

# Principles of Frame Design

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# Essence of Design

## **Visual Design**

**Art** = Part of an aesthetic experience

Purpose to communicate/arouse viewer

**Design** = Requires relating to the art

Framing is to enhance and protect

**Unity** = Problem/project + Plan + Process + Vision

**Principles** = Elements + Factors

# Design Process

5-Stages of the design process:

**Definition** = What is the problem to solve?

**Creativity** = The imagination stage

Traditional vs. Innovative

Selling-up from the beginning

**Analysis** = Are there limitations or guidelines?

Time allotment/cost/purpose

Helps verify materials selection

**Production** = Carrying out the above 1/2/3

**Critique/Clarification** = Final overview and critique

Verifies a great design, or

Points up weaknesses in 1-4

# Design Process

## **Critique/Clarification**

Three critiques (back room, designer, customer)

Five Ws (who, what...)

**Who** = the viewer's eye

**What** = the eye focuses on which portion first

**When** = it moves to the next detail

**Where** = it remains held longest

**Why** = the design works and has unity

# The Elements

There are seven basic elements in frame design **line, color, texture, shape, intensity/value, space, and rhythm.**

These make up the available raw materials, ingredients, or bricks of a design equation which will be mortared into a finished presentation.

In framing, these seven elements are identified by appearance and visual aspects of moulding, matboard, fabric, paint, pigment, decorative paper, and artwork.

# Elements and Factors

Line

Color

Texture

Shape

Intensity

Space

Rhythm

# The Factors

Basic factors are **proportion, emphasis/placement,** and **balance** resulting in **unity**.

They hold the elements together into a visually cohesive unit through a controlled, organized and well integrated presentation.

The factors are not a series of steadfast laws or rules, but rather guidelines developed to assist in completing a more harmonized or unified project.

**Line**

*Proportion*

**Color**

**Texture**

*Emphasis / Focal Point*

**Shape**

**Intensity**

**Space**

*Balance*

**Rhythm**

**UNITY**

# Counting the Principles

Relationships of the more emotional "elements of design" will vary from person to person.

The more physical "factors of design" will often be quite similar in taste.

Limit "Principles of Design" to 3-5, never ALL.

Too many things happening within a frame are too distracting from the art.

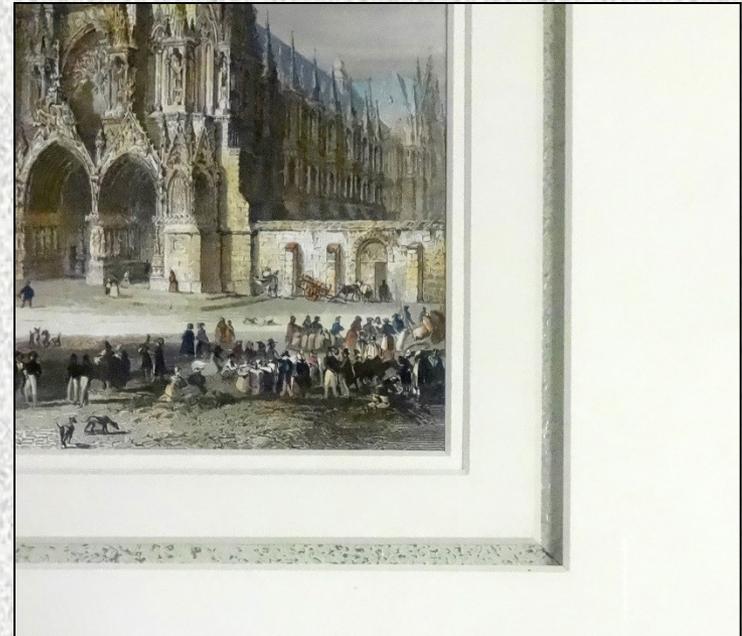
# The Givens

**Frame** = Rectangular

**Mat** = Rectangular  
single window

**Color** = Pick one

**Texture** = Pick one

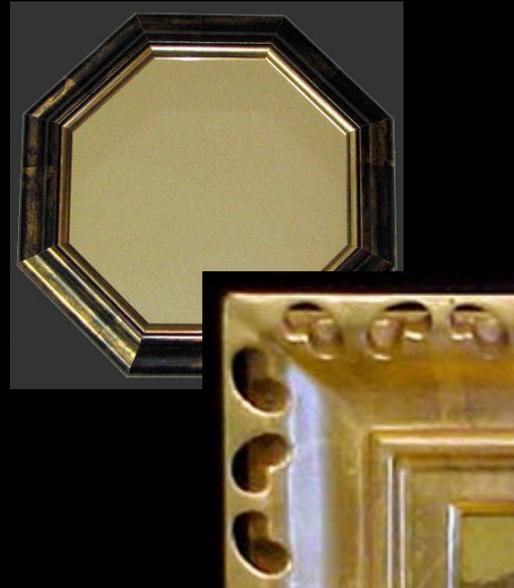


# The Givens

Extremes—and non rectangular--should not be counted as Givens because of making too strong a statement and will be counted as an element.

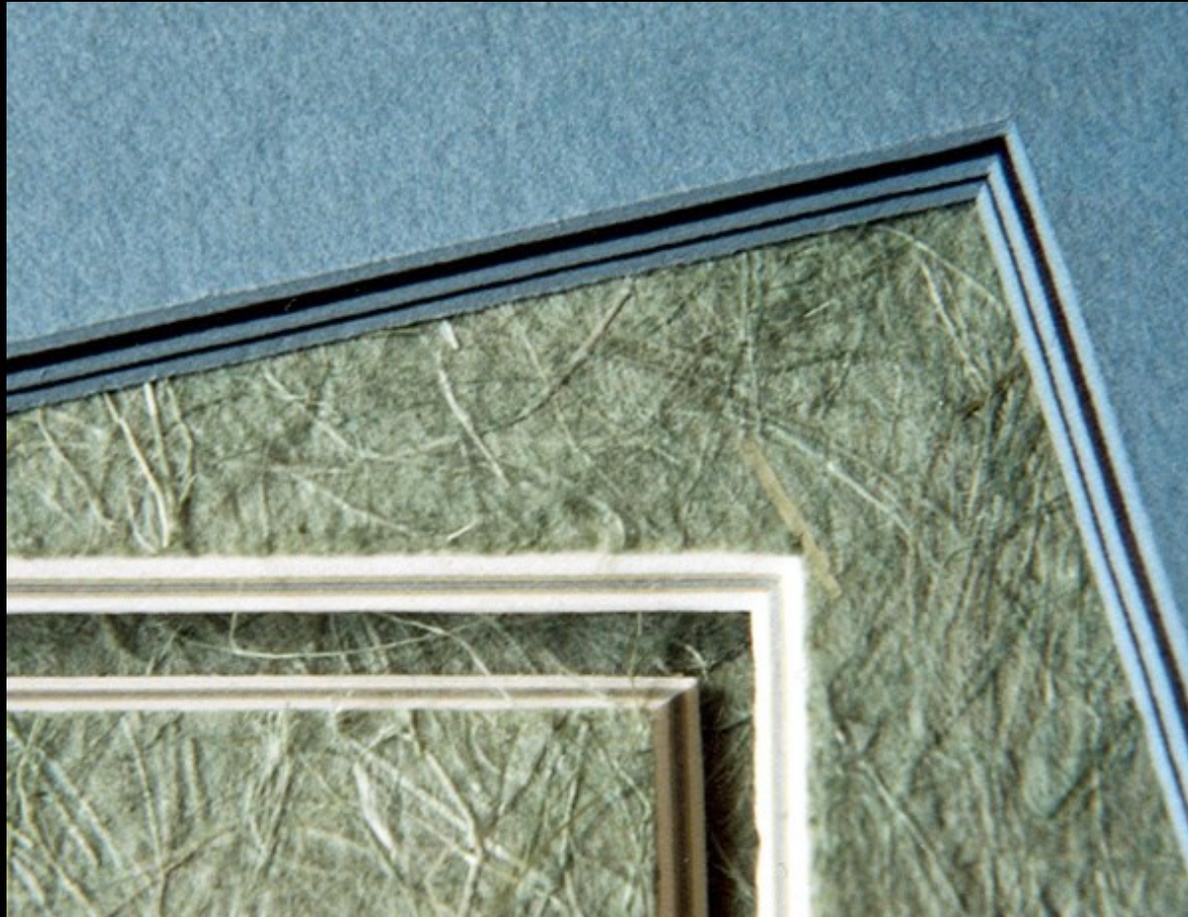


Periwinkle Framing, CA



# Line

- Organize, divide, enhance or direct, often to a focal point
- Created by French mats, painted bevel, panel designs



Line (3), color (3), texture (3)



