

## **Tips on Picture Framing for Artists**

A compilation of advice/tips from Autumn Kegley of

**Autumn's Framing & Gallery**

**537 Main Street**

**Edmonds, WA 98020**

**(425) 778-5150**

[www.autumnsframing.com](http://www.autumnsframing.com)

### **Matting**

Matting serves several purposes in the frame package. First, it separates the art from the glass, preventing transfer of your work to the glass surface. By using a mat in proportion to your artwork, you provide a space for the viewer's eye to "rest". A mat about 2-2 ½ times the frame width helps set your artwork in a space apart from the surrounding wall/room and its distractions.

Often people have difficulty envisioning a larger mat border, or feel it overwhelms the artwork. However, if your mat border is similar in sizing to your frame choice – a repetitive pattern is created which tends to draw the eye away from your composition. Smaller mats create the visual equivalent of claustrophobia, and your artwork will appear to have been "forced" into an inadequate space.

Always use acid-free mat board, as it rests directly against your work, and poor quality materials will cause yellowing and decay of the art (the yellowing edge of a low-quality mat board appears dirty as well). There are several lines of mat board to choose from which are either rag (100% cotton) or treated alpha-cellulose. Rag mat board is the best choice, as cotton is "born" acid-free and has a proven record of stability. There are cotton documents and artwork which remain in good condition after a century or more due to their inherent neutral PH. Crescent's *Museum Board Rag Mat* line and Nielsen/Bainbridge's *Alpharag Artcare* line of mat boards are both manufactured from 100% cotton. However, if you don't have the resources for cotton mat board, treated alpha-cellulose is a good second choice. Crescent's *Select* line, Larson-Juhl's *Artique* line, and Nielsen/Bainbridge's *AlphaMat Artcare* line of mat boards are all manufactured from alpha-cellulose fibers treated to be acid-free.

Details separate professional work from amateur. If you cut your own mat boards, clean lines without overcuts or rough edges (from using a dull blade) will elevate the appearance and perceived value of what you offer viewers. Using a hand-held mat cutter is a challenge even experienced framers find frustrating. To obtain quality results, you will need to invest in a mat cutter with a cutting head mounted on a bar, and a base. If you don't cut a large number of mats during the course of a year, it is probably wiser to have a frame shop cut them using professional tools.

To help you get a feeling for the range in pricing on various matting options, I've listed the current price at Autumn's Framing & Gallery for a 16x20 inch single-opening mat in the following (including the standard 10% artist's discount):

- Crescent Select \$14.40
- Crescent Museum Board Rag Mat \$16.81
- Crescent Museum Board Solid-core Rag Mat \$18.85

## **Glazing**

Works on paper should be protected by glass or Plexiglas from excessive exposure to atmospheric changes, light damage, and human accident (overspray from hairspray, stray droplets from spilled beverages, or testing water pistols indoors). You have a range of options to choose from, starting with regular clear glass.

- Regular Glass

Regular glass is the most affordable option available, and meets the base requirements of protection from moisture and accident. However, it only blocks about 45-50% of the UV rays which cause fading of colors and speed the overall aging process of substrate papers.

- Conservation Clear Glass

Conservation clear glass has a silica-based coating on one side which blocks about 98% of UV light rays. Its visual appearance is similar to regular glass, without any special treatments to reduce glare/reflection. This glazing option is more expensive than regular glass, but generally within a reasonable budget. I use conservation glass on my own artwork – as a watercolorist I am especially concerned with retaining the colors of that notoriously fugitive medium. If you aren't able to afford taking this extra step in protecting your artwork – it is wise to recommend your patrons make this upgrade when they purchase a work to treasure.

- Non-glare Glass (Reflection Control)

Reflection control glass is preferred by some framing customers who are bothered by broad reflections in regular and conservation glass which obscure their view of artwork – especially if it is displayed opposite a window, or in an otherwise exceptionally well-lit area. A chemical etch on one face of the glass softens light reflections - as refracted light is bounced in many directions off the minute hills and valleys created by the etching. However, this surface treatment does slightly diminish the clarity of detail – in a manner similar to bathroom glass (which has a much more pronounced etch). Because of this reduction in clarity, non-glare glass isn't recommended in situations such as shadowbox and lift framing, where the etch creates a hazy obstruction to viewing. The non-glare surface treatment is available on both regular and conservation glass. However, the price of “regular” non-glare glass is generally similar to conservation clear, and rises if you opt for the non-glare surface treatment along with conservation coating.

- Museum Glass

This is the Cadillac of glazing options – with magnetically applied treatments intended to reduce glare/reflection while remaining crystal-clear, along with a UV blocking interior coating. Museum glass is generally restricted to use by high-end established artists and wealthy collectors, however, as it is quite expensive. Also, you will need to use an alcohol based cleanser and cotton balls on this glass, as human skin oils and standard ammonia cleaners leave metallic streaks behind.

- Plexiglas

You may be required to use this glazing option at some point, if your work is being shipped to an out-of-area show, or will be displayed at a public institution rigidly adhering to OSHA regulations (which require acrylic glazing for safety). Acrylic glazing has several beneficial properties – being light weight, not easily shattered with either excessive flexing or sharp jolts (as glass is), and having higher inherent UV blocking properties (around 65% with basic acrylic). However, nothing is perfect, and following all these high points is a real downer – acrylic scratches very easily. You will have to use special cleaners and a soft cloth to preserve a clear surface on acrylic glazing.

