

# MAKING A SIMPLE

**H**ave you ever seen a framed mirror in an antique shop or designer's showroom and wondered how you too could offer such a mirror? To make something like that would indeed show your customers that you had the right stuff! If you look more closely at the methods of construction and see the frame as an assemblage of smaller parts, what seemed complex becomes simple.

One of the trends we see in today's market is the French country look, and a very popular piece in decorating with elements of this style is a trumeau (pronounced *true-moe*) mirror. The trumeau's charm is in the addition of a piece of art, a carving, or a second mirror, usually located above the large mirror. This adds chic to the frame.

As the name indicates, the trumeau originated in France. These frames came into prominence during the 18th century and were common up until the



*Photo 1: The trumeau frame can be a welcome addition to your customers' decor.*

mid 1800's. Most trumeau frames are constructed in the same manner as the paneled walls of the French homes that they adorned. Some may even owe their existence to having been a section of a wall. Frames that are known to have been removed from such a wall are called *boiserie* (sounds like *bwa-zer-ee*). The fact that some antique trumeau frames have varying widths on their sides leads me to believe that they have been removed from a paneled wall. Because these frames lack provenance (a record of ownership) we may never know their specific history.

An antique trumeau imported from France is expensive, difficult to find, and often retails above \$5,000. One solution in supplying the demand has been to produce reasonable reproductions for homeowners and designers. You will be able to create them for your customers, also.

# TRUMEAU

by Bob Hamon, CPF



Photo 2: Relief carvings are sometimes used on trumeau frames instead of other artwork, like a painting.

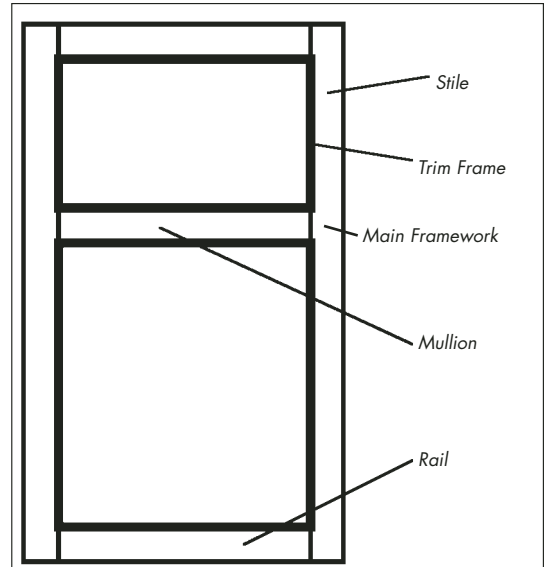


Figure 1: The parts of a simple trumeau frame

Using tools that you probably have in your shop, you can create your own version of a simple mirror frame in the French trumeau style, and assemble it in less than a day. For the frame in this article, we will use regular lumber and standard picture frame moulding. Therefore, I call this “a simple trumeau” (see Photo 1).

In dissecting the trumeau, you will see two distinct parts. One is the decorative (picture frame) moulding that borders the mirror and the art which we will refer to as trim. It is applied to the main framework that will be the means of support for the mirror and art.

The second part is the main framework of wood which is constructed in the same manner as a paneled wall, being made of two stiles (vertical lengths), two rails (a top and bottom), and one mullion (a cross member separating the two openings) (see Figure 1). A paneled door in your home or a kitchen cabinet may offer an example of this type of construction.

If you have decided to make your own trumeau in this manner, the first step is to choose what will be enclosed in the second (upper) opening of the frame. (The first opening holds the mirror.) If you are going to use art, whether it's a painting or a print of a painting, it should be French in order to appear authentic. The paintings that adorn antique frames range from

romance paintings (an example may be scenes of ladies in a garden like those done by Fragonard, Watteau, and Boucher) to florals. The art must not be Impressionist but rather painted in the Classical or French Academy style common in the 1700's and 1800's.