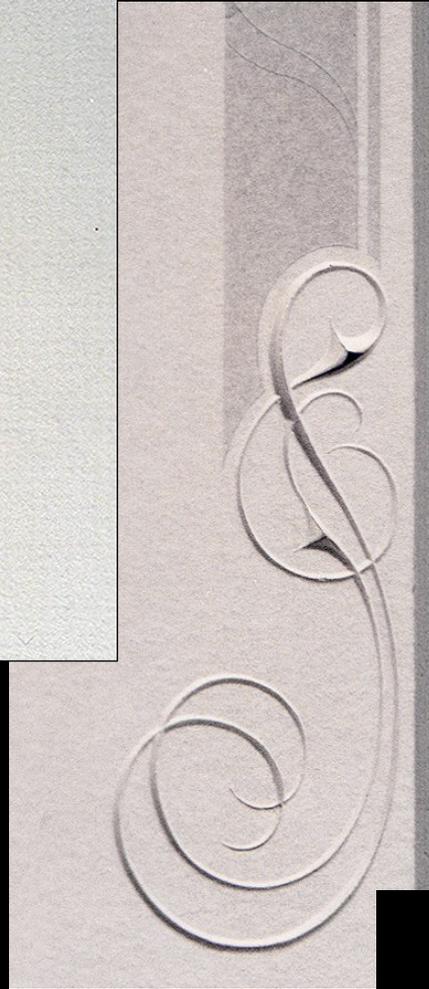
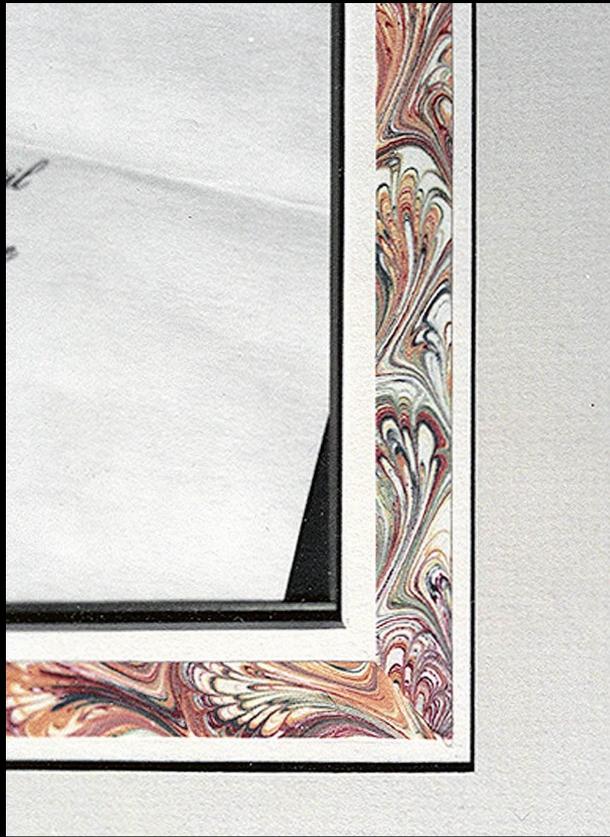
Triple mat = cream/green/cream with  
Green = middle and outer edge  
Top Cream = smaller than green  
Embossed Lines  
Painted Sponge Panel  
Gold Accent Borders

Created by Ray Dwyer, CPF 1995



Surface and pin-striped  
tiered mats showing  
line, color, & texture





Line as pattern, shape, and  
simply embossed lines

# Color

- Accents or harmonizes to create a mood, effect or response.
- Involves matboard, fabric, decoration, and frame.
- If you can't see the materials, you can't judge the color.
- Color can be passive or aggressive, working with or against.



Originally framed in 1972,  
reframed in 2015.





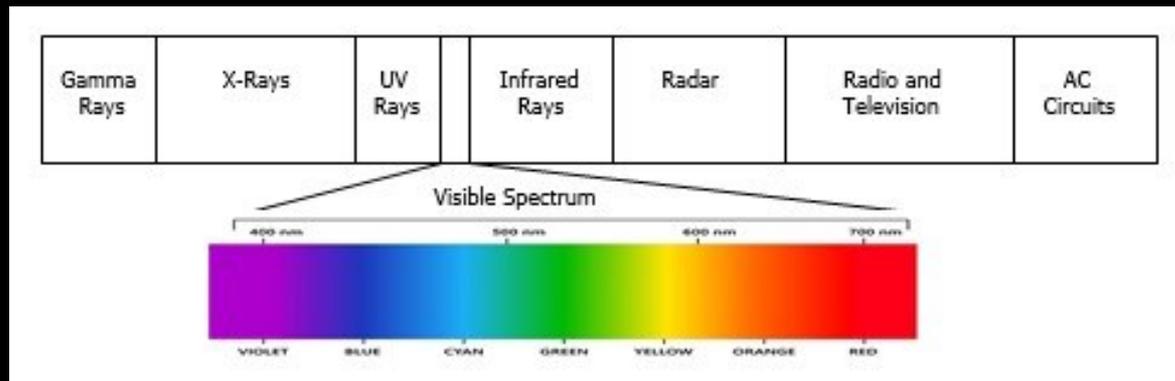
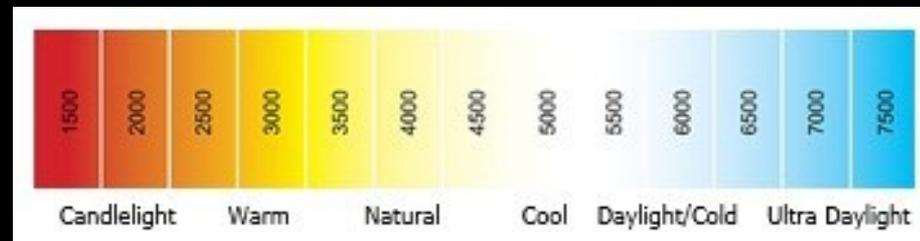
Chinese papercuts encapsulated in Mylar mounted between the top and center mats, floated above the bottom mat and mat backing. The same triple mat on each sample illustrates how color impacts the contrast (L) vs. shadows (R), impacting intensity.



Mats are the same size, with identical stem frame and wrapped deep bevel between the mats. Left mats blend with bamboo color, right mats accent the chop. The left appears confining drawing the eye into the bamboo, while the right opens it up because of matching the backing paper color.

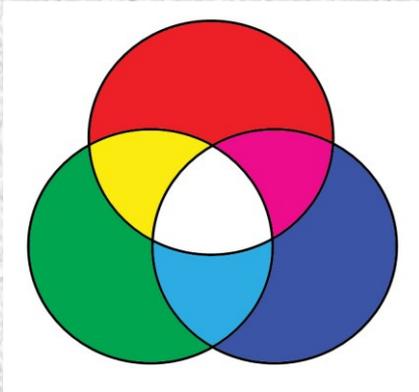
# Color & Light

Kelvin (K) is a unit of measurement for light bulb color temperature. Incandescent light bulbs usually produce warm light of 2700K to 3000K. LEDs bulbs produce a wider range of colors, from 2700K to 6500K. The lower the Kelvin scale, the warmer and more yellow the light. The higher the Kelvin value, the cooler and bluer the light.



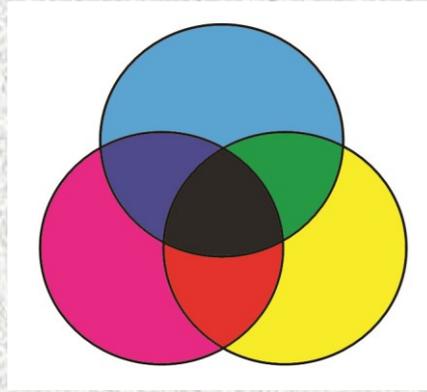
# Color Theory

## Additive Light



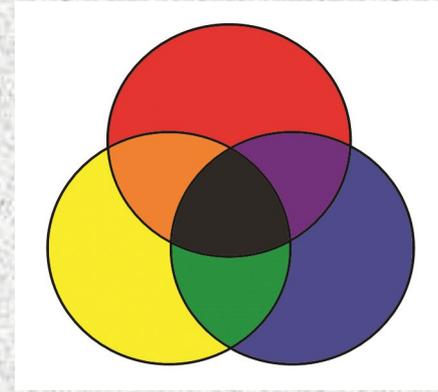
The three primaries of red, green, blue (RGB) create secondaries of yellow, cyan, magenta when overlapped. All six combined create white, all the colors in light are present and absorbed, it is the presence of all color.

## Subtractive Digital Pigment



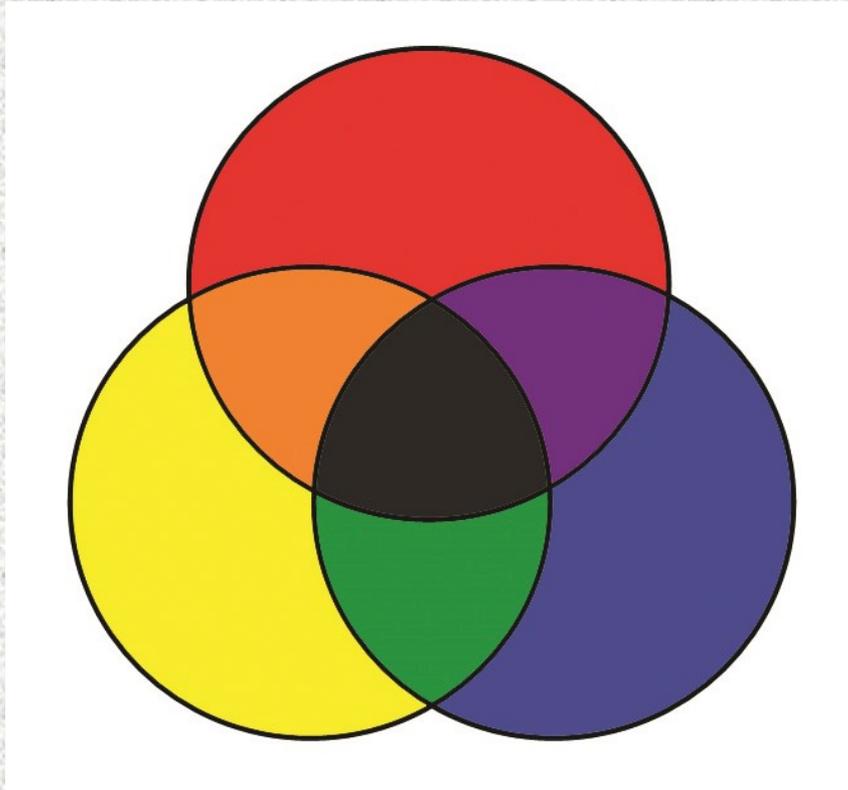
Primaries are cyan, magenta, yellow (CMY) which create secondaries of red, green, blue when overlapped. All six combined do not add color but subtract all light wavelengths creating black the absence of all color.

