

THE **E**ssence of **D**esign

Part II: Line

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Line is the most fundamental of the design elements. It begins with a point of concentration and then, by an extension from that point, it becomes a line. Multiple lines give shape and, at the same time, define the space surrounding that shape. It manifests itself from various beginnings, from doodles on paper to natural phenomena such as the horizon. Nature is rich with linear design, but its lines are symbolic of structure and function, such as the thin branches of a tree's silhouette, the veins within a leaf, or the layering of a shale rock wall. Thus line does not truly exist in nature, only mass and design.

Subjective vs. Objective Line

In the hands of an artist, designer, or framer, line is the most basic of tools. It is a graphic device used to function symbolically in literary and artistic expression. Though best described in art, it is the most powerful basis for most of our creative stimulus. Lines may be either subjective (as in the subject of or for communication) or objective (as in the object of physical art).

Subjective lines are those modified for communication to evoke emotional states and responses, as in calligraphy and letterform expression or music in written form. Objective lines describe measurements and surface characteristics or decoration, as in picture framing.

Line enriches a surface without denying the essential "flatness" of the artwork. Although we see line in all of nature, it is a man-made invention, an abstracted definition developed for the simplification of visual facts and symbolizing graphic ideas. This remains true whether dis-



Photo 1: These contempo panels (made with laminates) create a subtle monochromatic stripe that matches the mat color. The matboard textures are accented by wide strips, reflecting the mat.

cussing lines as subjective for communication or objective for surface decoration.

Physical Characteristics of Line

Lines can set a mood. They can be powerful or delicate, soothing or jarring. All lines have physical properties, and the type of line can either unify or divide an image. They can stimulate an emotional response depending upon their direction, as in a passive horizontal, inspirational vertical, or agitated diagonal.

Straight lines travel only in one direction (see Photo 1), may be short or long, and vary in width. If a straight line gradually changes direction, it becomes a curved line (see Photo 2). They may be graceful, flowing, and soothing, reflecting passive gentleness or at times appearing somewhat unstable. Angular lines (see Photo 3) have abrupt changes of direction and often stimulate excitement, confusion, or challenge.

The width of a line will also impact its meaning. Wide, heavy lines make a bolder statement than narrow,

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interpretation. Successful line designs may bleed off a page or out of a frame (see Photo 1, left), yet still draw the viewer back into the frame. They are capable of evoking emotional responses in a viewer by controlling focal point and eye movement through the use of line variety and placement.

Relating To Other Design Principles

When a line creates a two-dimensional boundary, it becomes a shape (see Photo 2). Further, by enclosing an area, a line's edges create

*(l) Photo 2: Gentle curved lines become ovals, creating shape. The multiple ovals are still only one element, but the negative area in the corners created by the oval in the rectangle also creates space.
(r) Photo 3: A closed line becomes a shape as this notched slant top mat over a 12-sided inner mat. The two principles of line and shape are illustrated here.*

fine lines, and the transition from straight to curved, heavy to light reinforces the entire picture and mood.

Translating Line Into Framing

A line is a path of a moving point or mark, made by some type of tool drawing across a surface, and made visible by contrast. It is fairly easy to translate this into framing design. Whether a line is thick, thin, dark, light, straight, or curved, it stimulates some sort of visual response and therefore creates movement. This eye manipulation may be deliberately stimulated by a framer through the use of numerous line designs including French lines, embossed lines, painted bevels, and panel designs.

In framing, the character of a line is also controlled by these various decorative interpretations. Wide, pastel-tinted, dry pigment panels may appear extremely soft, romantic, and feminine while a black ruling pen line is capable of taking on a much harder, aggressive, masculine

space. Lines almost always imply other elements such as shape, space, form, and texture as designated by their application. They have the power to emphasize or lead the viewer's eye. The intricacy of design will become more evident as we discuss additional principles, and visual emphasis will be covered as a separate principle.

Though design principles are titled and defined individually, they all intricately weave together into a meshed unit, for they often cross over into other categories. This is how the concept of a unified design works. Every portion relates to every other part and everything within a framing design should be there for a reason.

The "Givens," or Counting the Principles

When interpreting the use of line as a principle of framing design, you must begin with a given set of standards. A designer must be capable of limiting the use of design principles (a total of both the elements and factors) as a basis for the structure of design control. Ultimately, what



Photo 4: Embossed lines placed ¼" apart are a perfect example of pure monochromatic line.



