

CREATIVE MAT DESIGNS

By Don Strouf

Fellow picture framers, along with a few customers now and then, have asked me the same question: “How do you come up with your designs?” Everyone wants to know what the process is so they can duplicate it with their customers. It’s a simple question, and it has a simple answer—I ask questions!

First and foremost, I try to have great customer service. From the time the customer enters my store to the day they pick up their project and beyond, they become like family.

I also ask a lot of questions. I think it is extremely important to get to know your customers on a personal level. I like to find out where they’re from, what brought them into my store, and most importantly, what the story is behind the artwork they brought in for framing. I start out by complimenting them on the piece—because remember, the value of art is not just monetary, it’s also sentimental. I find that most of my customers are bringing in art that they bought when on a vacation or music posters from a concert they attended. Sometimes it is artwork from a friend or family member that either made it for them or gave it to them as a present. All this information is crucial when picking out the proper framing for a piece of art.

Let’s explore a few examples of creative uses of matting when designing a framed piece for your customer.

A POLICE CAPTAIN’S COIN

A customer belonging to the University of Oregon Police Department came in one day with a coin in his hand. This type of coin is called a challenge coin, and members of the military and police force trade them with other units as a sign of respect (they are also used for



● *Great framing shouldn’t be reserved for great artwork. Even a coffee shop’s rewards card can become a conversation piece (p. 24).*

awards). This customer had intended to visit the local trophy/awards store and get a wooden plaque with the coin glued to it and engraved words. But before he got there, he heard that I might be able to create a more special and unique design. Luckily, we are in a whole new world of custom framing since I started 34 years ago; to create something unique back then took finding the one person who could master the “dreaded oval cutter!”

Before we talked about design possibilities, I asked my customer who he was giving this coin to and what the meaning was behind it. I don’t usually ask about a budget at this point in the consultation; it can sometimes be a good idea to do so, as you can end up wasting a lot of valuable time designing something they cannot afford.

I always have samples hanging in my shop to show off different design techniques. In this case, I didn’t have a clue offhand what I could design for them. While showing the police captain around the store, I was able to get an idea of what he liked, what was important, and what was not important. As a new customer, he was a little apprehensive about just letting me do my own thing. However, by asking questions and telling him a little about me and my shop, he was willing to give me some artistic license as I designed the piece.

I asked him if he had an extra patch that I could use

in the design, and he brought one in later that day, along with names and other information for the piece. He was anxious to see what I would come up with. So was I—did I mention I had four days to complete it?

There is nothing wrong with simple framing sometimes; I frequently tell my customers that for certain pieces, simpler is better. With this one, however, I felt that it needed to have that “wow” factor, as I could see this customer turning into a repeat visitor over time. Armed with a coin, a patch, and some writing, I set to work creating a design that would satisfy myself and my customer.

I took a photo of the patch and traced it in Corel-Draw (the software I use to create shapes for computerized mat cutting), then turned the shape into a clip art file I could use with my Valiani Mat Pro Ultra. I measured the coin and entered its size into the program, then entered all the wording that was given to me by the customer. Sometimes finding the right font is the biggest challenge; I want to use something that is easy to read, but with a little more flair than Arial or Times New Roman.

With this particular piece, it was a no-brainer to incorporate the State of Oregon shape into the framing. Once I had everything inputted to the CMC program, I started moving the shapes and writing around until the design looked cohesive. This is actually the part I love the most about the design process. Having a CMC allows me to shape objects into others with clicks of a button. I have also found that when the writing is right on the matting instead of a metal nameplate, it gives it a more personal touch, and customers have said that it makes them feel like they have a one-of-a-kind piece that was made just for them. Most of the time, what I have in my head as a design going into it is not what the final piece looks like.

The top mat I used is Crescent #5598 Etched Black, and the inside of the state shape is Crescent #9599 After Dark. Using a shiny mat with a matte finish mat creates some dimension and texture. Using a brush tip pen, I colored the core of the mats blue to go with the police theme. Spacing the pieces up from the bottom mat gave it some depth to add to the “wow factor.”

After presenting this design to the police captain,

I am happy to report that what was once a first-time customer has evolved into a regular client. He has since brought in a box of coins and patches for me to have on hand for future framing projects, and when he wants something done, he sends me a text with a due date and all relevant information and gives me free reign with the creative aspects of the design. Every time he picks up a piece, I always get the “wow!”

A FLYING DUCK

I once had a customer bring in a rather straightforward framing job: a photo of a flying duck. He explained that he took the photo and wanted to hang it in his office, but also wanted it to be a conversation piece.

He had seen some of my creative sports pieces, but not being a sports fan, he said he still wanted to have something special done on this piece. It took me a day or two to come up with the design. I didn’t want to de-



● A police officer’s challenge coin and patch were showcased with this eye-catching mat design that utilizes the shape of the State of Oregon (cut on a CMC).

This piece turned a one-time customer into a repeat client!



● This simple photo of a duck was enhanced with creative mat design. "Grass" and "cattails" add dimension and visual interest.

tract from the photo itself, so I thought maybe I could enhance it a little with the matting. By adding the cattails and grass clip art into the mat, it gave it the 3D look I was going for. The customer was blown away when he picked it up!

A COFFEE REWARD CARD

Sometimes custom framing can be really fun. A local coffee drive-thru gives customers a stamp on their rewards card for every coffee they buy—get 10 stamps and the 11th is free! A customer of mine said his wife was always stealing his filled-up cards, so he wanted me to frame one of the cards so she couldn't cash it in. Since this was a prank, my customer wasn't looking to spend a lot of money and wanted a simple, small frame around the card. I told him I would only charge him for a simple frame if he'd let me have a little fun with the design.

I traced the coffee company's logo in CorelDraw and, using my CMC, drew the design onto the mat along with lettering. I attached the card on another piece of mat-board and floated it on the back mat. When the customer picked it up, he insisted on paying more because he thought it was the best thing he had ever seen!

A RETIREMENT GIFT

Our local parks and recreation company wanted to give a framed piece for a retirement gift for the local city manager. However, they didn't have anything to frame other than words. I've done other pieces for them in the past, but they always had some art to go with them. Giving me only two days to come up with something, I quickly put my thinking cap on.

I pulled some images of local areas off the internet and printed them out. Creating a collage of photos in the middle gave it that little extra touch that was needed. I also printed out the logo and trimmed it to fit a small matboard piece. Again, floating pieces within the matting gives it more depth. The city manager's response when he received it? "This isn't an award, this is a piece of art!"

My advice for getting these kinds of responses are to ask a lot of questions, give great customer service, and be creative, because the world of custom framing is competitive and always changing. **PFM**



Don Strouf

Don has over 34 years of experience in the custom framing business and owns his own shop, Ducko's Custom Framing 2.0, in Springfield, OR. Starting out cutting mats on a C&H table top mat cutter, over the years he has advanced to hand carving designs and has taken mat cutting to a whole new level with the Valiani Mat Pro Ultra.

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