## Subtractive Artist Pigment



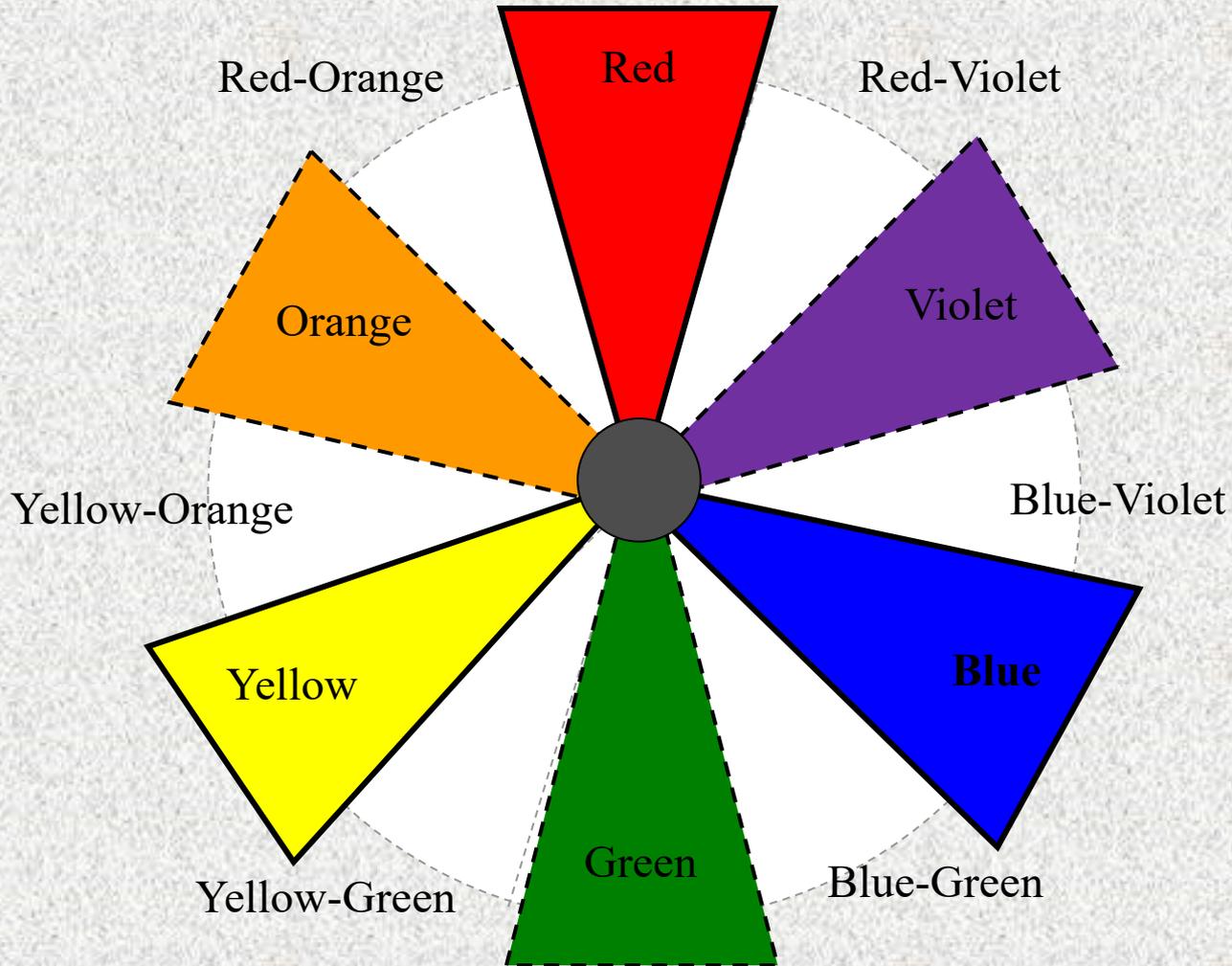
Primary pigmented colors of red, yellow, blue (RYB) with secondaries of orange, green, purple. When three primaries and three secondaries are blended the result should be black.

# Artist Pigment

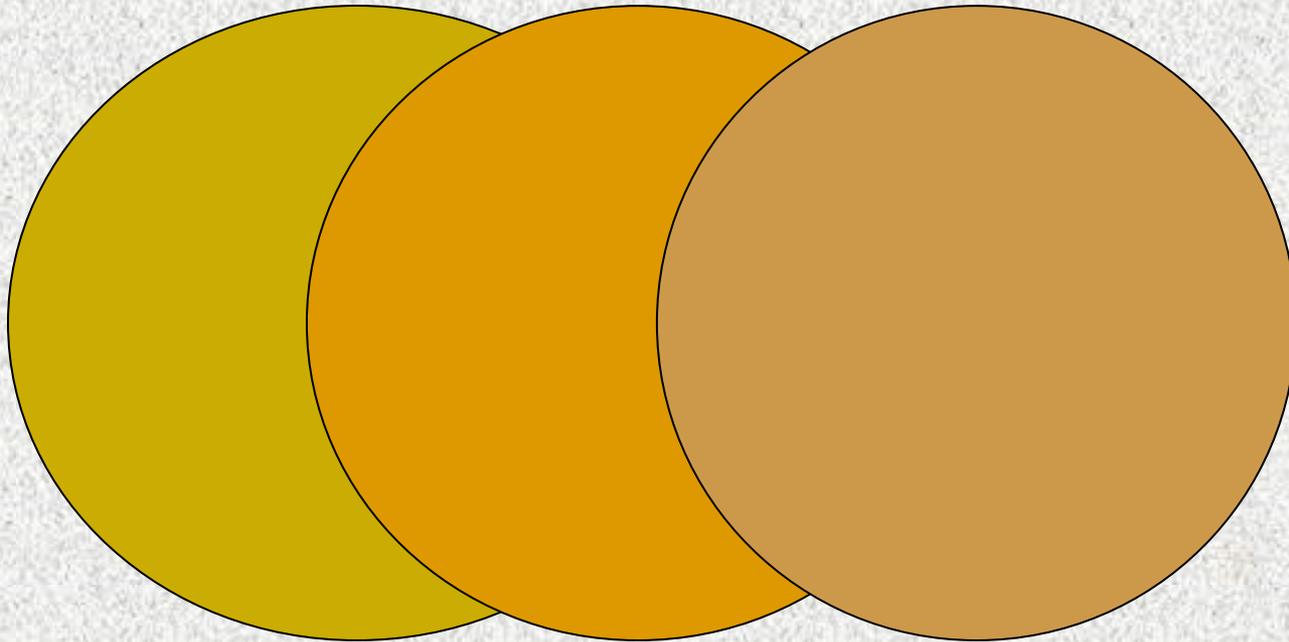


Primary colors cannot be created by mixing other colors. Pure pigmented primaries of red, yellow, and blue are mixed to create secondaries of orange, green, and purple.

