4-Week Short Course: Professional Framing For Photographers With Instructor John Siskin

Lesson #2: Cutting Mats

This week we will start with how to use photo corners and go right into cutting a mat.

So this is the archival way to attach the photograph to the board if you will be using a window mat. It doesn't actually attach to the photograph and it is easy to remove. Of course it is only archival if you are using archival mat board. If you are not using a window mat these methods are too visible. This is the area where I found the strongest opinions on what would be safe for the photograph.

Dodie Choosing a Mat
matted dog shot. Dodie helps out with the new framing class!
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Photo Corner Detail
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According to the photo conservator I spoke with, your safest mounting choice is a paper corner. You should make a corner pocket out of rag paper and attach the corner to the board with Japanese tissue. The open side of the corner faces the mat board. It is safest to use the Japanese tissue and starch paste to hold the corner to the mat rather than pre-made tape. In this method only archival stable products touch the photograph and the process is entirely and easily reversible.

There is more to making the archival paste than a person might think. First it is properly called Precipitated Wheat Starch Paste. Second as this product is used for many things in the conservation of artwork, professionals are very concerned about the quality of the paste they use. Consequently there are many recipes for this stuff. I am going to present two ways to make it. The first one is much more difficult, but provides a finer product. Also, after I get through describing how to make paste, I will have a link to buy the product

pre-made and a link to getting dry precipitated wheat starch powder. Some of you may want to skip ahead.

The best Precipitated Wheat Starch Paste is from Japan and called Zin Shofu. You can get Zin Shofu from Talas or you can get a wheat starch from Valley Moulding and Frame. In order to turn the powder into paste:

- First mix it in cold water. The conservator I spoke with suggested 4 tablespoons to 2 cups of water.
- Heat it up. You will need to stir this stuff at a temperature just below boiling for 25 minutes! It should become a thick gooey pudding, with all the starch grains opened up.
- Remove from heat and stir for another 5 minutes or so.
- Allow the mixture to cool. If you need it quickly you can cool the paste in a water bath.
- When the mixture is cool it needs to be strained through sieves - first a fine plastic mesh sieve and then if available, a very fine horsehair sieve. This horsehair sieve is available from Talas.
- Put your paste into a sealed container and store in the refrigerator, using as needed.
- When you are ready to use it, if the product is too wet you can put it onto a paper towel to pull water out of it. Or you can thin it out a little, with water, if it works better for you that way. You can actually put water on top of the paste when you store it in the sealed container to prevent mold from growing. This stuff is perfect mold food.

If you would prefer to use a microwave to cook this mix:

- Start by mixing 1 part Precipitated Wheat Starch Paste into 5 parts cool water.
- Mix thoroughly.
- Put into the microwave and zap for about 30 seconds.
- Take the stuff out and stir, thoroughly. Do this 4 to 6 times until you have a pudding like mixture.

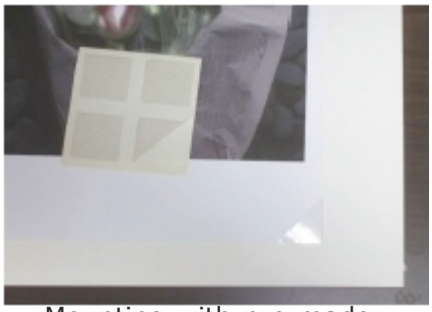
You can handle this stuff as you would the boiled stuff, with the same cooling and keeping suggestions.

Valley Moulding carries a ready-made version of this paste. I feel that this is a very good thing! It is called Nori Paste, you can see information about it on

their site:http://www.valleymoulding.com/ , this will take you to the Nori paste.

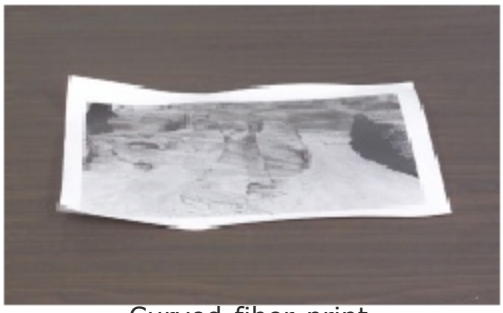
In order to fold a corner, start with a rectangular piece of paper, say an inch and a half wide, of course this will be adjusted based on your photograph. For a big photograph use a bigger corner, and if you don't have enough edge to hide your corner, use a smaller paper. Fold a 45Â° angle at the center of the paper and fold the side of the paper into the center, look at the corner in the picture above. Do this on both side and you have a corner. Remember to use rag paper!