Remember that the width of the art will also be the determining factor in the width of the mirror, since the art will be positioned directly above or below the mirror. As for the height, the mirror in my project was at least twice as tall as the art; I found this proportion to be very pleasing to the eye. There is no rule as to how tall

your mirror should be or where its placement should be in relation to the art. I have seen many variations of the trumeau, so whatever suits your needs will be all right. The only rule you need to heed is to keep the art and frame within the proper time period!

Trumeau mirrors may also display relief carvings in the upper opening of the frame (see Photo 2). The width of the carving will determine the width of the mirror, just as with artwork. Subjects for the carving may be scrolls, foliage, ribbons, urns, or a design motif like one featuring musical instruments. These trumeaus, compared to those with art, are equally as stunning, but frames made with carvings or compo require gilding. This project is about making “a simple trumeau,” so we will not consider a



Photo 3: In more complex trumeau frames, the artwork does not have to be the same width as the mirror, as seen with this oval artwork.



Photo 4: Here, a second rabbet is being routed to be the same height as the existing rabbet, as described in method one..



Photo 5: Here, a table saw is being used to cut out a second rabbet as described in method one.



Photo 6: A table saw can also be used to remove all of the wood below the face of the moulding, as described in method two..

carved panel here.

In choosing the moulding for the trim, the rule about keeping it true to the period still applies. From 1700 to 1850, the styles of decoration spanned Rococo, Louis XIV, Regence, Louis XV, Louis XVI, Directoire, Empire, and Louis XVIII. A trumeau can be as complex a design as the period permits. The mirror may even have an oval painting adorned in foliage (see Photo 3), but once again we are making a simple trumeau, and the French style that best suits this need is the Louis XVI period. This period is equivalent to the American Federal period. These frame styles are simple but elegant and may have beading or often some design as adornment. They are the easiest to adapt to our trumeau. So for the simple trumeau, I looked for a moulding that would require no adaptation to use.

## BUILDING THE FRAME

To begin, the picture frame moulding is measured and cut in the usual manner to fit around the art and mirror. However, before you glue, clamp and nail these two frames together, they may need to be altered to sit properly on the trumeau's framework. Your own experience, talent, and range of tools will be a big part in how you approach this part of the project. Review the following four methods of altering and/or applying moulding for the one that best suits your needs (see Figure 2 on next page).

**Method One:** The moulding is altered by cutting or routing a second rabbet in the back edge of the mould-

ing (see Photo 4). Note that the height of the second rabbet is cut to the same height as the rabbet produced by the manufacturer. This method helps to achieve the look of attached trim common to an antique trumeau. I prefer this method because it offers some extra strength when attached to the framework. Picture framers who have woodworking tools may have a router and table to do this (see Photo 5).

*Always think about safety.* If you use a table saw to cut the rabbet, the waste may be prone to “kick back” toward you, so take all safety precautions.

**Method Two:** The moulding is altered by removing all of the wood below the rabbet (see Photo 6). This will provide you with “trim” in which to border the framework. You will create a new rabbet when the trim is attached to the framework and extends over its inner edge. This method requires proficiency in working with a table saw and can be dangerous. Only use this method if you have the proper tools and experience to safely alter the picture frame moulding.

**Method Three:** With no alteration, the moulding is glued and nailed to the face of the framework. This method works well when the scale of the moulding does not compete with the width of the trumeau's framework. The example in Photo 7 (at right) shows that my choice of moulding is too high as compared to methods one and two.

**Method Four:** With no alteration, the moulding is glued and nailed to the inner edge of the framework. This will allow you to set the proper height of the moulding in

relation to the framework. I do not recommend this method because the surface area of moulding that is glued to the framework is too small to produce a strong joint, and it's difficult to nail.

This method also leaves you no option but to rip cut the lumber when you need to change the width of the framework to other than standard sizes.

*Note:* Take into account how each method would require a different width of wood to be used in the framework to accomplish the same look. This may be a factor in choosing which method you use for your trumeau. Consider your skills and tools on hand in picking the method to use.

Once the picture frame moulding is prepared using the method that you have chosen, assemble the two decorative trim frames. Your next step is to determine how wide the framework will be (if you haven't already done so). Working with the assembled frames of decorative trim, you determine what width of framework looks best. Lay the decorative trim on top of the wood in the same fashion as you would pick the width of a mat.