# Color Wheel



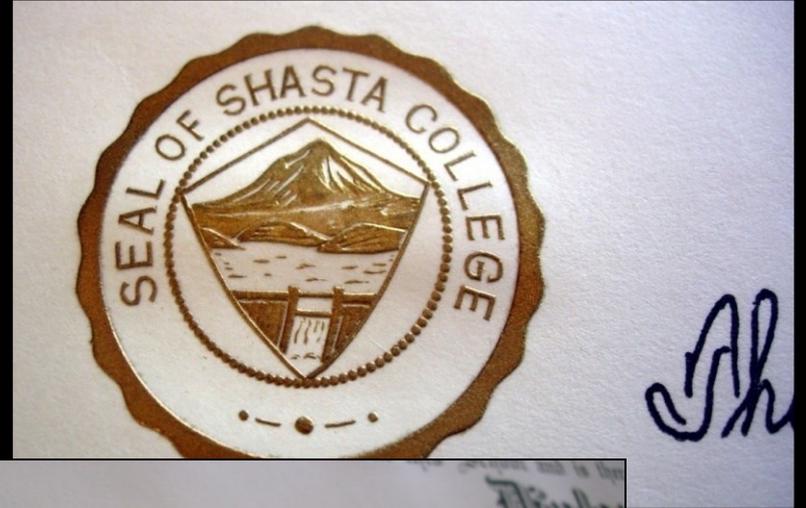
# Metallic Bases



Yellow Base

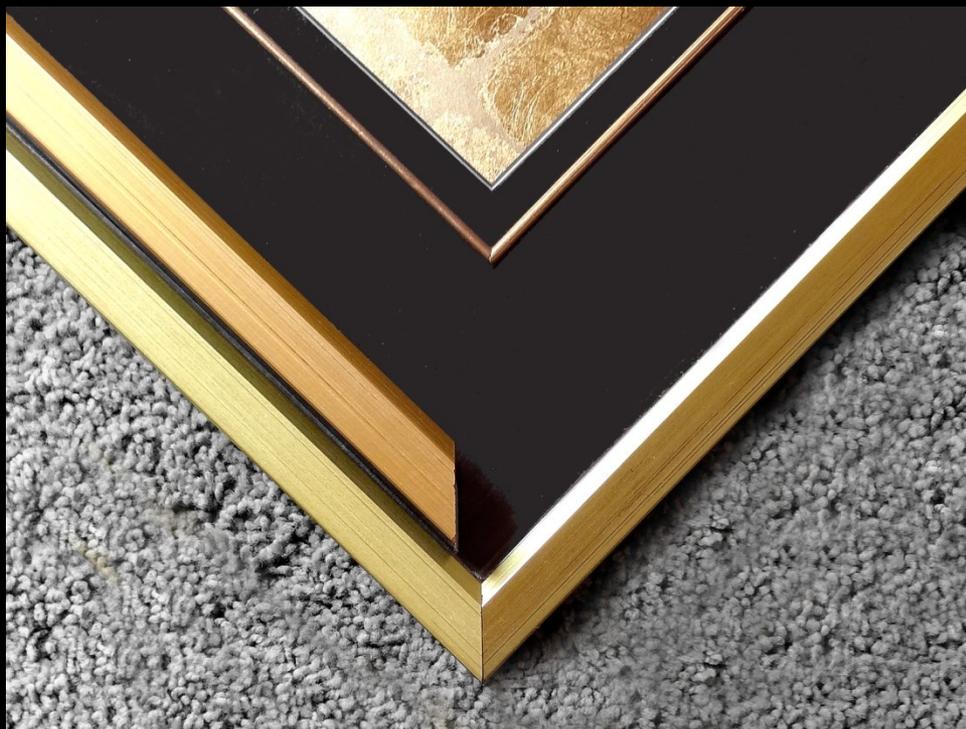
Red Base

Blue Base





Match metallic color families



Gold frame, red dye faded.  
Fillet hasn't faded under  
UV glass.





Fillet & frame originally matched. Yellow has faded from outer frame.



# Texture

- Visual vs. Tactile Texture
- Character of materials creating a visual look, mood and richness
- Different textures, same colors
- Threads of fabric, matboard surface, frame...



# Visual vs Tactile

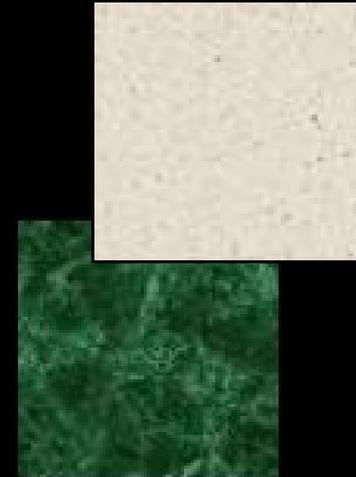
## *VISUAL TEXTURE*

The illusion of variations in light and shadow on a smooth surface that are 2-D only are *visual texture*.  
Matboard samples = granite, faux marble, flannel

## *TACTILE TEXTURE*

A 3-D surface which may be felt when touched is a textural surface with *tactile texture*.  
Matboard samples = silk, linen, suede, wrinkled wraps

Though all textures under glazing are untouchable they are still either visual or tactile in nature.



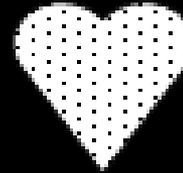
# Shape, Pattern, and Motif



Line  
as Shape



Shape  
with Texture



Shape  
with Pattern

A *pattern* is created by using repeated shapes. Line heart shape set of four into a clover pattern.



Multiples of the pattern (right) is now a *motif*, common in fillets to match a moulding.





Quadruple mat  
(silk plus 3 ragboards)  
on original watercolor  
and ink on  
mulberry paper.  
Silk has tactile texture.

Count the elements...

Line, texture, intensity, possibly proportion (but not in a good way).

Line, color, intensity, wider frame is better.



Original framing (above) and updated redesign of original pastel with softer colors mats and the textural frame.





Original calligraphy with 2 deep wrapped textural freeform mats & 2 freeform hand-cut 4-ply ragmats. Ink added to the mats by framer/artist with spacers. The design uses color, tactile texture, shape, & intensity.



"Tile"

No glazing, fit mounted.  
Natural bark paper wrapped  
over ragboard.  
Line, color, rhythm.

# Shape

- Shapes are natural, geometric, abstracted, or freeform
- *Shape* (2D) and *Mass* (3D) are essentially the same thing in different dimensions. A tree may appear as a 2D silhouette, while still having actual 3D mass.



# Types of Shapes



Natural  
Lifelike

Geometric  
Circles

Abstracted  
Reality

Nonobjective  
Freeform

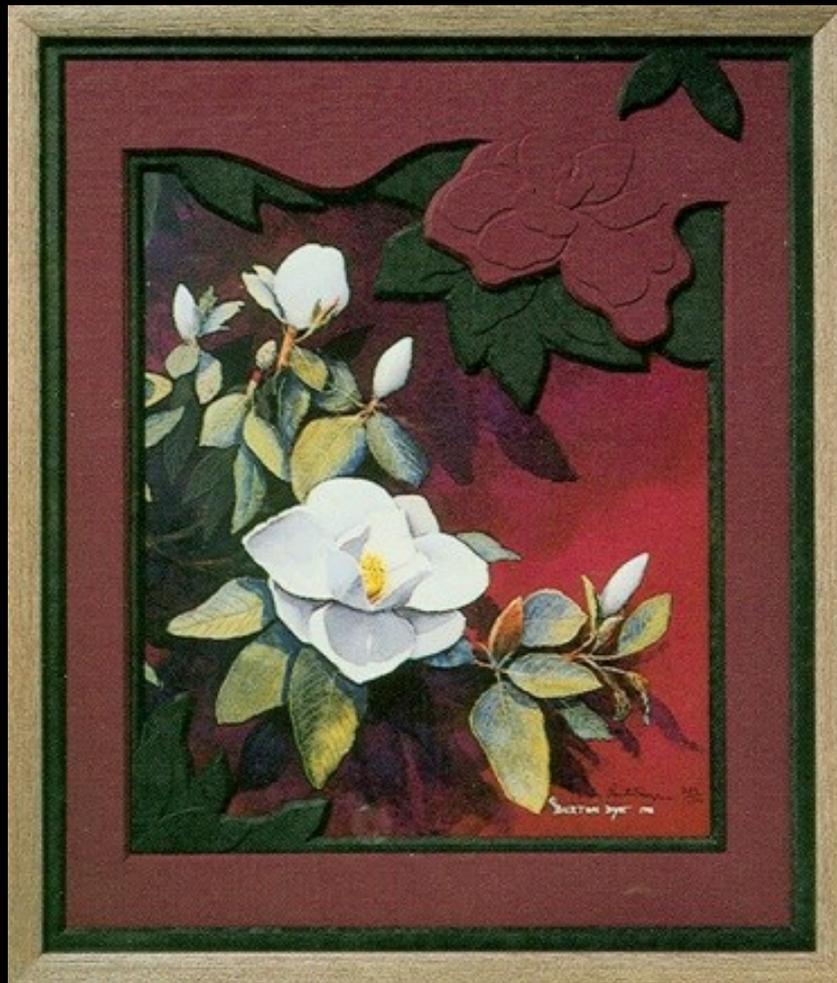
Shapes stand out from spaces surrounding them because of a defined boundary, or a difference of line, color, or texture. Thus, shape defines a specific area.



Shape dominance is used in the arrangement of shapes in a frame. By facing the middle and bottom birds inward viewer focus remains within the frame. With multiple openings balance also comes into play.

Freeform openings also help bring in the natural subject matter, as does the natural and bleached bark paper.





A triple deep wrapped, embossed fabric mat is decorative and showy. This invades the art and would only be acceptable as a showcase piece and/or done as a one-off request for a client design.



# Copyright

Since the development of CMCs shape has reigned supreme with multiple opening mats and combinations of basic window shapes and logo designs. But be careful of copyright infringement.

*Descriptive Fair Use* allows use of a trademark or intellectual property without permission if used for informational purposes, as in an article. *Nominative Fair Use* allows use of a registered trademark specifically to reference the products under that brand.



Images courtesy of  
Crescent Brands



# Intensity

- Evokes strong reactions of mood through highlight and shadow
- Uses creative applications and use of shadows
- Glass etching, deep bevels, stacked mouldings...





Spacers, shadows, &  
floated images.  
Line, color, intensity.

