

# Matting and Mounting Your Photographs

*Here's how to support your work with high-quality presentation*

by **John Siskin**

*Impressionist painter Edgar Degas once said, "The frame is the reward of the artist." It gives your work a sense of strength by providing a place, set apart, for your photograph to present itself to the viewer. My best images look good in a tray full of fixer, better when I mat them, and outstanding when framed. Each step in the process supports and encourages the image.*

Photographers generally create large numbers of images. What do we do with all these images? Digital has only made this problem worse—do you only want to fill up your hard drive with your work? Will you settle for pumping them out of your printer and tacking them to the wall (figure 1)? If we want other people to respect our work, we need to support it with high-quality presentation.

## Business decisions

Of course, if you are a portrait or wedding photographer, framing is a profit point for your business. I know photographers who make as much on the frame as they do on the print. If doing your own framing is part of your business strategy, you should develop a business relationship with a wholesale framing supplier. This will allow you to do your own framing with access to any materials you want. Even a photographer who doesn't frame work all the time can use a wholesale outfit. Choosing your suppliers well is important whether you are working on a few images for a show or your living space, or creating family portraits for a living.

Your supplier should have samples of a lot of frames, whether in a store setting or a catalog or online. If you are framing for yourself or for a gallery show, you may be able to make a choice from the Web or a catalog. If you are creating work for someone else's home, you may want to bring them into the decision. The



**Figure 1.** *Don't do this! Non-professional display of a photograph.*

easiest way to do this is to order sets of corner moldings from your frame supplier. You hold these corners against the photograph to see how that frame would look on a specific photo. This is one of the most important choices you make for your piece, so your frame supplier should help to make it easier. Your supplier should also have mats and other needed materials. My supplier, Valley Moulding and Frame ([www.valleymoulding.com](http://www.valleymoulding.com), 800-932-7665), even has framing classes.

## Archival preservation

Archival preservation is an important issue with matting and framing. With the increasing number of print types available, photographers need to be aware of how our prints are presented and whether the presenta-

tion will help the print last a long time. Of course, print preservation has always been an issue, but now it is more confusing due to the growth of digital. I consulted a photographic conservator while preparing this article, and will present the conservator's suggestions, along with some commercial options.

If you expect to sell photographs, it's important to prepare them for maximum longevity. You owe that to your customers and to your reputation. One way to evaluate the suitability of a product for use with photographs is to check whether it passed the photographic activity test (PAT). Products that passed will generally stand the test of time. More information about PAT testing is available at [www.imagepermanenceninstitute.org](http://www.imagepermanenceninstitute.org).

I generally use natural white museum or rag board, both of which are made from cotton fibers. A large range of full-rag color boards is available from Crescent and Bainbridge. I get the boards from Valley Moulding and Frame. You may need to have a business or resale license to deal with a wholesale frame supplier. Wherever you get your mat boards, be sure they are archival.

## The decision process

In deciding how to frame my image, I generally begin with the mat. I use white board for fine-art pieces because it creates a neutral environment for the image. When I mat

images for my commercial portfolio I use black board because it provides more “pop” for the images. Mats are available in a rainbow of colors, but I see photographs most often matted in neutral colors: white, cream, grey, and black. If you have an image that works best against purple, however, I think you should go ahead and use that (as long as it works with other work that may be around it). Don’t be afraid to try new color options.

Other issues must be considered as well: will I leave a white border on the print and include that in the open area? Will I cut the mat to expose only the image? Will I sign the mat? With silver gelatin prints, I usually leave the border visible and sign the print itself because I like the look of the white photo paper. With digitally printed images, I generally mat up to the image and sign the mat because I don’t feel the need to display the inkjet paper I’m printing on.

With a mat selected, I think about the frame. Choosing your frame is a very important part of the process. The frame provides separation between the image and the surrounding wall; it helps let the eye know that something special is coming. A bright and very complex frame doesn’t fit into many rooms, and it separates the art from the wall, and from the room. If you use a very plain frame and it doesn’t give the image enough separation from the surrounding wall, the photograph appears plain. If you use a frame with fancy carving, you might want to use a muted tone. If you are using a plain frame, maybe a metal channel frame, a brighter-toned frame will often work. Personally, I try to avoid shiny frames, and tend to go with a boring choice—black satin metal—because I think a black frame does a good job of isolating the image. When I frame something for my home, I often use a wood frame because I like the warmth, but my choice is dictated by the place the print will go.

