

# Ain't No Shadows In My Boxes: Framing Medals in an Acrylic Box

by Ira Freinle, CPF

What does the average framer think of when they think of acrylic? You can almost hear the gears click and stop at “cheap glazing.” The funny thing is that acrylic isn’t cheap. In fact, it is a marvelous medium for framing objects that require depth in a frame.

Most framers have done shadow box installations and are familiar with the process. And it’s true that shadow boxes can successfully hold deep objects, but they can also be heavy—both in appearance and in actual weight. For one, the deep wood mouldings often used can cast a disturbing shadow on the contained objects. Second, the actual weight of these frames can become quite heavy. And if “extenders” are not available for a given moulding, an often unsightly box must be created behind the frame to provide the necessary depth. In many cases, the framer is passing up a very favorable alternative—acrylic boxes.

These types of boxes have a light appearance. In many cases, the viewer does even not realize that the acrylic box extends from the face of

the piece, and there is no shadow on any part of the contents. One of the reasons given by framers for not considering acrylic boxes is that they have an unfinished “techy” look, but this can be addressed by simply adding a finishing frame around the edges of the box.

Most of the pieces we create in my shop are housed in such a frame. It can be of any width, and the only requirement is that it have a rabbet depth of at least  $\frac{3}{8}$ "

a very liberal stipulation which allows more choices than are available with shadow boxes. Otherwise, all of the other framing techniques used with acrylic boxes are already in most framers’ vocabulary.

Acrylic boxes are not new, although I’ve found most framers do not use them, or do so very rarely. By not taking advantage acrylic boxes, framers miss out on a highly profitable and creative display technique.

Generally, the boxes are made with a fitted strainer inside to which the box is screwed for support and on which the artwork (whatever its nature) is mounted. Leaving the outside of the box bare is efficient, but



*Photo 1: For this frame design, we utilized an acrylic box with a hinged door so the customer could remove his medals whenever he liked.*

it is also quite sterile in appearance. We have left them this way sometimes, but our usual practice is to trim the box with a suitable moulding to give it a warmer, more finished look. As with any frame job, the moulding should be selected to suit the objects on display. We have used gold- and silver-leafed, wood finished, and aluminum.

## Framing Medals

A project we recently completed was an excellent challenge to our design abilities. The finished product made us proud when we heard that the recipient “flipped” when he saw it (see Photo 1). The Shah of Iran had presented our client, the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, with three medals in recognition of his services.

The prime piece was a large medal, 4" in diameter, with a long sash for formal wear. A smaller medal for less formal use, as well as a lapel ribbon and pendant for everyday wear, were also included. Our client not only wanted to display them, *but* he also wanted to remove them from time to time to wear or show others.

In order to give the pieces the regal appearance they deserved, we could not skimp on the size and spacing of the mountings. Therefore the finished piece was 21x28" (see Photo 1). This was not tremendous, but still would be a nuisance to take off the wall to

remove the medals from the rear as would normally be done. We wanted to make the removal and replacement of the pieces as simple as possible.

So we decided on the usual five-sided box, except that the front is a hinged door with a simple pressure latch closure for easy access. In Photo 1, the door is open to reduce reflections when we took the shot.

We chose a bordeaux wine-colored crushed suede mat to use throughout for backing. We felt this would enhance the “regality” of the piece. All the pieces were cut from one matboard. We marked arrows

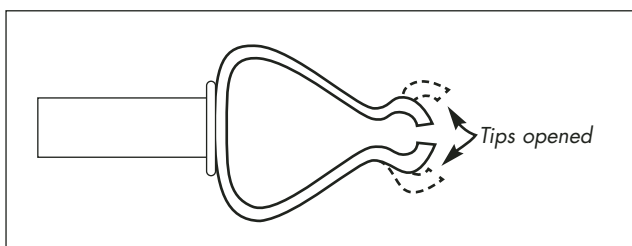


Figure 1: Once we heated and bent the tips of a Mighty Mount Spoon holder, the vertical pin bar of one of the medals could be rested upon it.

on the back of each piece as we cut them so that all the pieces could be faced in the same direction to make the nap of the suede consistent.

We used a silver moulding which had an “imperial” look for both the outside finished moulding and the inside trim.

The main backing mat was mounted on black Gatorboard for rigidity. This is a very useful material because it is actually stiffer than a piece of plywood of similar thickness and is as light as foam board. The two lower panels were made by reverse beveling pieces of the matboard and mounting a fillet around the edges, so that they would have a raised platform appearance. They were then glued in place.

The medium-large medal (Photo 1, bottom left) had a vertical pin bar on the back so it presented only a slight mounting design problem. We modified a standard Mighty Mount Spoon Holder by opening the front curve to allow the pin bar to just be pushed in (see Figure 1).

We have all types of heating elements available for acrylic work. However, for this we turned a dry mounting tacking iron upside down, rested it on a block so the bottom was level and stood the Mighty Mount on it so only the ends of the arms rested on the iron. The rest of it was kept off the heat so it would remain hard and firm.

It was left there for about ten minutes to soften, and then a piece of wood was used to open the tips, but not the arms. The arms were kept tight to hold the medal backing pin. “Voila.” The medal could be pushed on and pulled off without twisting.

The lapel pin had a horizontal pin bar on the back. We took a standard metal frame backing spring, flattened the normal curve, bent the tip of it up as a hook, and then made a downward bend about  $\frac{1}{8}$ " behind that to extend the hook away from the mounting surface. It was drilled out and screwed to the matboard with a nut and bolt (see Figure 2).

