

# B/W *TODAY'S NEW LOOKS*

*By Chris A. Paschke, CPF, GCF*

*By adding style, texture, and color, today's black-and-white photography frame designs go far beyond the white mats and black frames of the past*

Over the past century, frame design for black-and-white photos has traditionally meant using a white mat and a simple black stem frame based on the idea that stark non-design will never get in the way of the beauty of the photographic image. It is also supported by the early limitations of rag board, mat colors, and moulding profiles. Frame design also clings to traditions, such as the practice of mounting 8"x10" and 11"x14" hand-developed images to white or black 16"x20" boards for display, critique, or competition.

This look largely arose from Bauhaus design. The Bauhaus was an art school in Germany from 1919 to 1933 that combined craftsmanship, architecture, and fine arts. The Bauhaus style promoted the concept of all arts coming together, and it became one of the most influential movements of the Modernist era. The innovations commonly associated with the Bauhaus are radically simplified forms, rationality and functionality, and the idea that mass production can maintain individual artistic spirit.



*This square format Hasselblad photo of a flower was shot and darkroom-developed on traditional fiber base paper by Jim Tucker, fine art photographer, Tehachapi, CA.*

*The square format Hasselblad image was double matted with Antique White top mat, Ostrich Gray bottom mat, and 4-ply rag spacer between, leaving a 1/2" perimeter mount board and allowing for LE#, title, signature, LJ Petite II Ebony frame, and UV glazing.*



Three of the concepts started at the Bauhaus were: 1) form follows function; 2) be imaginative but never let it detract from your message; and 3) reduce your design to its most essential elements. These ideas are essentially where the established concepts for framing black-and-white photography were born. They translate into photo design as: 1) select a frame strong enough to support the package but small enough to blend in; 2) be creative but always keep the photo dominant; and 3) select a mat, glass, and frame to do the job.

Today, a white or black mat with a black frame is no longer gospel for framing black-and-white photos. Sticking to early design trends has also become a matter of individual choice, not a concrete rule. Even purist collectors have begun to see the value in a frame with a little more style, texture, or color variation.

## Photo Framing Basics

All photos require a mat or spacer to separate them from glazing and to give the eye a space to pause while being drawn into the photo. Museum board is 100 percent cotton—the best for long term display—and is the matboard of choice for the preservation of photos both in storage and on display. Bainbridge, Crescent, Peterboro, and Rising all have photo-quality, solid-core boards for extended-term display.

Selecting only a single 4-ply, bright white mat and a narrow black frame limits photo frame design. Consider a double 4-ply, single 8-ply, a combination of 4-ply and 8-ply, or spacers instead. Multiple mats allow for design variations on black-and-white photos. Tie the bottom mat color to the frame color. If it is more neutral than black, use neutrals for the middle and top mats to pick up the whites and grays in the photo. This creates a more contemporary feel. Also, a wider 4" to 6" border in white or off-white looks sleek and contemporary in a gallery grouping.

Frames today may be narrow or wide; wood or metal; and black, white, or another neutral color. Even the Ansel



*Twelve pieces were reframed in an updated contemporary style for Tucker's local exhibition. The signature and title are now visible and the image more saleable in the market.*



*Tucker previously mounted the photos to 11"x14" 4-ply boards, so they needed to be sink-mounted to be enlarged for the new 12-1/2"x15-1/2" frames.*



*A bright white mat and a black stem frame were replaced with a double mat, spacer, and a textured frame with a pewter lip. The moulding pattern reintroduces the cloud striations and waves.*

Adams Gallery in Yosemite National Park offers Adams lithographic black-and-white prints matted in white with narrow Nielsen metal frames in gray, champagne, and matte black. The key is to keep the visual focus on the photo.

## Museum Preferences

The metal frame was developed in the 1950s and has since been used in museums and galleries because of its simple, aesthetically pleasing design and archival nature. It does not require rabbit sealing to protect photo emulsions from the acids in wood mouldings and may easily be reused. The Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art





Two darkroom-developed, fiber base photos are on opposite ends of the color scale: one cool blue-gray with bright white highlights (L), the other, warm brown-gray with cream highlights (R).



A 2" neutral blue-gray black core mat matches the gray tones in the shadows, which naturally draws the eye into the image darks. The black bevel draws into the darkest shadows.

A triple mat of cool gray, pearl white, and cool gray, all with black cores, not only matches the colors but also replicates the linear highlights along the edges of the driftwood.

regularly display photos in aluminum; acrylic; brass; and painted, varnished, stained, or lacquered wood, often in the same exhibit. This practice is not new; it has been common since the 1960s.

Just as the frames vary, mats may be seen with even borders, weighted bottoms, Asian proportions, narrow to wide, and white and color, all in the same exhibition. Museums showcase collections and, quite often, the unifying element is frame width.

## Framing for Galleries

Galleries are not museums; their goal is to make sales. Galleries that require wide white mat(s) and thin black frames are striving to set the artwork off from the wall and highlight it without detracting from the photo. By providing a colorless background for the photo, high-end galleries are bringing a uniform, clean consistency to an exhibition, which allows a collector to focus on the inner image. Selecting the same design element for each piece—mat color



A wider 3" to 4" white rag mat expands the image but also tends to darken it. The mat matches the highlights in the photo but is still overpowering.

Courtesy Gwen Walker Strahan, Walker Strahan Gallery, Redding, CA.

(warm white), mat thickness (8-ply), mat width (6"), frame (narrow black metal Arthaus)—helps present the photo in a consistent way, even if the white seems stark and impersonal.