I generally begin by choosing and sizing my mat. There are two reasons for the mat: 1) to keep the photo-

graph from touching the glass, and 2) to visually isolate the art from its surroundings. Your mat also can help bring your frame to a standard size, such as 11×14 or 16×20 inches, which makes it easier and cheaper to order frames. Of course you also can use custom frame sizes.

### Mat cutting

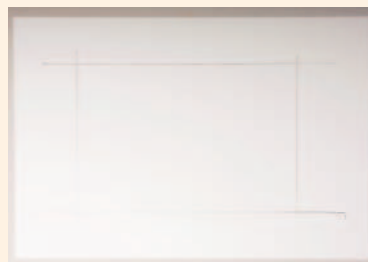
I start by outlining the area I want to cut out. I determine this by putting the image to be framed onto the board, which is cut to its final size, and visually center it. Then I put a ruler under the print area to center it side-to-side (figure 2) and add the amount of border under the window mat, if any, to the size of the print. I write down the distance remaining on the board, as it is where I will cut the mat window. I do the same thing top and bottom, but I usually offset the print toward the top of the mat by 10% to 20% because that looks more balanced. Next, I draw a pencil line on the back of the board, where the mat will be cut (figure 3). I find that a T-square and a combination square are a big help with this. Don’t forget to check this pencil line against your image: it’s easy to change now and difficult-to-impossible to change later.

Mats can be cut with an X-Acto knife and a straight edge, but that doesn’t look as good as a beveled (angled) edge made with a mat cutter. A mat cutter can hold the board straight and fix the cutting head at an exact angle to the board, enabling beveled edges. I only cut mats a few times a year, and I find that the Logan compact mat cutter suits my needs (figure 4). I look at the Fletcher 2200 mat cutter with some desire; if I were cutting a few mats a week I would probably get one (figure 5). Consider getting a mat cutter that can cut down a full-size, 32×40-inch board.

To do the actual cutting, I set the pencil line on the back of the board even with the cut line on my mat cutter. Then I push the cutting head from the near line to the far line in one smooth, easy motion—be sure to



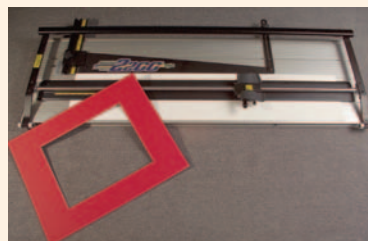
**Figure 2.** Measuring for the mat with a t-square.



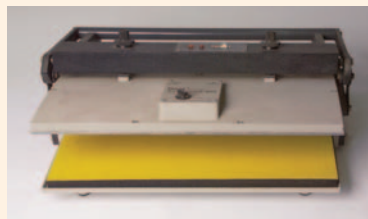
**Figure 3.** The board for the window mat with the pencil lines for cutting.



**Figure 4.** Cutting the mat on a Logan cutter.



**Figure 5.** The Fletcher 2200 Mat Cutter.



**Figure 6.** The author’s old dry mount press, please note the dirt.



**Figure 7.** The corner made with archival paper, note the materials used to attach the corner are also shown.



**Figure 8.** The photograph attached to the board. Note the corners are used and the window mat is attached.



**Figure 9.** Considering colors for second level of window mat with mat corners.



**Figure 10.** Considering frame styles with frame corners.

practice this. Do four clean cuts, and you have a mat suitable for framing. With practice, you can make several layers of mats and various other tricks. Some photographers find someone else to cut their mats, and just do the frame assembly themselves.

### Assembling the mat

The next step is to attach the photograph to a board below the window mat. This is the subject about which I've found the most opinions as to what's safe for the photograph. When I started doing photography, we would just use a dry-mount press (figure 6). This is essentially a 16×20-inch iron that attaches prints to a board with heat-activated adhesive tissue. The problem is that it may damage a traditional (C-print) color print, and probably will damage a dye-based inkjet print or a giclee. In my experience, it does seem to work with a pigment-based ink such as Epson UltraChrome.