I have a few scraps of dimensional lumber that I use for this decision process. Having a table saw, I also can rip the lumber to alter the width further. If you do

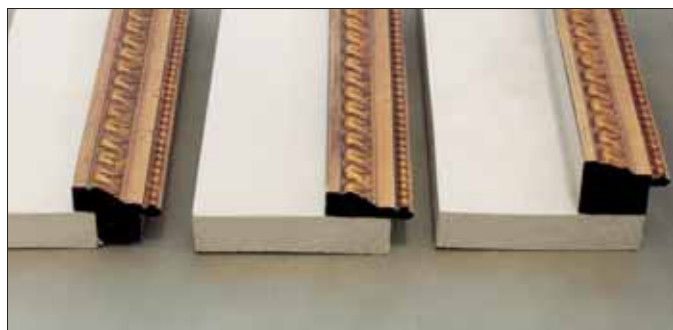
not have that option, then your choices are limited to the lumber offered, which are usually 1"x 3", 1"x 4", and 1"x 6". For my frame I chose to use the 1"x 4" ( $\frac{3}{4}$ " x  $3\frac{1}{2}$ " actual size), and that meant all I needed to do was cut the wood to length.

If you do not have an electric miter box (chop saw) to do this, most lumber and hardware stores provide cutting for free or a nominal fee. If you use this service, you should know the exact dimensions that you need.

## LAYOUT AND ASSEMBLY

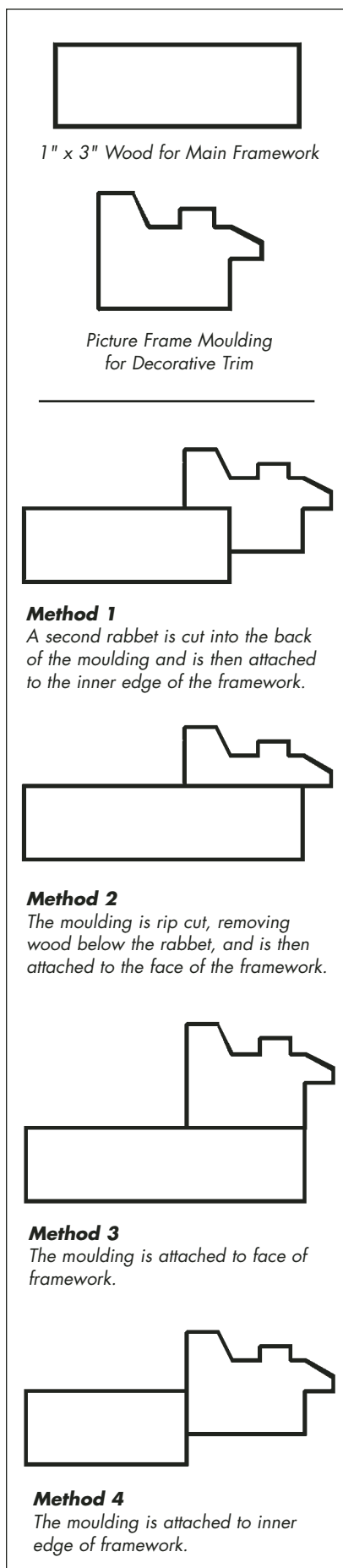
Layout and assembly is pretty simple, too. The framework is joined with butt joints because this most closely resembles the real look of an antique trumeau. To lay out your cuts, the assembled trim frames are positioned with the two stiles (vertical parts) of the framework. After squaring up what you have, you can now measure the distance for the rails and mullion.

Cut and make any adjustments to the lumber and dry fit everything to ensure accuracy. I double checked by placing the framework in regular framing vises. The framework now in place, the mullion should fit right in between the frames of trim. If everything fits accurately it can all be glued and nailed.