Photo 5: Varied line widths can create dramatic accents. A cut v-groove on the inner mat is contrasted by a pinstriped undertiered top mat. A spacer between mats two and three creates intensity. Line and color are also present here.

is required is a clearer understanding of what goes into a good design and what needs to be kept out!

The givens in framing include four accepted visual basics:

- 1) an understated traditional rectangular frame of neutral wood or metal;
- 2) a single mat with a single rectangular window opening of traditional border widths (with or without a weighted bottom);
- 3) a chosen color for the mat; and
- 4) a particular texture to that chosen mat.

Anything done in addition to alter the basic visual presentation becomes a specific stimulation of an additional design principle. These work best when the number of principles in each design is kept between three and five.

By first establishing these givens (those items required to frame a piece of art—frame, mat, color, and texture), the other principles become customized framing design additions. By understanding the individual design principles (line, color, texture, etc.) one can literally count the number of visual design activities in a framed presentation. Again, limiting the framing principles from three to five items will keep the design strong, tasteful, and understated. This enhances the art as it should and doesn't overdo the design!

As A Pure Design Element

As already noted, there are a great number of line possibilities in relation to framing design. The most pure use of line as a design element is a monochromatic double mat (ie: white on white), same color core v-groove, or embossed line (see Photo 4). This would be a design in which no other elements are initiated, using only line to attract attention or to serve as a visual accent.

Using line only excludes the introduction of color (which would be a second element), but does allow for numerous layers of same colored mats to be used within the design. Each line is not counted as a separate element. A double, triple, quadruple monochromatic mat unit, or simply a double mat with a v-groove, all count as a single design element, as long as a designer color core board has not deliberately

of Design

been used as a color accent.

Rag mat and conservation-quality same-color core boards or white core conservation boards may be utilized in a pure line “one principle” design. Too many white on white mats (four or more), though only showcasing line, will create a natural depth that will, in a future article, be defined as intensity.

Additional Elements

Once the concept of pure line as a single element is understood, you may then add color to expand upon the design’s potential. Since three to five principles is the goal, adding color to line is quite acceptable and opens up the ultimate in surface line decoration as mentioned earlier. Now, by varying line widths and colors, more dramatic accents are possible (see Photo 5).

Besides color, the character of the line from a framing point of view may be altered by the integration of multiple media such as sewn silk threads, marbled papers (see Photo 6), and contempo panels with laminating films (see Photo 1). As each new item is used to create an illusion of line, additional elements are inadvertently integrated and will need to be counted into the total number of elements used. Silk threads may represent line and color and laminating films may integrate line and texture, but one single strip of surface marbled paper counts as line, color, and texture.

It may sound confusing, but simply go back to the basics. Pay attention to the fact that a surface decorative panel is first a line. Though its character may be wide or narrow, pastel dry pigment or marbled paper, it is a line before it is a color, texture, or combination.

Designing with pure line is clean, classy, and simple. Perhaps it is not overly profitable, but then again isn’t a Brian Wolf hand carved mat simply a series of curved lines creating a shape? (see Photo 7). Okay, so that isn’t pure line, it’s line and shape—but there’s more money in it too.

Good vs. Bad Line Design

In a good design, the line is energized and will animate the art in relation to the entire design. This brings the entire image to



Photo 6: Marble surface strips are wide lines and also add color and texture to the design.



Photo 7: A wide dry pigment French mat panel is accented by a curved incised line shape of varying weights, adding panache to a basic mat design...and lines.

THE **E**ssence of **D**esign

life. The eye movement is drawn from the artwork to the line decoration, but ultimately returns to the art. Therefore, it truly enhances the art. A good design is technically well executed and plays off the period and style of the artwork. An example would be a traditional French mat on an antique botanical print.

In a bad design, lines become isolated with no organic relationship or meaning to the whole of the art and the design does not enhance the art. This can happen through poorly placed v-grooves, too many mat layers, or by drawing attention away from the art through the use of corner overcuts or v-groove lines that are not parallel.

Line in Review

Try not to underestimate the power of the line. Embossed lines, v-grooves, and monochromatic multiple mats may either showcase the art or leave it flat. Think about how appropriate your design is. Everything must be there for a reason, not simply to increase the price of the framing job. Also, don't lose sight of the aesthetics and beauty of the line in its purest state. It's all up to you to determine the correct presentation.

In Part III of The Essence of Design series, which will appear in the June issue, I will cover the second element in this series—Color. Stay tuned. ■