MASTERING MOUNTING | by Chris A. Paschke, CPF, GCF, CMG

Mounting The World

This original article was written after teaching at numerous European shows and studying in China, so it is my overview of mounting around the globe. Reviewing it today for this reprint it seems most things have remained fairly consistent 25 years later, and these observations were prior to the launch of the digital revolution. Framing techniques and processes have definitely changed, though not all seem to be improvements, and some shows no longer exist, but the crafts are still practiced and tourists are still buying them.

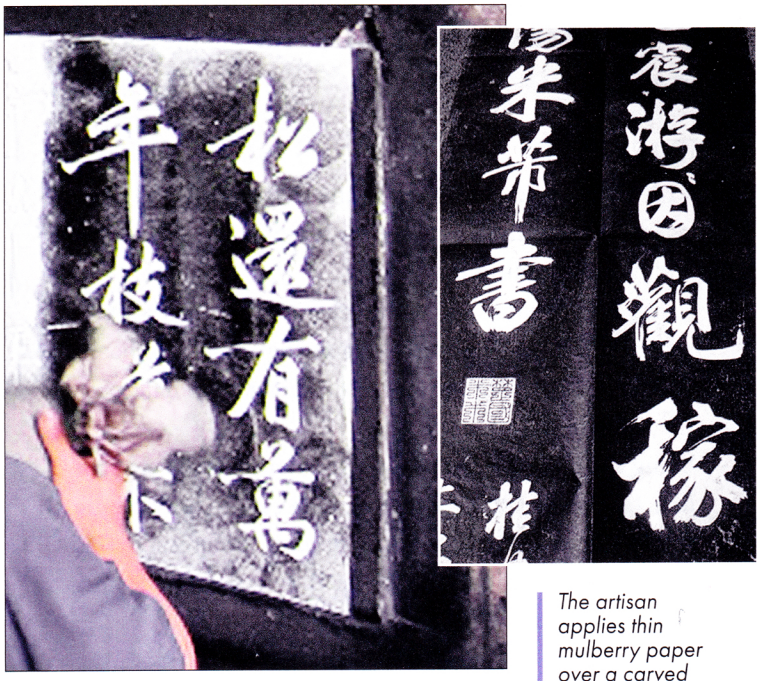
Sometimes the best way to offer education is through comparison. Over the past five years, we have seen marked improvements in both the materials used in day-to-day framing as well as a more knowledgeable consumer. Preservation framing and Japanese hinges have become the norm rather than the exception for fine art, and although we will always have open edition posters and decorative art to display, even the customer is more aware of the factors involved when framing personal collectibles and other types of art. What's more, it appears that the United States is setting the pace for the rest of the world.

Framing in England

When I was told that one of the three framed items I needed to bring to the UK for my GCF test was a mount (a.k.a. mat) with ruling pen lines on it, I questioned why ruling pen lines were one of the three top priorities. Once I arrived in the country it became immediately apparent that French panels and lines were much more than a simple occasional surface decoration or variation on a theme, but rather was more of a theme itself.

That was the first time I began to recognize the differences in picture framing practices in other countries. Framing in the UK is elegant, respectful, and dignified. A great deal of pride is taken in the presentation of the art, and surface mat decoration appears on nearly everything. It was also refreshing to find that not only were there lines and panels on most of the framed artworks, the framed items were plentiful, and almost always matted.

Unlike in the US, where the illusion of mats is sometimes printed on the reproduction (sometimes with panels and lines themselves printed), in the UK, the real mounts



The artisan applies thin mulberry paper over a carved stone tablet and proceeds to pounce ink onto the paper to duplicate the original stone. These are then either sold mounted to scrolls or folded up for easier and more compact transport. Average price for a 24"x36" duplicate hot off the stone is $12.50 USD. Dried copies are then folded for sale to tourists, ending up as potential framed keepsakes later. Creases are healed by a process of soaking the unfolded mulberry paper and reflattening it by drying as is done when scroll mounting.



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most often have handmade authentic ruling pen lines and panels. And the best part is that you find these hand-decorated mats everywhere: in hallways, in pubs, along staircases, even in bathrooms. They are all under glazing, traditionally framed, and with hand-decorated painted mats. From what I saw, even designs with just a single mat feature drawn lines around the window opening.

Only in recent years has decorative framing in the UK come into its own. There are now framing competitions that encourage the UK framer to really get creative with three-dimensionality, shapes, colors, and other factors. Use of heavy MDF (medium density fiber) boards remain more prevalent than the use of foam center boards for both mounting and as filler boards when framing. It seems the value of the framing is often compared to the actual weight of the completed framed piece. Substantial weight brings a better price; more weight, more value. It is interesting to compare the use of foam board and acrylic glazing in the US.

The Italian Concept

While in Italy attending the SACA show, I was exposed to the world of moulding manufacturing and framing through the eyes of yet another country. The first thing I noticed was the incredible, breathtaking mouldings created there. Fortunately, with the "shrinking" of the globe, we are able to find more and more gorgeous Italian mouldings here through our distributors in the US.

The basic framing was very different from what I had seen in either the UK or the US. There was a framing competition at the show (like the PPFA framing competitions) with pieces that framers were presenting for critique and awards. A major difference was that numerous artworks were beautifully framed and glazed, but that matting was less often seen and, as a result, surface mat decoration was non-existent. Often the art was pressed directly against the glazing.

It was beautiful art, but preservation considerations were minimal. I saw little regard for originals and limited editions, and many were mounted directly to backing boards.