According to the photo conservator I spoke with (who preferred not to be identified), your safest mounting alternative is a corner. You should make a corner pocket out of rag paper and attach it to the board with Japanese tissue. It is safest to use Japanese tissue and starch paste to do this rather than any pre-gummed linen tape (figure 7). Making prints with oversize borders enables you to avoid having the corners show up in your window. You can, of course, get premade photo corners, which is easier, but I have yet to see any that are PAT approved. Some of these premade corners are available in polyester and polypropylene, and are reported to be archival quality, so they may be a reasonable choice.

I checked some of the commercial products for attaching prints to the base, looking for a product that could be repositioned easily. I'm not sure I found one. I did discover a new item, a pressure-sensitive product called Gudy 870. This is an adhesive

without a substrate, just the sticky stuff, and comes in 24-inch wide rolls. If you're looking for this and other PAT products, you might try Light Impressions ([www.lightimpressions.com](http://www.lightimpressions.com) or 800-828-6216), in addition to your regular supplier. Other alternatives include an adhesive mat board from Crescent and sheet adhesives. These are good products and some of them are easy to use, but they may eventually damage your print. Keep in mind that you want to attach your prints to archival-quality boards. It'd be a pity to make your own archival corners only to attach a print to an acidic board.

Of course, you still need to position a print once you choose a way to attach it to the board. To do this, I begin by attaching the window mat to the backing board. You may want to use pre-gummed linen tape for this. I usually use white artist's tape, since it won't be touching my print. Once I have done this, I use the window mat to help me position my print (figure 8). Wear white cotton gloves to avoid getting the print or mat dirty. If you are careful, you can set your print down with the window mat. This is easier if you have a repositionable adhesive. In this situation corners give you a great deal of flexibility. Once the image is centered in the window of your mat you've done the trickiest parts of the job.

### Choosing a frame

Now we need to choose a frame. If you're framing a family portrait, you'll probably choose something fancy. If you are framing something for your office or living room, you may want to think about something fancier than you would pick for a gallery show (figure 10)—this is your work and you probably want to show it off. Whatever frame you decide on, consider upgrading your glass. Regular framing glass creates reflections; you may find yourself looking at the room lights or at yourself rather than at your work.





**Figure 11.** A package of frame corners.



**Figure 12.** The final frame decision!

Museum glass will control this reflectivity and protect your image from ultraviolet light. If you order glass by the case from a wholesale supplier, you will save a lot over single-sheet prices (and have incentive to do more framing). If you're going to ship your framed work, you should use an acrylic product such as Plexiglas. These are available with ultraviolet protection.

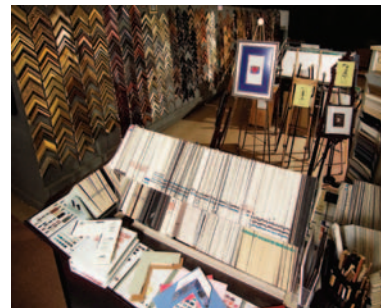
Once you choose the glass, the next step is to make a sandwich of the glass, the window mat, print, and backboard. Place another backing board in back. This final board also should be archival quality. You can order an archival corrugated board made for this application; it's more reasonably priced than rag mat board. Be sure to clean every part of this sandwich with compressed air or a soft brush.

If you have a metal channel frame, all you need to assemble it is a screwdriver. Attach three sides with the hardware from the kit, then slide

your sandwich in and check to see that the image is clean. Attach the last side and put in the tension clips. Put on the hanging wire with the remaining parts of the hardware kit.

If you want a wooden frame, drop the frame over the sandwich (figure 12). You'll need some framing points to keep the package in, however. These points are installed with a fitting gun. Place the gun against the final board in your sandwich, on the inside of the frame, and shoot the point into the side of the frame. It helps to hold the frame against something solid. Check for position and cleanliness after the first few points are in the frame. Add screw eyes or strap hangers (strap hangers are more sturdy) and a picture wire to the back of your frame. Hang it up!

You might also want to consider an easel to display your work. This can look great in a home or office. An easel is also a great thing to bring when you display your work to clients in their homes or offices. It



**Figure 13.** Your frame supplier should carry a lot of products!

allows you to have greater control of the presentation: you control the background and lighting.

Now enjoy your photograph, in whatever mat and frame you choose. ■

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