Of course you will want oversize borders on your photograph to avoid having the corners show up in your window. You can also get pre-made photo corners. These are available at Valley Molding and Frame, or most other framing supply outlets. Photo corners are supposed to be archival, but apparently they have not been P.A.T. tested. Some of these pre-made corners are available in polyester and polypropylene and are reported to be archival quality, so they should be a reasonable choice. They are easier than building your own paper corners with the Japanese tissue!



Mounting with pre-made corners

Again please keep in mind that you will want to attach your print to an archival quality board, if you expect it to last as long as possible. It'd be to bad to make your own corners to attach the print to an acidic board.



Curved fiber print

Two problems with the corners are that they do not hold a glossy print truly flat and you have to hide them.

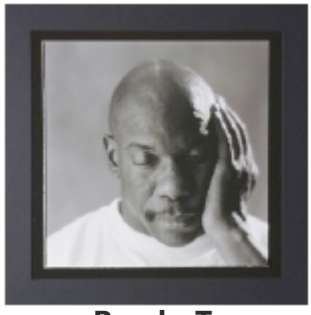
The wavy look that you almost always get with a glossy print is annoying, because it creates irregular reflections from the print. Obviously this is not a problem with prints that are not shiny. Consequently I will often use a method that is less archival with prints that are very reflective or very wavy (air dried fiber based black and white prints are very wavy).

I usually use a dry-mount press with fiber-based prints. But I am now using the Gudy 831 also.

Another method you can use with a mat is to attach the print with tape hinges or artist tape. Neither of these methods is considered to be archival, because of the adhesives and the problems if you ever need to remove the tape. This used to be a popular method if used with linen tape. Many photographers believed that this was the state of the art in archival presentation. However, the photo corners are much easier to remove and less likely to put stress on the print, so they are the standard currently. If you ever find a need for this method, you can use the same paste and Japanese tissue you used to hold down the corners, instead of tape.

Remember, I will actually cut my mat before I attach the print to the board to help me position it accurately. So this next section is on making the window mat, also called an overmat.

Tar Creek
Silver Gelatin Print, Note border of photo paper inside mat.



Randy T
Matted on black board for my portfolio. Note this print is not meant to be framed.

Now I will want to decide on the way I want to frame my image. I generally begin by deciding about the mat. I use white board for fine art pieces. This will present a neutral environment for the image. When I mat images for my commercial portfolio I use black board, it provides more pop for the images.

Mats are available in a rainbow of colors, but I see photographs most often matted in a neutral color: white, cream, grey and black. If you have an image that works best against purple, well I think you should go ahead and use it. Of course it won't be strictly archival, as rag board doesn't come in purple. Don't be afraid to try new color options. The next question: will I leave a white border on the print and include that in the open area of the mat? Will I cut the mat to only expose the

Sea Cave, El Matador #2
This is an ink-jet print. The overmat is cut to only show the image.

image? Will I sign the mat? I usually print a large white border on a silver print. I usually leave some of that border visible and sign on the print border on a silver gelatin print. I do this because I like the effect, not because it is considered the best way to present the work. What I like here is the white of B&W fiber photo paper. I wouldn't do this with a resin coated-print. I have a friend who signs on the undermat (the board the print is attached to) and cuts a separate window for the signature. I generally mat to show only the image and sign on the overmat if the image is an ink-jet print; once again this is because I like the look.

Lady Liberty
This is a cyanotype print. A contact print of the original negative. I usually give alternative process work a bigger borger.

Then I want to think about the frame. The most important decision I will make about the frame, at this time, is the size. I do not need to commit to a particular frame style. I like the effect of a large white border on my images; it gives the image room to breathe. I prefer to use a standard size frame, so this is the point where I will make this decision. I want to use a standard size frame because it is much easier to order. I try to keep the borders similarly size for a gallery show.