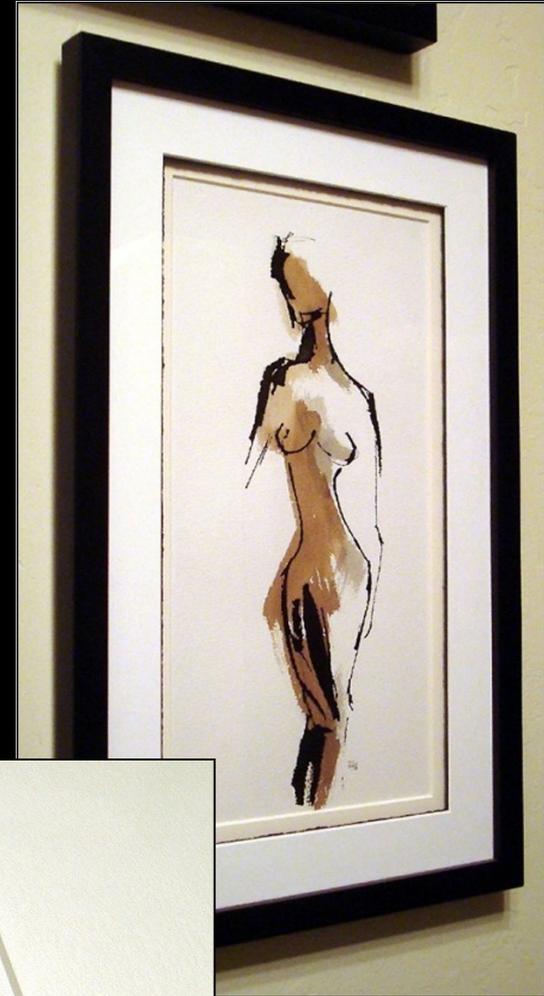


Images courtesy of Greg Perkins

# Accent Strips

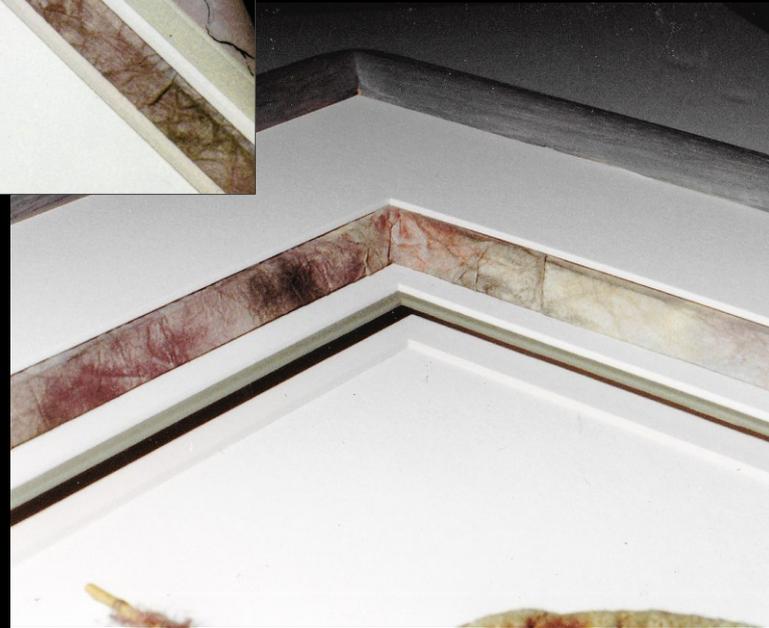
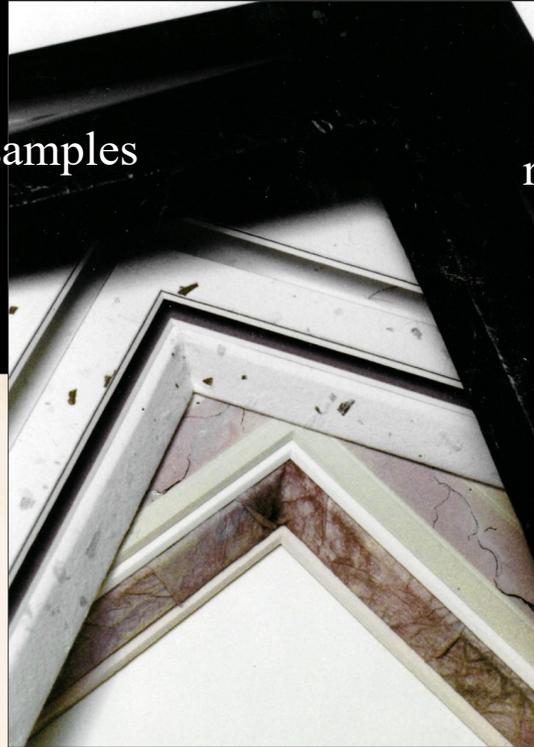
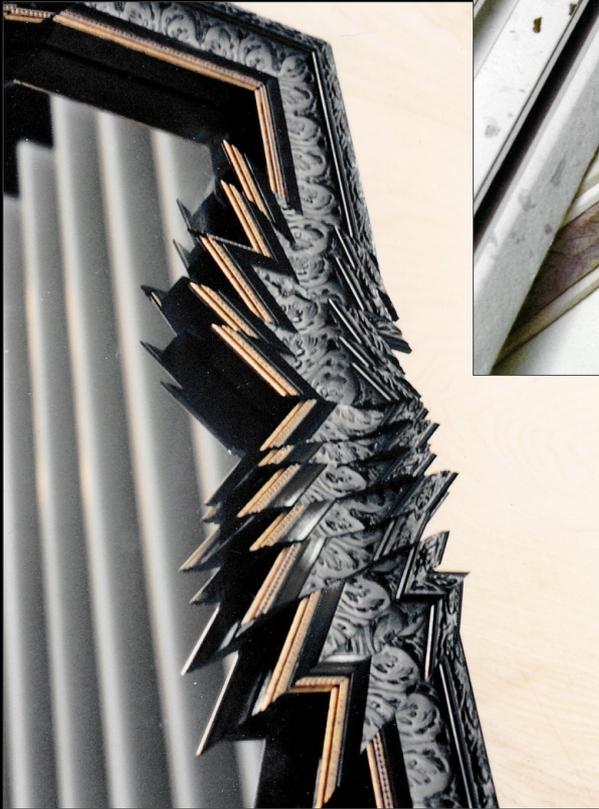
Torn strips fitted under or between mats,  
With or without spacers,  
Variable widths and edge deckles.

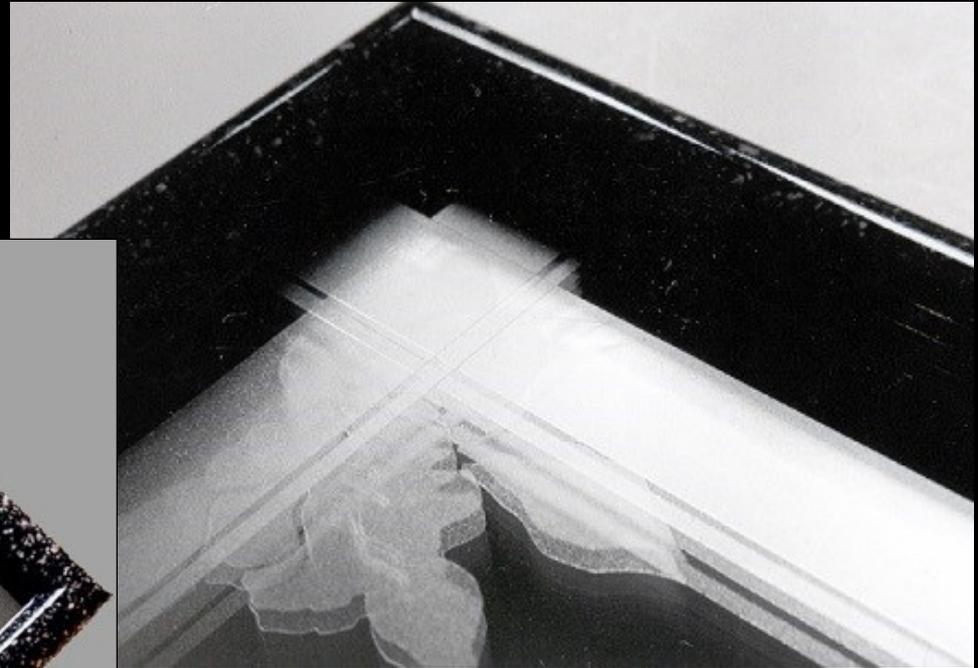
They attract attention (emphasis), also  
adding color, shape, and line.



Store corner samples

Intensity is drama, depth and the relationship of one part to another. It can be the mat, the frame, or etching on glass.





Faux glass etching on a mirror,  
for depth and intrigue.

Use scraps to create point-of-purchase  
mini mirrors as accent pieces.

# Space

- Distance around or between items to accent or unify
- Both as the outer frame and within the frame
- Wall groupings, shadow boxes, white around image



Images courtesy of Greg Perkins

*Optical spacing* is the placement of letters or items that appear in correct placement to each other.



*Mechanical spacing* is the literal same amount of negative space between each letter or item, which can appear incorrect or unbalanced.

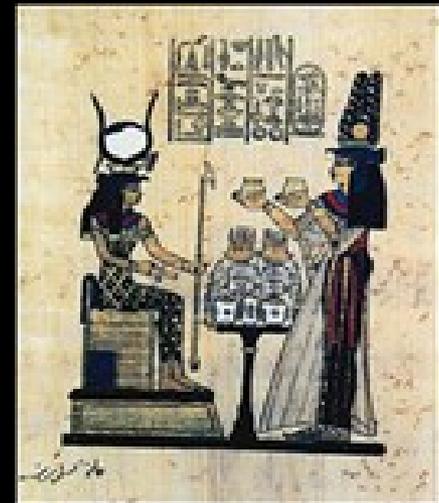


# Types of Space

*Pictorial space* is 2-D that only involves the length and width of shapes interacting on a flat surface. Silhouettes, stencils, and flat woodblock prints are examples of pure pictorial space. They are commonly found as patterns on fabric, decorative marbled papers, panels and Asian and European papercuts



*Illusionistic space* is when the concept of 3-D depth must be achieved through techniques of overlapping, layering, size, and perspective, while still being 2-D.

