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The ART of framing a picture

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Frames and mats enhance and contribute to the importance and effectiveness of a picture by creating an illusion of size, depth and perspective to the picture. They form a transition between the picture and the wall. Frames protect the edges of a picture, hold protective glass which keep the picture clean and facilitate hanging.

**FRAMES**

When mats are used, frames are usually quite narrow. Fragile pictures such as delicate water colors, etchings, engravings and photographs usually are matted and framed in a narrow frame about ½ inch in width. Medium to large-size matted pictures may have frames from ¾ inch up to 1½ to 2 inches in width.

Large pictures with bold heavy lines and bright colors need wide frames. They are sometimes framed like oil paintings without mats in frames 2 to 5 inches wide. Glass is used if there is no protective coating on the picture.

Frames with removable backs enable you to change your pictures periodically. Invisi­ble frames which have only a cover glass to protect the pictures also offer flexibility. They are inexpensive. Clips at the back hold the edges together securely. Charts, maps, and temporary pictures are easily inserted under the glass.

**Frame styles**

Choice of the frame style depends upon the subject matter of the picture and the room decor. A frame has a functional purpose and should not dominate nor be more decorative than the picture it frames. A frame is the connecting link between the picture and the wall and should complement the picture. If your picture has simple lines, use a simple frame. Pictures with much detail look best in frames which are subtle in design and color.

When selecting a frame consider the various styles such as:

1. **Traditional style.** Carved, elaborate and ornate frames often are antiqued or finished in gold leaf or in rich mahogany or walnut. Pictures with rich coloring and formal subject matter, paintings done a century ago and prints by the "old masters" usually are framed in the more ornate style. However, ornate carved and gilded frames are less frequently used in modern homes because of lower ceilings, smaller rooms and modern decorating styles. When used they should not be overly ornate to draw attention away from the picture itself.

2. **Provincial and Early American Style.** Natural wood usually is finished to bring out the grain and color of the wood. Finishes may be slightly stained and waxed or antiqued. Pictures of landscapes, still life, fruit and floral prints often are used.

3. **Modern Style.** Frames are simple and either left natural or painted. Frames for modern art often are narrow. Often just a small molding covers the edge of the stretcher.

**Frame Finishes**

The color or finish should be closely related to the picture. It may be neutral, toned with a color from the picture or a color in close harmony with it. Usually a color which is neither the lightest nor the darkest color in the picture is best. The frame should be darker than the mat and in harmony with both the picture and the wall. Narrow frames may be gold, black or natural.

**Availability of frames**

Ready-made frames are available or you can have a frame made. Or you can buy moulding and make your own frame. The corners of hard wood, however, are very difficult to miter accurately.

Picture moulding has a groove or rabbet cut into the bottom inner edge. This holds the picture, backing and glass. Builder's moulding, however, may be used if a groove is made or you can cut, or glue a thin strip of wood on the back of the moulding.

**MATS AND GLASS**

In general, all pictures except oil paintings and processed reproductions have both a mat and a glass. **Width of a mat** is determined by the picture, frame and background. Narrow mats should be used
if a frame is very wide. Wide mats set pictures apart from competitive wallpapers and backgrounds. They enlarge small pictures which otherwise may seem insignificant. Pictures which show decided movement or action should be framed with wide mats, especially if the lines of the picture tend to carry the eye out of the frame. Also wide mats are needed when the subject seems to "fill" the picture. On the other hand, mats which are too wide make the picture seem unimportant. Wood cuts and etchings usually require wider mats than other types.

Sometimes a print has a large plain area surrounding it which may take the place of a mat. Often one sees bird and flower prints which do not have a mat; however, it usually is best to mat them anyway about ¼ inch away from the edge of the print.

A wide mat allows a picture to be seen easily.

A mat is omitted or must be of thin cardboard when a non-glare glass is used, because the glass must be placed directly against the picture to avoid a haze caused by its density.

A glass may be omitted if a picture is dry mounted to a rigid backing and sprayed with plastic. An area around the picture which is part of the backing may serve as a mat or the picture may be mounted up to the edge of the backing. Oil paintings and good reproductions of them are best protected from dirt and wear by spraying them with three or four coats of clear plastic, mat finish, available at art supply stores.

Textures and colors of mats and frames should be chosen with care to bridge the gap and form a pleasing transition from the picture itself to the background against which it is seen.

A mat color generally should be an off-white or a very light pastel. Mats either should duplicate a color in the picture or harmonize with the wall color. They should not be lighter than the lightest color in the picture. It usually is safe to choose a color slightly darker than the lightest color in the picture or a natural color. A white mat may be too stark and draw attention to itself.