I also like to use a large border, 8X10 print with a 16X20 frame, when I am framing alternate process work, platinum or cyanotype.

We will talk more about frame material next week.

I will use a sample mat corner to check for the color of the mat I am going to use. Here consistency has value if you are doing a show. If you are doing a group of images please be sure to keep track of the exact board you are using. Unfortunately I have not always done this and my mats do not always match when I show my prints.

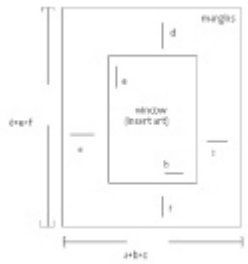
I generally begin by choosing and sizing my mat. There are two reasons for the mat: **1)** to keep the photograph from touching the glass; **2)** to visually isolate the art from its surroundings. It also helps to size your mat to bring your frame size to a standard size (11" X 14", 16" X 20" and so on), as I mentioned above. This will make it much easier and cheaper to order frames. Of course you can do custom size frames also! First I will generally choose a piece of

Wholesale Frame Store

natural white museum or rag board, this is a product made from cotton fibers. There is a range of color choices in boards from Bainbridge and Crescent that are full rag products, white cream antique white black and a few more. I get the boards and most of my framing supplies from my wholesale supplier. They have an advantage over a regular art store, they stock much more framing product.

Wherever you get your mat boards be sure they are designed to care for your print over time. There is a product called Alphmat that is archival quality and has a huge range of colors available, nice if you are getting bored by rag mat colors. However, this stuff is buffered, as I mentioned above, so it is not perfect.

Next I outline the area on the board I want to cut out. I figure this out by putting the image onto the board, after the board is cut to the final frame size. Then I visually center the print. I find that this step of finding out where the print looks good is very important; it helps to reduce problems caused by mistakes in measurement. Then I will put a ruler under the print area to center it side-to-side.

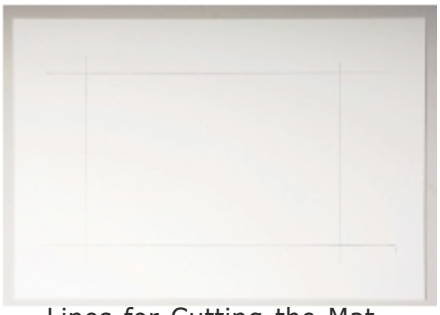


Matting Diagram

Now I add the amount of print border (this is the area of mat board or photo paper I am showing in the window) under the window mat, if I show any, to the size of the print. I will 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 except that I usually offset the print toward the top of the mat by 10 to 20%, because it looks more balanced. If I am framing for a show I usually try to keep the top border that same on all prints that are the same size and oriented in the same direction. So I should have two pairs of numbers, for the mat margins, in one the numbers will be exactly the same and in the other set the numbers will be close to the same.

Next I will draw a pencil line on the back of the board, where the mat will be cut.

I find that a T-square and a combination square are a real big help with this. I use the combination square to mark where the lines should be, since it will keep the same measurement, fewer mistakes. Then I make the lines with a t-square, or other straight edge.



Lines for Cutting the Mat

Combination Square

T-square under art work

Using the Combination Square

Using the T Square

Don't forget to check this pencil line against your image; it's easy to change now and difficult or impossible to change later. Also double check your lines, see that they are straight, square and in the right place. Measure twice, cut once.

Logan Bevel Cut

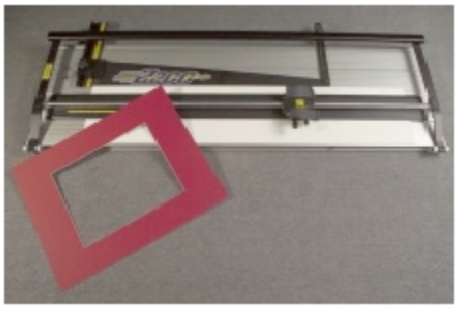
The mat can be cut out with an X-acto or utility knife and a straight edge, but that doesn't look as good as a beveled mat made with a mat cutter. The mat cutter will cut on an angle or bevel and give you a better corner. It does this by holding everything straight and moving the cutting head at an exact angle to the board.