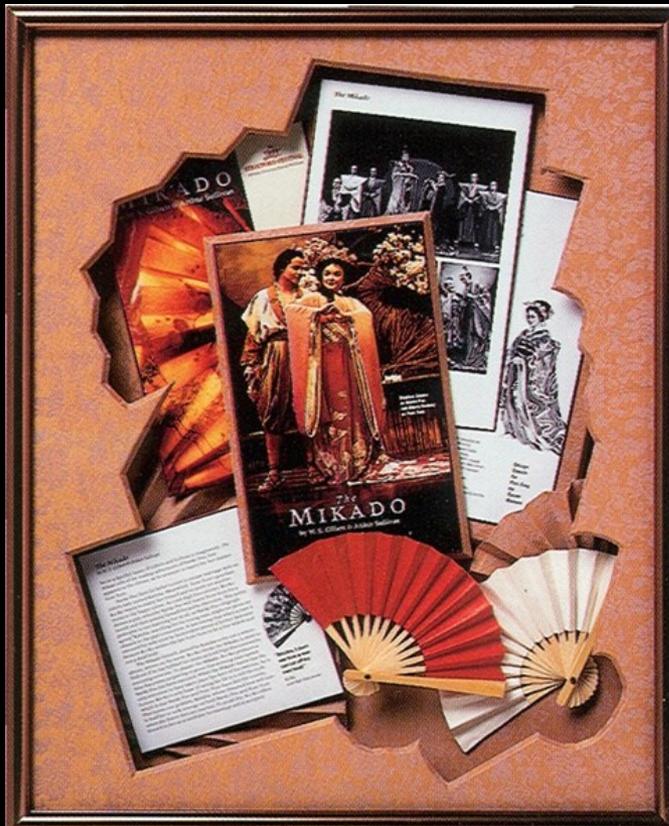


*Positive space* is the focus, where the images exist. *Negative space* is the area surrounding that focal point. Space becomes a countable element when the design heavily weights the mat, bringing more attention to the negative.



# Rhythm

- Use of measured accents, patterns, colors
- Repetition of select details, ratios
- It falls into either elements or factors...
- Art detail is reflected in fillet, moulding, mat carving



Rhythm is the repetition of visual elements to establish a pattern.



Rhythm—or repetition—can be achieved through color, texture...

Soft brushed antique  
silver works with  
melted opaque waxes.





Chinese tile simply framed with a single LJ moulding that replicates the color, feather pattern, and era of European Chinoiserie.

Simple, minimal,  
contemporary design of  
Greg Perkins showing  
use of rhythm in the  
frame and fillet taken  
directly from the art, as  
with the black mat.

Notice how your eye goes to  
and from the art to the frame,  
fillet and art again.

That's a unified design!



# Proportion (Scale)

- Ratios and relationship of one part to another
- It makes the world recognizable
- Art, border widths, and frame to each other...scale



Plein Air frames  
have a set width  
limiting  
proportion





A PPFA PRINT competition piece from decades ago. The scale of the pattern of the fabric overwhelms the sepia photo on the cover.

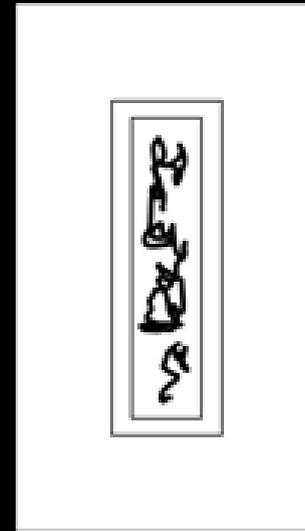
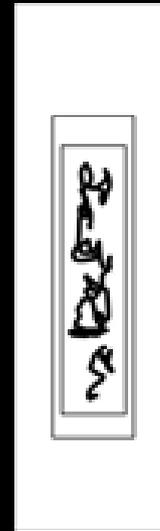
Weighted side mat with three same width of this intricate pencil drawing of a craggy, old man, accentuated the close-up. By adding the spacer between the two white ragmats he seemed 3D.





# Asian Proportions

- Maintains the exaggerated rectangle better
- Greater heaven than earth
- Not about materials, but widths and balance
- Not only applied to Asian art



和風朗日喻天懷



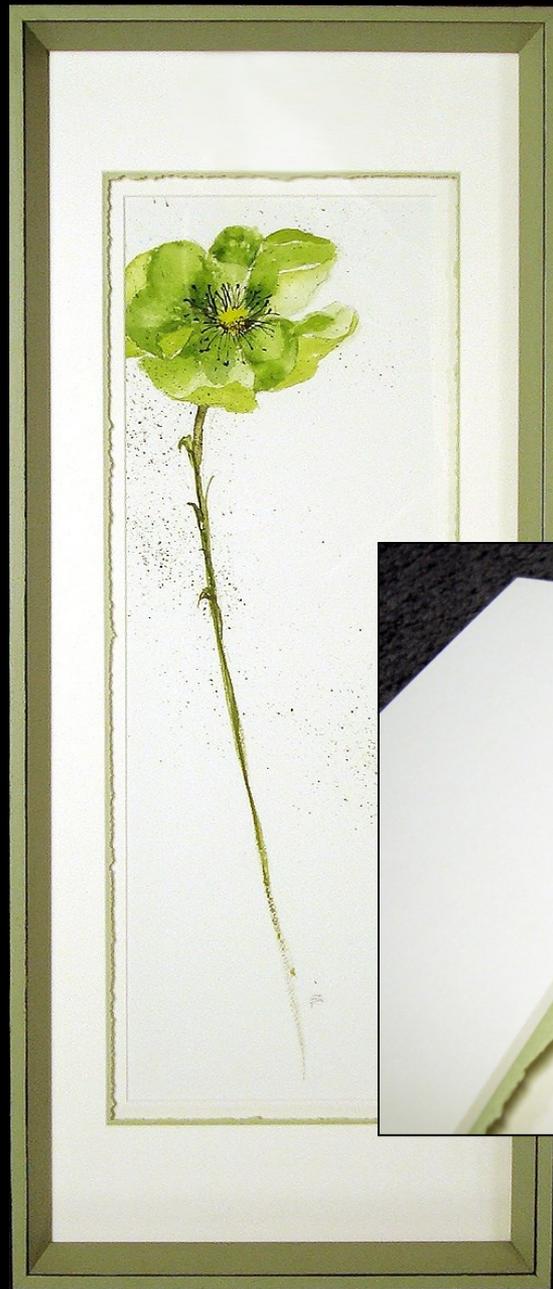
大江東去浪淘盡千古風流人物故壘西邊  
人道是三國周郎赤壁亂石崩雲驚濤拍岸  
捲浪千堆雪江山如畫一時多少豪傑遙  
想公瑾當年小  
喬初嫁了雄姿英發羽扇綸  
巾談笑間檣櫓灰飛煙滅故壘神遊多情應  
笑我早生華髮人間如夢一樽還酹江月

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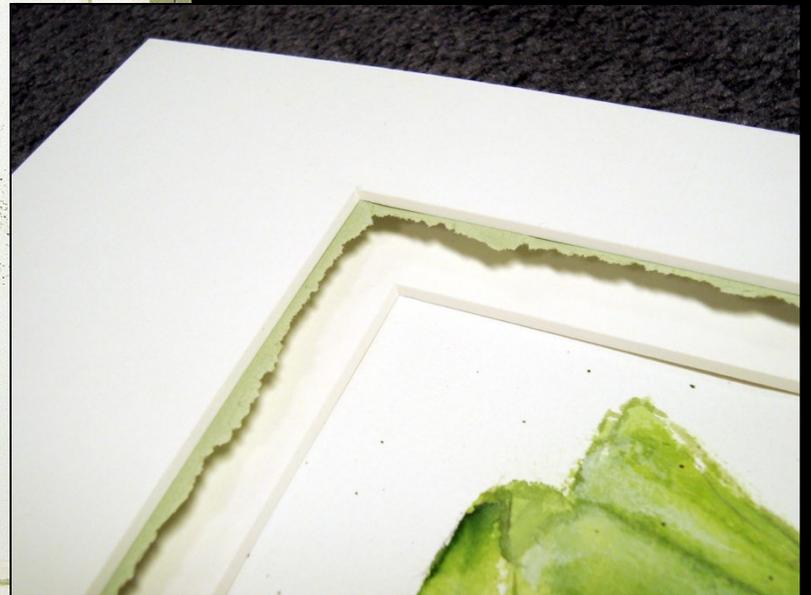