Art in Amsterdam

Next I attended perhaps the most beautiful trade show I have ever seen: Image '98 in Amsterdam. Wide aisles, walled booths, and natural light flooding through skylights high above the show floor showcased numerous original artworks and the framing



This 24"x24" embroidery was wet mounted to a hardboard, matted with creme colored black core matboard about 3" wide around, glazed using regular clear glass, and placed into a 24"x24" Kobe corner 1" black lacquer frame. Notice the poem across the top and the two seal shops along the left side.

that enhanced it. Mats were often conservation quality in nature and the care of the art shone through. A classy, understated use of color was prevalent to let the art remain dominant.

As an artist, I am pleased to say I am selling my mixed media originals throughout Europe with a company based in Amsterdam. My originals were being handled and framed true to many standards there, and what I discovered was very distressing. Even though these were originals, they were often being mounted to non-preservation backing boards using high tack non-removable pressure-sensitive adhesive to hold them flat. This is neither a conservation nor a preservation treatment.

Since then, this problem has been corrected, but that's not to say the practice does not continue elsewhere. There still appears to be a great deal of mishandling even in this day of preservation awareness and care.

Shows in Germany

There are gift shows held twice a year at the Messe in Frankfurt, Germany: Ambiente in February and Tendence in August. These are enormous shows and the artwork there consists of numerous posters, reproduction limited editions, giclees, and originals ranging in size.

It is always difficult to judge the handling of art when looking at displays seen at trade shows. This is because the rules may be bent a little to accommodate the constant and repetitive travel demands of display works. Because of this, items at shows may end up mounted to a backing more solidly than they should. This might be tolerable for open reproductions and poster art, but it is totally unacceptable with any original.

Originals are sold from the floor, framed, ready to be gallery hung, and sold to a consumer. Any mismounting will carry right into the customer's living room. By my count, we are still leap years ahead of Europe in the way we truly respect all levels of our artwork and mementos when framing.

Art and Framing in China

And then I arrived in China. This past summer I had the marvelous opportunity to visit China on an intensive three-week calligraphy study tour. Having studied with four calligraphy masters in four different cities with four different views on how to properly hold the brush, grind the ink, and mount the scrolls, I returned home with a number of strong and supportive observations.

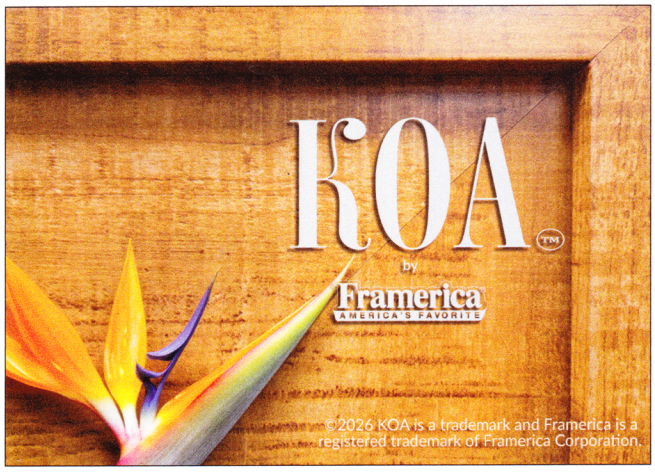
It's no accident that Eastern and Western thinking appear so very different. Our background, lifestyles, food, culture, and respect for the arts are also very different. The Asian cultures highly respect and admire their artists and craftsmen. Their arts are valued treasures, and there is a very large distinction between arts and crafts.

Having had the opportunity to watch craftspeople at work and observe the ways in which they handled completed pieces, I can say there is a vast difference between the respect for Chinese art and their mass-produced crafts. One is a treasure, the other a commodity.

In China, the procedure of scroll mounting takes the place of Western picture framing. It is the completion of the fine art to be hung on the wall. Traditional wet mounting methods using cooked pastes, silk, and rice papers allow these treasures



A set of four seasons scrolls on display are considered completely and properly framed (as noted above).



to be rolled and stored or unrolled and hung for display. They are then considered protected and ready to hang. There is no frame, no matting, no glazing, and no acrylic box; only a piece of wood at the top, dowel at the bottom, and decorative cord to hang are used.

Interestingly enough, Western thinking has us convinced that when a mounted scroll is brought into a frame shop, it requires traditional framing applications. It is true that the unglazed Asian method of hanging a scroll does nor protect the art from bugs, humidity, and pollution damage. However, they have lasted the test of time for centunes.

Framed Chinese Art

Beautiful hand-stitched textiles called silk embroidery as well as some larger silk paintings are pieces of Chinese art that may be framed. These are often wet mounted to hardboard with or without mats but with glazing.

Tourist boutiques and other stores will most often be the source for these framed items, but still 90% of what is seen is scrolled or intended to be scroll mounted. Most of these production paintings have been dry mounted rather than traditionally wet mounted. This is not to say there are not fine art upper end galleries. Most of these show original oils, acrylics, and mixed media in very contemporary themes, and yes, they are framed.

Mounting the World

It seems as much as we complain about standardization and soap box about the need for preservation framing, there are still many different concepts and approaches to framing around the world. And there are as many variations that are every bit as acceptable in other countries as our methods are to us. As I have said before, the only time a mounting technique will be changed from what has always been the tried and true method is when for some reason it fails to be efficient or dependable.

If mounting and framing methods continue to support other cultures and thrive, why change them? Although we are seeing evidence of improved treatment of fine art throughout Europe, it appears that the Chinese will continue as they have done for centuries and no doubt will continue to thrive.

The real question is, how are we supposed to handle Chinese paper silhouettes, Egyptian papyrus, and African masks when they make it into our shop? Frame the scroll? Sounds like a job for an acryclic box or deep, unglazed shadowbox to me. PFM