I cut mats a few times a year, so I

don't need a production mat cutter. I find that the Logan compact mat cutter suits my needs.

I will say that I have looked at the Fletcher 2200 with some desire; if I was cutting a few mats a week I would probably get one.

Logan Compact Mat Cutter



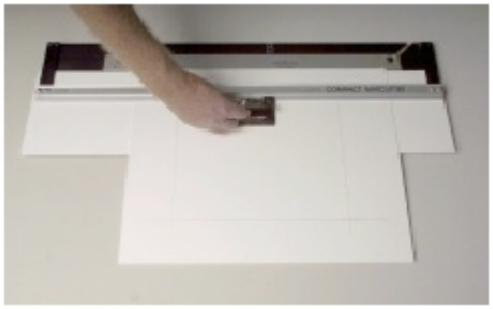
Fletcher Mat Cutter

If you are getting a mat cutter it should cut down a full size board, 32"X40". You will need to be able to do this.

Logan Mat Cutter Functions as Paper Cutter.

Logan Straight Cut Head

I have some experience with both of these cutters, and I know they work well. Regardless of what cutter you get please pay close attention to the instructions and please study them. CHANGE THE BLADES FREQUENTLY. Many problems in mat cutting are caused by dull blades. I set the pencil line I made on the back of the board even with the cut line on my Logan mat cutter. Then I hold the bar down on the board. Next I push the cutting head from the close line to the far line in one smooth easy motion. Don't over cut! You will want to practice this. Do four clean cuts and you have a mat suitable for framing!



Logan Mat Cutter

Close Up Mat Cutting

With practice you can do double mats and other tricks. Really this is quite easy, just make an outline on a second board. The center should be at least 1/8 inch larger on each side, but you may want inner borders as much as 3/8 inch wide. You'll want to attach the two boards to each other, you can use precipitated wheat starch paste or even an ATG gun to attach these two boards. If all this seems like too much to do, then don't do it. Some photographers find someone else to cut their mats; they just do the frame assembly.

Of course, once you choose a way to attach the print to the board, you still need to position the print first. In order to do this I begin by hinging the window mat to the backing board. You may want to use pre-gummed linen tape for this. I usually use white artists tape, since it's not touching my print, and not next to it. The artists tape is designed to let go, so if that isn't good for your application you can use lined tape. Once I have done this I use the window mat to help me position my print.

Underneath The Mat

This would be a good time to use white cotton gloves. If you are careful you can set your print down with the window mat. This is easier if you have a repositionable adhesive, like dry mount tissue. The ability to reposition is something you will want to look for in a mounting system. Often a mounting method clams to be repositionable, but you'll damage the print if you try. This is a situation in which the photo corners give you a great deal of flexibility. Of course if you do position the print wrong, you can always move the undermat until the print is centered in the overmat. Next step, just trim off any of the undermat that extends beyond the overmat. Once the image is centered in the window of your mat you've done the trickiest parts of the framing job.

Your Assignment: Cut a Mat

Cut a mat and attach a photo to a board

behind the mat. Show a picture of the finished piece and a shot of the open mat. You can use any method to attach the photo to the board, but I would prefer you to use corners. If you use something else, please tell us what you did.

Submit your **a two images** to the Campus Square by Wednesday, July 19, 2006.

Dodie Choosing a Mat
matted dog shot. Dodie helps out with the new framing class!

Have a good time. Send me some

questions.

Thanks!

John

These lessons are posted for free. If you want critiques of the assignments, or other help with the lessons, you can arrange that with the PayPal link on my workshop page: http://www.siskinphoto.com/workshop.php. You can find a lot of other information there and or the rest of my site. Please check out the magazine articles as well: http://www.siskinphoto.com/magazinearticles.php. If you'd just like to send some money, because you like the lessons or articles, you can use the donate button on the workshop page. I hope you'll consider doing that. Thanks so much for your attention!

John Siskin