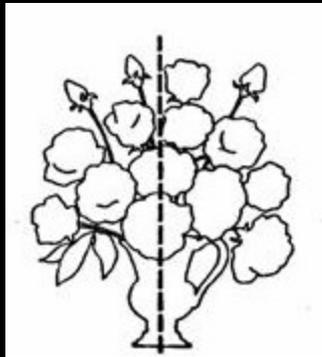
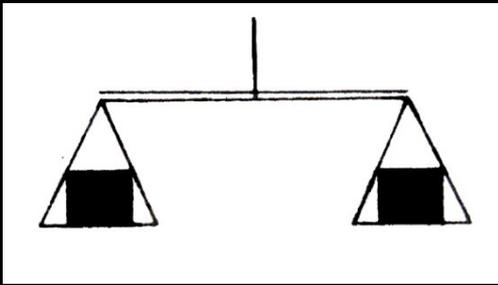


Color,  
Shape,  
Proportion,  
Intensity



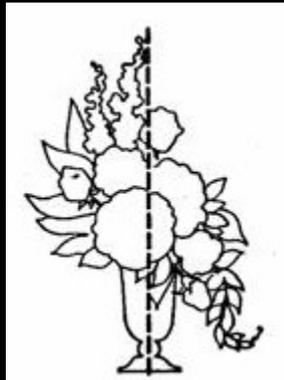
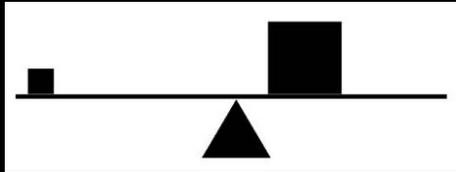
# Balance

- Equality in weight, attention or attraction to all parts
- Visual balance of the design elements
- Relationships of fillet to mat to frame...



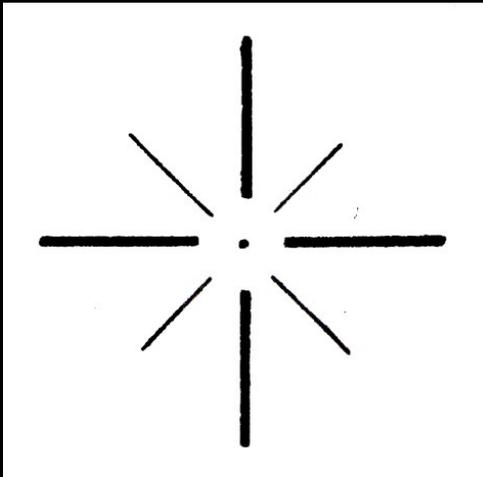
# Asymmetrical Balance

- Creates a visual balance by countering the weight on an invisible axis



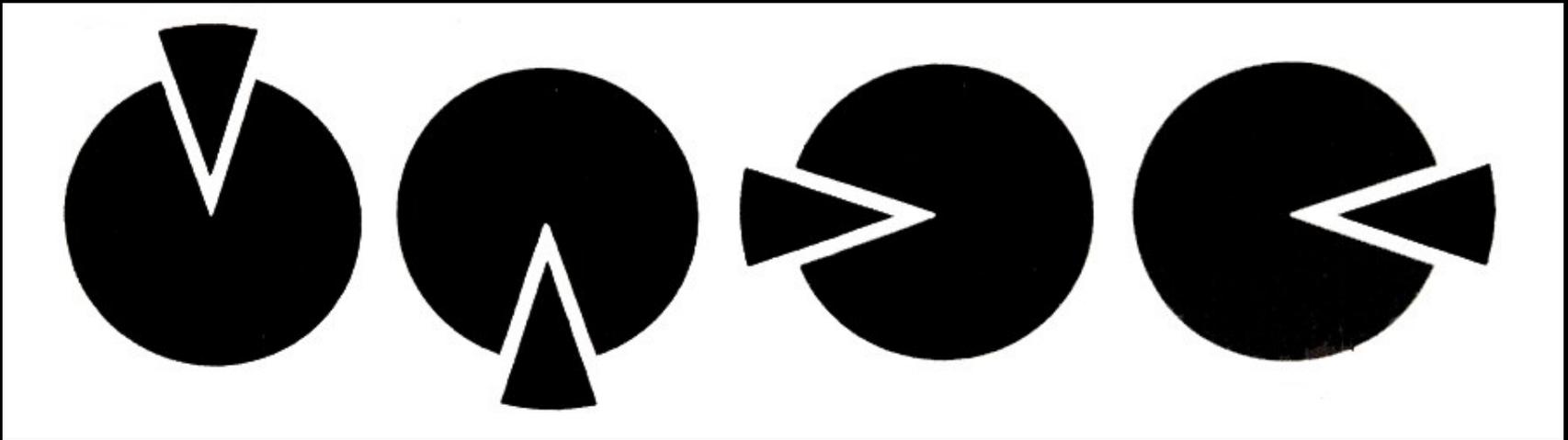
# Radial Balance

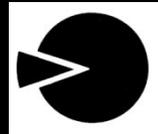
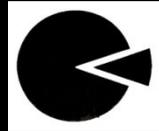
- Emanates from the center to the outer edges
- Creates a circular pattern



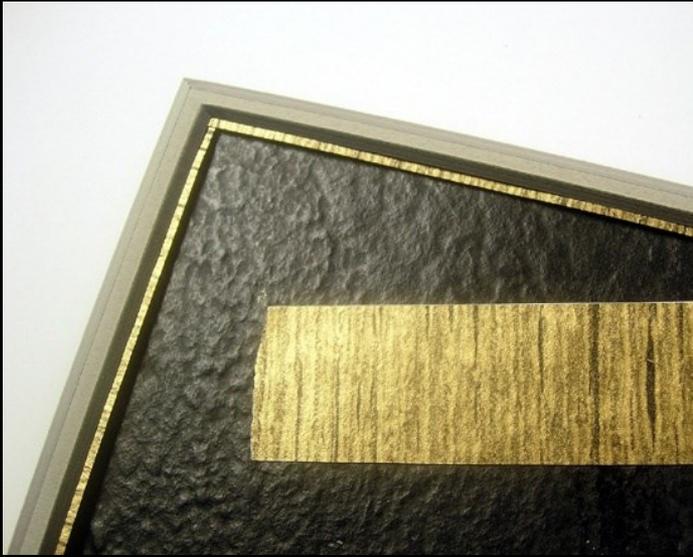
# Emphasis

- Physical positioning of focal point
- Controls eye movement and attention
- Physical position within frame
- Very important Factor of Design





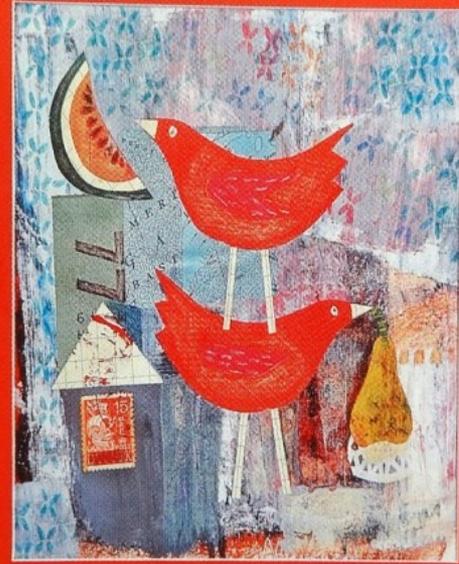
Emphasis by Implied Movement



Emphasis by Portrait Direction



Emphasis by Shape and Direction



Emphasis by Color Placement



# Unity Style

- Quality of oneness, a fusion among the individual elements
- Design harmony where everything feels right
- Specific characteristics as in a type of art or period in history
- This establishes the mood, color and type or framing technique
- Art Deco, Impressionist, Contemporary, Victorian...

Unity may be achieved in many ways; there are four basic concepts to help integrate unity into a successful design.

1. *Limit* the number of elements used in a frame design from 3-5 five.
2. *Proximity* meaning everything relates to each other by manipulating the elements of space, placement and emphasis to create a visual flow.
3. *Repetition* of patterns, textures, and shapes resulting in emphasis, and balance to create unity.
4. *Harmony* with all design components having something in common. The art establishes a style and period, allowing for a mood, color, and feel for any given design.

# Visual vs. Intellectual Unity

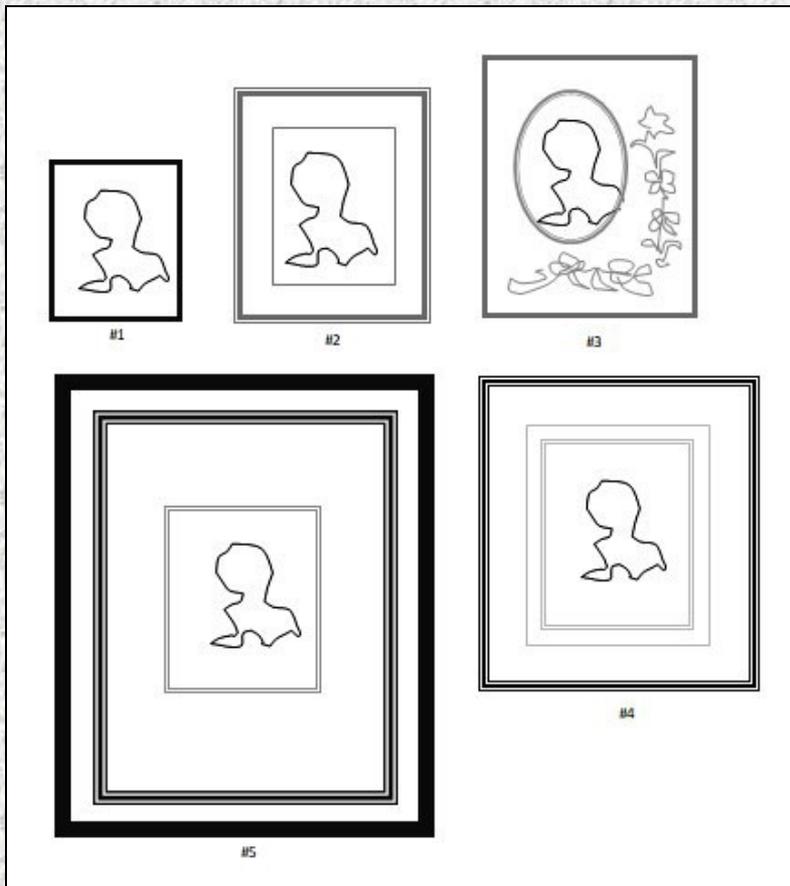
*Visual Unity* is when color, texture, pattern, all elements appear connected denoting harmony when viewed. No one thing stands alone or demands visual attention, it all interrelates.