To help you get a feeling for the range in pricing on various glazing options, I've listed the current price at Autumn's Framing & Gallery for a 16x20 inch sheet in the following (including the standard 10% artist's discount):

- Regular \$7.87
- Conservation Clear (Tru-View) \$16.06
- Reflection Control (Tru-View) without UV block \$15.68
- Conservation Reflection Control \$20.69
- Museum Glass (Tru-View) \$46.12
- Basic Acrylic (Tru-View Premium Clear Acrylite) \$18.45

## **Mounting**

Your artwork needs to be secured inside the framing package somehow – or it will slip askew and look extremely sloppy. A proper mounting also protects your artwork from being punctured or dented from behind. NEVER use cardboard as a backing material against any artwork (or personal memorabilia) you care to keep in good condition long-term. Cardboard is manufactured using highly acidic untreated cellulose fibers, and causes paper substrates to become yellowed and brittle.

The most basic mounting solution is to use an acid-free tape (such as Fimoplast P-90 for lightweight work, or Lineco linen gummed tape for heavyweight papers) and hinge the artwork along its top edge to the mat board, allowing it to freely expand and contract with changes in humidity and temperature. Please don't "mummify" your artwork by taping it down around all edges – this leads to warping over time. Also, masking tape, scotch tape, and duct tape are inappropriate due to high acidity and a tendency to lose their adhesion over time.

Foam-core board may be used alone as a backing behind the mat board/artwork package, and secured in an easily reversed manner using 4 short anchoring strips of acid-free double-sided tape just beyond the outer edge of the artwork. Standard foam-core board is lightweight and strong, with much lower acidity than cardboard. However, it is not the very best solution... even acid-free foam-core tends to yellow over time. To create a long-term archival mount, you should sandwich your artwork in PH neutral cotton. Use either a sheet of rag mat board or thick cotton linter paper to face a foam-core backing and provide a buffer between it and your artwork.

For the most easily reversed and archival mounting, you can secure artwork using polypropylene "photo" mounting corners (available in several sizes), or clear plastic mounting strips which slightly overlap the artwork on their leading edge. Keep the mounting process in

mind as you create artwork, and leave an excess border which can be slipped into photo corners and remain hidden behind your mat board.

Artists working in pastel, charcoal, or other media which tend to “shed” must take this into account when framing their art. If you place a mat board directly against such pieces, over time the lower edge will accumulate unsightly detritus. Also, the action of cleaning glass and acrylic before placing it over the artwork tends to build up a slight static charge which can attract loose particles onto its interior face. You can prevent both of these problems by adding a “lift” underneath the mat board which provides both distance between the art and glass as well as allowing shed particles to fall into an unseen pocket. Mat board lifts can be easily created using strips of foam core board set back about ½” from the inner mat edge, where they won’t be seen at obtuse angles. With a lifted mat, however, you must overlap the artwork edge by about ½” as well - to avoid seeing the edge of the work. Pre-plan for this by extending the color edge beyond your essential compositional area, and leaving excess border.

## **Framing**

A frame completes the protective package surrounding your work, and provides the final visual divider between it and the surrounding environment. As an artist, you have several unique concerns (or should keep them in mind). Because most work will be presented at galleries or in juried shows where you don’t know the particular tastes of potential collectors, your framing choices should be somewhat neutral. Gallery owners and jurors want to create an arrangement of work where the framing doesn’t provide a distraction to viewing the artwork by being too strongly colored/textured. However, you still want your work to be finished in a manner that elevates/enhances its value in viewer’s eyes. Classic framing profiles in neutral tones such as black, german silver, washed gold, cherry, walnut, and maple may find homes more readily than trendy styles and colors which distract attention and will soon become dated.

I recommend artists consider the basic emotional/visual character of their work, and chose a limited range of frames which reflect and enhance it. If your artwork is strongly graphic – with bold black outlines and architectural elements, then a using a group of similar matte black frames would probably best serve to unify your portfolio. Artists working in traditional landscapes may opt for clean-lined wood frames which reflect the natural theme – using a chrome finish metal frame for this type of work creates a disconnected feeling. Look for a line of frames which emotionally ties to your art, fits your budget, and is available in several sizes and color variations to simplify the framing process.

Metal and wood frames each have their own strengths and weaknesses to consider. Metal frames (made of extruded and anodized aluminum) are available in a fair range of colors and styles – greatly expanded from the original offering of thin square-topped black, gold, and silver classics familiar from the 70s. Because of their modular construction, this style of framing is appealing to artists who frequently exchange one artwork for another, reusing a frame package many times. Wood frames require more time and labor to exchange artwork, and will eventually begin to break down with too many “switches”. Metal prices are rising with the elevated cost of aluminum, however, and they are no longer the cheapest option available. Also, they can confer a feeling of “cheapness” to art patrons who may associate simple metal frames with poster offerings from Target and WalMart.

Wood framing is available in a tremendous variety of styles and colors, from inexpensive basic matte black to costly ornate gilded creations. Enquire with your picture framer – they are often artists who can point you toward good values which appear more costly than they are in fact. Many different woods are used to create framing lengths. Be cautious of extremely soft woods, which may dent too easily during transportation and hanging at various shows. Always protect the surface of your frames by separating stored works with sheets of cardboard or dense foam, and keeping them back to back, preventing the hanging hardware from scratching the face of another work.

When completing your framing package with hanging hardware, I recommend using eyescrews or d-ring hangers on either side of the frame moulding and twisting a braided wire between them. The zigzag style hangers often included with inexpensive ready-made frames don't offer a great deal of stability when slipped over a broad nail-head on the wall. Many shows will specifically exclude frames with this style of hanger because they are too likely to "bite the dust". Also, if you're using uncoated braided wire, it is thoughtful to wrap the ends with a strip of tape to prevent fingers from being pierced by the sharp ends.

Good luck to all of you in creating a more professional image in complement to the artwork you've worked so hard to create! I hope some of these tips will come in handy as you prepare for juried shows and gallery hangings. Be happy in the wonderful process of making art happen!