The largest medal was fastened to a six-foot-long sash that could not be removed. This created a display problem. We could not leave all of this fabric loose in the case. So we created a space behind the panel. The sash fabric was too soft to simply push it into a slot (and a

long slot would be unsightly). We devised a removable panel with hooks on back to hold the ribbon (see Photo 2).

A silver moulding of similar appearance to the outside frame was selected for small width and maximum depth. It was  $\frac{3}{8}$ " wide and had a  $\frac{7}{8}$ " rabbit depth inside. An opening 1" smaller than the frame was cut through the main mounting board. The frame was mounted on the mat/Gatorboard combination providing a total inside depth of  $1\frac{1}{8}$ ", allowing plenty of room for hooks to hold the sash neatly and to hold the medal mounting board. A piece of the suede board was fastened to



Photo 2: The long sash on the largest medal is neatly tucked behind a panel.



Photo 3: Modified object hangers make the smaller medals easy to remove—and return—to the frame.

the outside back of the panel to create a finished look when the panel was removed (see Figure 2).

The mounting board for the medal was three pieces of .80" thick clay-coated board. Gatorboard is very rigid, but it will crush if a nut and bolt are tightened on it. We chose the clayboard because it would not crush and used three thicknesses to make the assembly rigid.

The ribbon hooks were made from  $\frac{1}{8}$ " round rod bent to shape, and threaded on one end to fasten to the cardboard. The three pieces of cardboard were sized so they would just slide into the sight size of the small frame. We wanted a close fit on the sides so you could not see into the frame when the panel was in place, but just enough space so the panel could be pushed into the frame. The top and bottom of the panel would be behind the frame rabbet so there was no unsightly opening there.

The grain of the three panel pieces were crossed for greater rigidity and then glued together. Holes were drilled for the sash hooks and the front piece was drilled out large enough so that a nut would countersink into it. Thus the nut and the countersink holes would be covered by the suede mat finishing board when it was glued on. The finishing

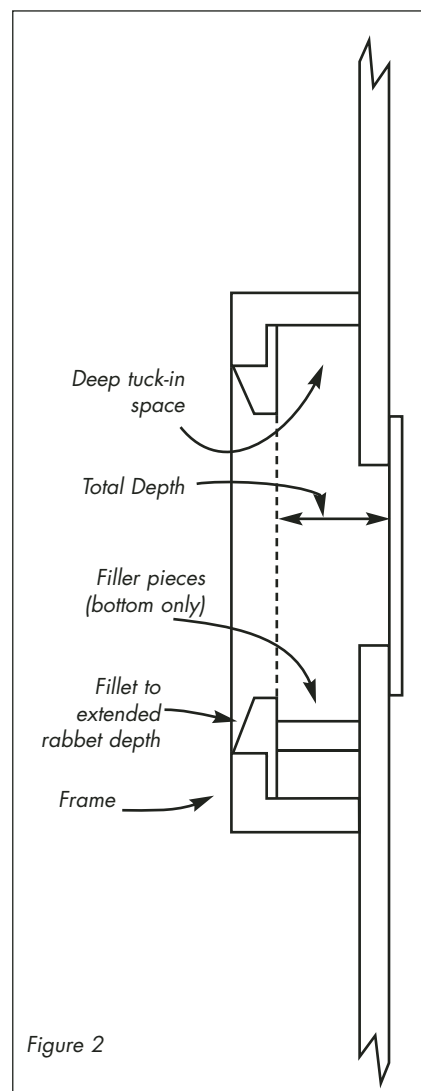
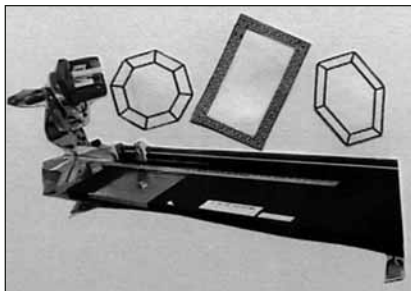


Figure 2

suede board was cut  $2\frac{1}{2}$ " larger than the clay board and  $1\frac{1}{4}$ " of the edges all around were stripped of core and backing to leave a thin piece of mat fabric to wrap around the panel back for a finished look.

A long Mighty Mount plate hook was mounted in the center of the panel board so that the ring of the medal could be hung on it. This would locate the medal where we wanted it and also prevent its weight from pulling down on the sash.

If you think about it, you cannot lock a panel of any size in an opening unless it is larger than the opening. Thus we have to be able put the top of the panel into the opening and then lock it in on the



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bottom. We accomplished this by gluing a matching wide fillet inside the frame to increase the rabbet depth all around, and then shimmed up the bottom side to keep the panel from falling out at the top (see Figure 2).

Two acrylic cubes were drilled and tapped for screws and were fastened to the board as handles to facilitate inning and outing of the panel. A security type mounting was provided to prevent the piece from falling off the wall when the panel was inserted or removed.

## Many Possibilities

Future articles will describe methods for creating your own boxes with standard framing tools, and also show other projects that can be accomplished with acrylics. In the meantime, there are numerous companies from whom you can purchase the boxes. If you don't have a local source for acrylic boxes, refer to sources such as *PFM's* Annual Directory. Most areas have a company that works in plastic. Some sign makers can create a five-sided box.

If you do have local sources, make sure they do cement work. Some shops only do cutting and bending of the acrylic. If they do cementing, look for samples. You want to see clean shiny joints with no bubbles. It is not difficult to eliminate bubbles, but some shops don't bother. This lowers the price, but gives a less desirable project. (Similar to the framer we had in our area who told his customers that overcuts on a mat were desirable because they were a sign it was hand cut!) ■