*Intellectual Unity* illustrates a common theme or central idea, which does not necessarily produce a unified design. Being Sherlock Holmes--or Grandma--isn't enough; it must all tell a story.



# Selling Design

- Sell up - once they've seen the best it's hard to go back
- Ask for the sale
- Offer alternatives



## Framed Samples always sell

**#1** Basic Photo Frame - Value \$100  
Ready made frame, no mat

**#2** Single Mat - Value \$200  
Single mat increasing frame size  
Wider moulding

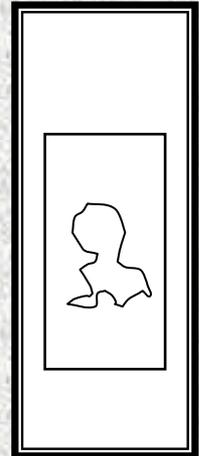
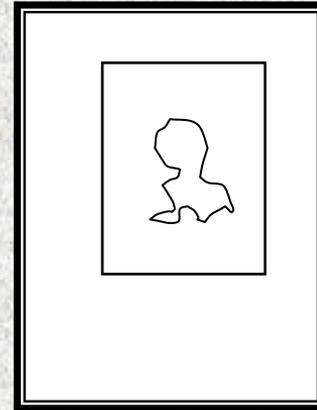
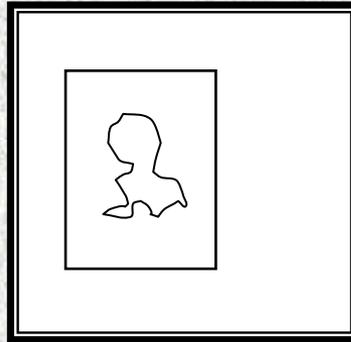
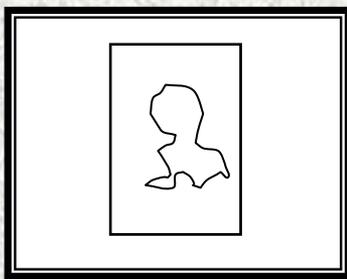
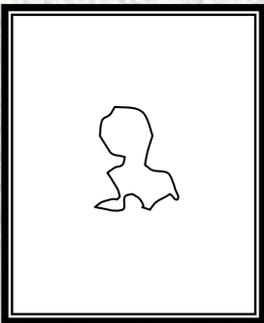
**#3** Double Oval Mat - Value \$300  
Double oval mats  
Surface designs of paint, embossing

**#4** Panel Mat - Value \$400  
Double panel mat w/spacers and accent strip  
Upscale moulding and preservation treatments

**#5** Stacked/Leafed Mouldings - Value \$800  
Fillet and stacked mouldings

# Variations of a Theme

- Shape, Space, Proportion
- Just as there should be a series of five design options from the economy to the elegant, if there is adequate wall space sets of unusual designs should also be showcased.
- Asian and contemporary proportions will sell better when shown.
- Show proportion varieties and unusual placements to help sell larger frames and more innovative designs.



## **Additional Resources**

Chris A Paschke, Designs Ink, <https://www.designsinkart.com/library.shtml>

*"The Design Process"*, PFM, 12-part series, 1994.

*"Design And Critique"*, PFM series, 1997.

*"The Essence of Design"*, PFM, 12-part series, 2000-2001.

Paschke, Chris A. The Principles of Framing Design.

California: Designs Ink Publishing, 2026.

Perkins, Greg. Great Framing Design. New Jersey: PFM Books, 2009.

# Other Paschke classes WCAF 2026

## **Designs Elements: Understanding Color**

Friday, 1:00pm - 3:00pm

## **Mastering Mounting: Sensitive Items**

Saturday, 9:00am - 11:30am

## **Mastering Mounting: Mounting Basics**

Saturday, 1:00pm - 3:00pm

## **Mastering Mounting: Handling Digitals**

Sunday, 1:30pm - 3:30pm

Paschke Online  
Article Archive and Reference Library

<https://designsinkart.com/library.shtml>

Articles by Subject:  
Frame Expo 2026 Orlando  
**PowerPoint and Outline PDFs**

## THE PRINCIPLES OF FRAMING DESIGN

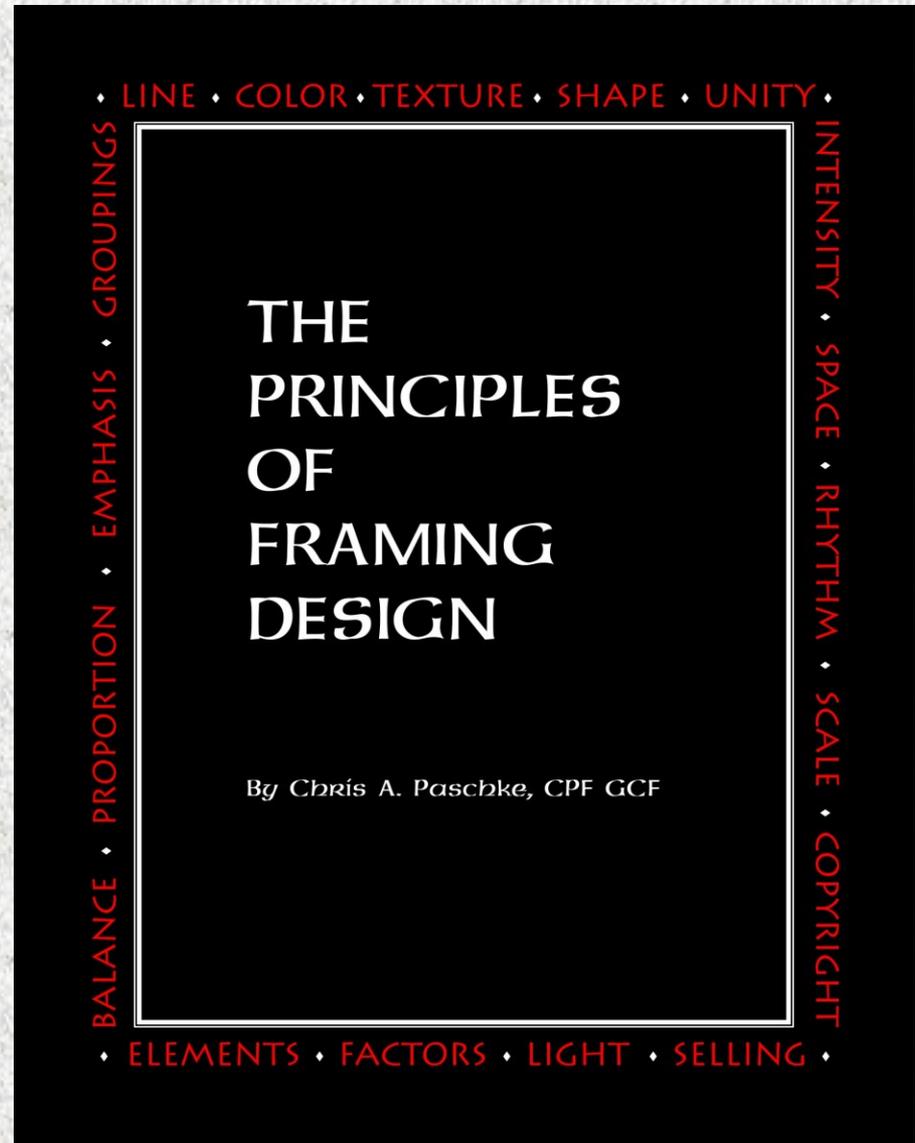
By Chris A. Paschke, CPF GCF

Unlike any other design book in the industry, *The Principles of Framing Design* examines traditional Design 101 art concepts but reconfigures them to fit within the confines of the picture framing industry. Never has a design manual redefined the elements to work within the confines of frame design including mats, moulding and layout. This is written for custom framers, artists, and photographers who do their own framing, as well as those interested in designing for both PPFA and general framing competitions.

In-depth chapter by chapter discussions of the elements (line, color, texture, shape, intensity, space, and rhythm) and factors (proportion, balance, emphasis, unity) which together form the palette of principles that remain the fundamentals of successful frame design.

This 2026 release from Designs Ink PUBLISHING, is a laminated, soft cover, 172 pages, 7 x 9", that retails for \$39.95. Soon available as a PDF version.

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