Mats may be effective if of cork, rice paper, or of tagboard covered with fabric, grass cloth, wallpaper or other plain and slightly textured material.

Law of Margins

The Greeks were masters at good proportions and pleasing space relationships. The ratios of 2:3 and 5:7:11 are standards of good proportion. Standards help overcome the optical illusion which makes objects in a vertical position appear to drop in space. Exact measurements may not give the desired effect due to varying forces in lines and colors in a picture; therefore measurements may be approximate.

Examples which follow use the Greek "Law of Margins" to determine approximate widths for mats of pictures which are square, vertical or horizontal. Since ratios are more difficult to figure, the examples are worked out in fractions.

The bottom width of mats always is the widest.

If the picture is square, the sides and top margins should be equal; if the picture is vertical, the top margin should be wider than the sides; if horizontal the side margins should be wider than the top.

The bottom width is determined first in relation to the picture itself, the frame and the place where it will be hung. It will be necessary to try different widths to find a pleasing proportion for the bottom width.

Examples are given to determine the size of mats in inches using fractions based on the law of margins.

Examples

1. For a square picture (Ratio 2:3)—
top and side widths = \( \frac{2}{3} \times \text{number of inches at bottom.} \)

\[ \frac{2}{3} \times 4 \] (In this example, 4 inches was decided upon as a pleasing proportion) = \( \frac{8}{3} \) or 2 2/3 inches (for top and side widths)
2. For a vertical picture (Ratio 5:7:11)—

- top width—$\frac{7}{11} \times \text{number of inches at bottom}$. (In this example, 6 inches was decided upon as a pleasing proportion)

- $\frac{7}{11} \times 6$
- $\frac{42}{11}$ or $3 \frac{9}{11}$ inches (for top width)

- side widths—$\frac{5}{11} \times \text{number of inches at bottom width}$
- $\frac{7}{11} \times 5$
- $\frac{35}{11}$ or $3 \frac{3}{11}$ inches (for side widths)

If you plan to mat a picture using a frame already in existence, make the bottom width of the mat widest. Try to make the side and top widths nearest to the shape of the picture. Consider what looks to be pleasing proportions.

To prepare the mat cut the outer edge of the mat to fit the frame. It can be slightly smaller to allow for expansion. Then cut the mat opening for the picture. The opening should be slightly smaller than the picture so the picture can be placed behind the mat. Using a mat knife and metal edged ruler, cut the edges of a thick mat so that it is beveled with the slanted edge toward the composition. This may require considerable practice and skill to cut well. The beveled edge may be colored if desired. Otherwise, a bright or colored strip may be inserted between the composition and the mat to show about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch or less along the cut edge of the mat. Miter corners of the strip. It may be gold, black or be the accent color of the composition and highlight or enhance the colors in the print. Sometimes fine lines are drawn on and near the cut or beveled edge of the mat to enhance the picture and give it a finished appearance.

Tape the picture to the back of the mat with masking tape and place it in the frame; then back it with cardboard. More than one piece may be needed for a good fit. Use small headless nails in the frame to hold materials snugly in place. Nails should not project. Wrapping paper pasted to the frame on the back will make the picture dust-proof. It should be free of wrinkles, firmly glued and have well-trimmed edges. Masking tape may be used instead of paper to seal the space between the frame and the cardboard.

**HANGING DEVICES**

Measure about one-third down from the top of the frame back and place a screw eye at each point on each side. This will permit the picture to hang flat against the wall.
Cut a wire 6 inches longer than the distance between the two screw eyes. Put the ends of the wire through the screw eyes two inches. Pull and twist these ends back around the wire. If the picture is heavy, back twist to keep the wires from slipping.

Wire should be short enough so that it will not show above the picture when hung. Other hanging devices are available. Be sure they are securely attached to support the picture. Gummed hooks may not adhere to rough plaster. Adhesive may also be affected by humidity.

Place a thumb tack at each lower corner on the back of the frame to keep dust from collecting behind it and soiling the wall. Be sure hooks in wall are secure and will safely support the picture. For comfort in viewing, hang picture at eye level. This is judged by the position of the person viewing the picture.

**LIGHTING**

Pictures may need lighting beyond general room illumination. Dark corners can come alive with a well-lighted picture. Consider using over-the-picture reflectors, mantel reflectors, spot lights and lighted picture frames. The picture should not appear to be lighted. The source of light should not be visible from normal viewing angles. An improper angle of light which produces glare also should be avoided, especially on varnished or glass-covered pictures. Non-glare glass avoids this problem.