*Photo 7: Shown here are methods one, two, and three (l to r). As you can see, the moulding I've chosen is too tall to utilize method three.*

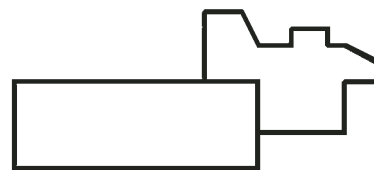
**Figure 2**



1" x 3" Wood for Main Framework

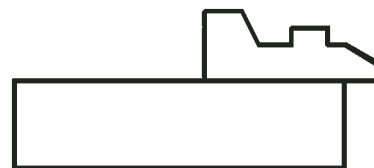


Picture Frame Moulding for Decorative Trim



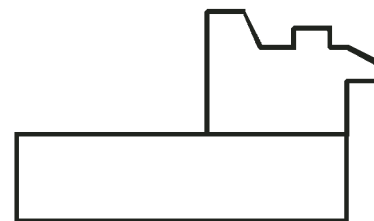
### Method 1

A second rabbet is cut into the back of the moulding and is then attached to the inner edge of the framework.



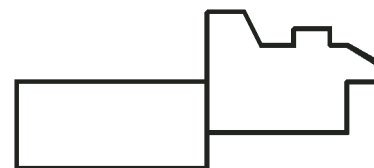
### Method 2

The moulding is rip cut, removing wood below the rabbet, and is then attached to the face of the framework.



### Method 3

The moulding is attached to face of framework.



### Method 4

The moulding is attached to inner edge of framework.

The mullion is held in place for gluing using a band clamp. The band clamp consists of a nylon strap that is wrapped around the frame (helpful on those stubborn wide mouldings) and cinched tight to hold the joint until dry. (If you do not have one of these little marvels, I recommend you run out and buy one even if you don't make this trumeau.)

## CREATING A FINISH

Now that assembly of the framework is complete, all that we need to do is paint the frame. We have relied on the picture frame moulding to provide the gilded surfaces so we do not need to do any gilding. With a couple coats of paint and some razzle-dazzle, our trumeau will look like an antique.

I get this look by first lightly sanding the outside edge of the picture frame moulding and the raw wood frame, leaving all gilded parts untouched. Remember, new paint will adhere better to scuffed surfaces. I painted the frame with a pale green latex paint having an eggshell finish. When dry (an hour or so) I painted the same areas with a crackle agent following the directions for the crackle product. In the proper time limits after the crackle agent was applied, I then painted a creamy beige as the top coat. The top color cracked and with



Photo 8: Here is a detail of the finished frame with its antique finish.

some help from a heat gun (shrink wrap gun), additional cracks, peeling, and bubbling appeared.

After the finish was hard and dry, I toned it with a tinted (dark oak) paste wax (see Photo 8). The frame then had a level of aging that was natural and not too harsh. Remember that the back edge of the rabbet is seen in the reflection of the mirror, so you can dress this up with black or gold paint.

The trumeau frame now done. Fit and finish in your usual manner. You will be proud to hang this in your store, and better yet in a customer's home! ■

(Photos 2 and 3 courtesy of Maison de Provence, New Orleans)

## THE FINAL FRAME

The customer that purchased this trumeau had a perfect spot to display it in her home. The simple lines and color worked well on the brick wall over the fireplace in her dining room. However, her husband did not like the art in the upper part of the trumeau. The solution was to replace the art, but to find one that was to his liking and the same size as the existing still-life would be difficult.

The idea came to me to replace the art with a relief design mounted on plywood and painted to match the rest of the frame. The idea of a family coat of arms engulfed in foliage was enthusiastically accepted by the customer. A little research into their family name produced several designs and one was adopted to use for their new family heirloom. The mirror now hangs in distinction in the family din-



The customers' family crest was installed into the trumeau and now hangs in their dining room.

ing room (see photo), and has been a topic of dinner conversation with guests.

**Note:** Relief designs in compo that feature crests can be found in Decorator's Supply catalog #124. Family coat of arms can be researched at your public library or on the Internet at [www.traceit.com](http://www.traceit.com)

Please note that what we generally refer to as a family coat of arms is a shield which may include a motto in a scroll below, and a crest (helmet or other items) above. Coat of arms were recorded and assigned to individuals; therefore each son in a family would have a coat of arms that differed from the father according to the rules of heraldic order. The written description of a shield on the website is in a precise order according to heraldic rules so that an accurate depiction can be made from the text. ■