Proper design proportions (moulding width, mat border, and image) are not cast in stone. A 1/2" smooth black stem or 1/4" metal frame may be perfect for an 11"x14" photo, while

a 1-1/4" lightly textured pewter Ferrosa requires a much larger image to maintain proper proportion. At a photo show in Georgia, an interested photo collector commented on the beauty of the texture and soft tones of a Larson-Juhl Foundry frame on a large black-and-white photo. Then again, a photo gallery in California will not display any black-and-white photo that isn't framed with a white mat and narrow black frame.

Contemporary frame design integrates the photo with the framing. Rather than multiple mats of the same color, two or three are based on image colors. The bottom line is to know your gallery and its anticipated clientele. Using high-end contemporary frame designs in a country town will never sell. Likewise, contemporary textural frames and triple mats with spacers in colors other than white may not appeal to many collectors.

## Framing a Photo Series

Jim Tucker is a fine art photographer in Tehachapi, CA, who shoots textural abstractions and landscapes using rolls of film with a Hasselblad and then develops them in his darkroom. This allows Tucker to modify his black-and-white tones when creating his finished prints. He then mounts them prior to bringing them to his framer. Tucker came to me after seeing samples of my frame designs at a recent lecture and exhibition. He was preparing for his show at a local gallery and previously had six of his pieces framed in the traditional white-mat, black-frame style. He brought me those originals to reframe as well as six more for the show, looking for less "collector" and more "consumer friendly" frame designs. His objective was to appeal to the home decor market and ultimately sell pieces at the show.

Since six were reframed and six were new, materials

could be purchased in bulk to minimize board and glass waste. That allowed him to receive package pricing. Tucker mounts all of his own photos to 11"x14" using 4-ply boards and a small mechanical press. The original framing was 11"x14", so when the frame size was enlarged to allow for a signature and title space around the photos, the mount boards were too small for the new 12-1/2"x15-1/2" frames.

A simple sink mount was required to properly hold a pre-mounted photo in place. Since the rabbet was shallow, a 4-ply backing was sized and prepared, with 4-ply strips adhered to the surrounding edges to fill the void. The new backing was flange-hinged on the long side of the window mat unit. The completed mount was simple and reversible.

Tucker's photo of a flower, for example, is one in a series of fine art photos that are darkroom-developed in the traditional manner, but the final framing showcases a contemporary twist on an old-school design. The new design has a more saleable appearance for his market, and the softer, more neutral mat colors allow it to fit better in a greater range of homes. The Larson-Juhl Petite II Ebony frame has a texture and soft, warm-black finish that replicates the cloud striations and wave patterns in Tucker's photos and works well on a wide variety of images.

## Color

Mat color—tint (c+white), shade (c+black), or tone (c+gray)—should be based on the color base of the tones of black and white in the actual photo, as very few photos are truly black or white. Color families should always be matched within neutrals. Blue-based cool white should match blue-gray and the cool shadows in the photo. Likewise, warm brown-gray and yellow-base cream will demand the same color, thus matching mats to photo. Bright white mats can create glare around an image, which can detract from the eye's ability to discern detail; off-white and warm and antique white may allow greater integration.

A wider white rag mat with 3" to 4" borders that matches the photo highlights will visually expand the image but can also make it appear darker. A black mat will close

in, wash out, or discolor an image, so a more neutral warm or cool gray might be a better choice. A 2-1/2" neutral, cool gray, black core mat matches the gray tones in the shadows, which naturally draws the eye into the dark areas of the image. The black bevel also integrates with the darkest shadows. A black-core triple mat of cool blue-gray, pearl white, and blue-gray not only matches the photo colors but also replicates the linear highlights along the edges of the driftwood.

## Design Unity

Unity in frame design takes place when the frame, mats, and mat decoration all work together to enhance and protect the image. The photo must always remain the dominant element, and perfect frame designs should be noticed but not overpowering. They should gently guide the eye from frame to image yet allow it to wander to see how well the selected lines, colors, and textures all showcase the photo.

Black-and-white frame design may have been done in the past but, with all the subtle variations of board colors and moulding available now, a softer approach is more contemporary and inviting. Use of white or off-white mats can also help unify a gallery or museum exhibition of assorted framed pieces. Selecting the same mat color, same mat design, same frame, or same exterior size will all unify a display while allowing for variety in the singular images.

## Final Frame

Every moulding company has basic black, white, gray, and wood grain stem profiles suited to photos, making frame selection easier than in decades past. Embracing the design elements of texture, color, and repetition, and then selecting a profile that reflects the gray tones or pattern within the image helps bring photo framing into the twenty-first century. Textured metal mouldings like Bauhaus-inspired Nielsen Arthaus; Designer Moulding Brushed Gray Pewter; Larson-Juhl Petite II Ebony, Ferrosa, and Foundry lines; and Studio Plata adapt very well to photos and are all suggestions for thinking outside the black frame. **PFM**

### Resources

<http://larsonjuhl.com>  
<http://studiomoulding.com>  
<http://nbframing.com>  
<http://omegamoulding.com>  
<http://designermoulding.com>  
<http://nielsenbainbridgegroup.com>  
<http://crescentcardboard.com>  
<http://peterboromatboards.com>  
<http://risingmuseumboard.com>

### Items

Ansley, Petite II, Ferrosa, Foundry, Nielsen  
Plata, Studio Black, Matt Gray, Matt White, Natural Wood  
Nielsen 15, 22, 33, 34, 117...  
Moderne, Accord, Eastman, Midnight  
Assorted metal mouldings  
Alpharag, Alphamat, Essentials, Foamboard  
RagMat, Museum Solids, Crescent Select, foamboard  
Peterboro Museum Core, Conservation  
Rising Museum Board, Conservation Board

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