate heat without problem, they may be scratched by release materials and by general handling. When mounting any surface-sensitive images, release materials should always be used rather than abrasive Kraft paper, and the sheets need to be gently placed over the art and not dragged across the surface. No

matter if they are wet, spray, pressure-sensitive, or dry mounted, there is always a potential of damaging the surface if it is permanently mounted. Consider hinging or corner pockets as an alternative, and treat the image as gently as you would an Ilfochrome Classic (a.k.a. cibachrome).

Photo 6: Scratching is the result of mishandling and carelessness. The scratched left image is dye ink on Canon Photo Paper. Notice the unscratched glare image at right.

Why are my photos bubbling, lifting up, and/or peeling off?

The calls and emails continue to bombard me with such questions as, "I have successfully mounted thousands of photos over the past 10 years, so why are my current photos bubbling and peeling off?" First, all the proper TTPM methods in the world cannot make something bond when it has nothing to stick to. Adequate time, the correct temperature, the right pressure, and controlling of moisture only works when the art in question will stick to the substrate of choice with the selected adhesive using a given technique.

If an image is bubbling and you have done everything right by checking the elements of TTPM, you may just have the wrong mounting method for the art. It may look like a duck and sound like a duck, but it may very well be an odd duck. Surprise, it's a goose—a digital goose that doesn't act like the original photo ducks you have been used to mounting for decades.

In the October 2007 *PFM*, I discussed a mounting problem with Kodak, Epson, and Xerox

Photo 7: This manually scratched surface is on a pigmented ink print from an Epson c86 on OEM Epson Glossy Photo Paper.

inkjet photos, which were bubbling after mounting. One of the explanations presented to me by photo manufacturers was that perhaps a smoother resin-coated backing was not allowing the photo to grip the adhesive when bonded.

Also consider surface sensitivity. At a recent digital imaging conference, I was told that the surface scratching issues were becoming so bad for consumers that damage was even occurring in the output tray of printers. In an attempt to remedy that problem, some manufacturers have smoothed the verso side of their digital photo papers. So in correcting one problem—scratching—they may have created a new one.

It sounds as if the bubbling problem may not be resolved quickly by paper manufacturers. So you have two options. You can either convince your customers to test and perhaps change photo papers, or you can consider an alternative method of photo mounting, such as hinging, edge strips, or perimeter mounts. The days of following in the footsteps of Ansel Adams, who always dry mounted his photos, are being overturned by technology. It's tough to mount a photo to anything—high tech or not—if it won't stick to it. Today's digital photographers may want to mount their works to longer, larger, smoother, high-tech substrates like aluminum and acrylic. But if they won't stay stuck, what good will it do?

Full Circle

So, while framers still only need to know how to mount paper, photos, and fabrics, today the mounting projects are all odd ducks. And while framers are still dealing with the original three categories, the items have expanded exponentially. You may know what it is, what it was printed on, what it was printed with, or how long ago. Somehow, things just never get any easier.

Happy New Year! ■

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Mounting Editor, owns Designs Ink in Tehachapi, CA, featuring commercial custom framing, fine art/graphic design, and industry consulting. Specializing in mounting, matting, design creativity, and fine art, she works with industry leaders and has taught for The National Conference. She has written two books on mounting: *The Mounting and Laminating Handbook* (now in its second edition) and *Creative Mounting, Wrapping, and Laminating* and can be contacted at www.designsinkart.com.