

Design Concepts

Global Design...

Framing and Art in Southeast Asia

by Chris A. Paschke, CPF, GCF

During late August and early September of this year, I had the opportunity to spend two weeks in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the Philippines. This gave me a wonderful opportunity to visit fine art galleries and search out the art of this region, as well as to see how the framing practices compared to those in the United States. Since this trip

was meant to be for my research and continuing education as an artist, it didn't occur to me to write a design article about it until I reached Makati City, Manila.

In "Mounting The World" (*PFM*, March 2001), I gave an overview of my framing observations from a mounting point viewpoint in UK, Italy, Netherlands, Germany, and China. At that time, the United States had established itself as a leader in preservation/conservation framing techniques. China had shown how much it revered handcrafts as both fine art and consumable, through its vast array of batik, pottery, papercutting, and silk embroidery. Traditional scroll mounting was the framing of choice for much of the art shown. My trip to Southeast Asia offered further insight into framing around the globe.

Decorative Handcrafts vs. Fine Art

While pop culture has pervaded much of the world (McDonald's, Taco Bell, and Hard Rock Cafe seem to be in every major city I have visited to date), I have found that each country marvelously languishes in its own culture and appreciation of art. In fact many European and Asian cities appreciate handcrafts far more than we do, and their fine art appears to develop from handcrafts, like silk embroidery in China. (I'll be covering this topic in an upcoming article.)

In the United States, we often place open edition reproductions and handcrafts in a category referred to as decorative art. Even "shadowbox" is a term coined by the framing industry for the "memory boxes" I used to sell supplies for during the 1970s at my family's Hobby Hut in Redding, CA. In fact it took me years to get used to calling them shadowboxes instead. They truly



Photo 1: Silk Embroidery—Three-dimensionally framed silk embroidery, like this example, is sold in Hong Kong tourist shops. It is hinged in the center so the intricately executed delicate silk floral may be rotated and viewed from either side with no visible knotting.

are boxes that preserve and showcase our memories and collectibles.

Hong Kong: Crafts and Art

Arriving in Hong Kong, my itinerary included visiting as many galleries and art stores as possible. This was my second trip to Asia, and the difference between this place and mainland China is obvious. Hong Kong is geared more to shoppers and tourists and it is easy to get along even if you only speak English. The British influence remains strong everywhere but in art, it seems. Since tourism flourishes here, handcrafts abound from carvings to papercutting. They remain inexpensive, representative of the area, and easy to take home.

Many stores proudly showcase silk embroidery. The difference between this trip and my travels here two years earlier was that the embroidery was even more prevalent. Pieces are either matted flat or framed three dimensionally (hinged in the center with the silk pressed between two sheets of clear glass in a free-standing wood frame that turns for viewing from either side with no visible knotting). The freestanding frames are hand-carved and highly polished, and feel like fine furniture. They sell for under \$100 (US). (see Photo 1).

High-end galleries in Hong Kong predominantly display contemporary and abstract paintings from Asian, Australian, and European artists on traditional



Photo 2: Sculpture—This welded rooster is representational of the freely interpreted arts, textiles, and sculptures seen throughout the National Art Gallery in Malaysia. The landscapes in the background are interpretive and contemporary, too.

stretched canvases and paper, simply framed. It seems there are two extremes of the art spectrum—either traditional scroll paintings or contemporary abstractions, and not much in between.

Malaysia: First Impressions

After Hong Kong I headed to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia for five days. In contrast to the bustle of crowded streets and massive tourism in Hong Kong, here there were flowers, bright island colors, and markets everywhere. In the open air markets there were many small booths of assorted goods. Many handcrafts are imported from China. Small, handpainted 5"x7" images were originals painted by either the booth owner or other local artists, and generally ran under \$25 (US).

Staying here for five days gave me the time to seek out the National Museum and National Art Gallery along with assorted antique houses and dealers of fine collectibles. Mass transit made it easy to get around the city, but not to the galleries and gardens. You could get a taxi to them, but you run the risk of not finding one to return home.

Nonetheless, I ventured out, took a train, and then a taxi to the new home of the National Art Gallery. I was greeted by its director who was thrilled that an American artist was interested enough in their country's fine art collection to have made the attempt to track them down. She proudly led me through the gallery's new location while telling me of the development of



Photo 3: Stacked Multiple Opening—This image found in the Philippines is a pair of simple line drawing, close up florals that have been stacked in one frame with a double opening window mat. This was commonly seen here, even in bathrooms. Many images were limited editions, with very few decorative open editions being used.

their art and artists, having only emerged since their independence in the 1950s.

Art from the gallery's permanent collection included small welded sculpture (see Photo 2); large, free hanging, textile wall hangings; and assorted oil and acrylic paintings. Subject matter ranged from Rothkoesque squares of bold color to fine detailed landscapes, but the bulk of the images fell into the Abstract Expressionist school.

Framing was generally minimal with most canvases being stretched and framed using a simple wood moulding (sometimes using a linen liner). Some were painted black; some were natural wood. All works on paper that I saw were matted with a single, 4-ply, window mat using narrow dimensions with little or no bottom weight and regular glass. Though the mats appeared to be paper mat quality, they were cleanly cut, simple, and well-suited to the contemporary art they housed.

Makati City, Manila

The Philippines was spectacular, and was more than I had ever expected. It poured rain constantly, feeding the assorted varieties of tropical flowers that grow wild along city streets. Having stayed in the heart of the financial district, I was close enough to walk to Ayala Museum Gallery and major shopping. The gallery housed assorted artists from the Philippines and much of it was also abstract in nature. Conservation framing is one of the



Photo 5: Clustered Framing—These two 24"x40" framed images showcase uneven, non-traditional mat proportions, as well as the clustering commonly seen throughout Manila. These pieces were photographed in a hallway, with a cluster of four 20"x20" pieces in a four square just around the corner in another room of this hotel.

Photo 4: Exaggerated Proportions—The wider mat borders and heavily-weighted bottom seen on this etching (hung in a hotel bedroom in the Philippines) is representative of the current design trends of wider proportions practiced in the U.S.



museum's services and all the framing and design within the city seemed to reflect an understanding and respect for preservation.

The shopping center I visited next door was a four-wing extravaganza—four stories high with the top level called "Home Zone." This floor filled with home interiors and accessories stores featuring items from textiles for drapery to picture framing. In fact there were two custom frame shops across the hallway from each other. Showcased art pieces were all originals and sizes ranged from small to quite large. Asian, African, and contemporary minimalist furniture and accessories seemed to dominate other store windows.

Framing Design of the Philippines

Framed art was everywhere in the Philippines, and it was distinctive. There were framed pieces in all public buildings; throughout hotels including bathrooms, foyers, and the end of long hallways; everywhere in restaurants; and in shops. The many pieces I saw were often framed with double mats, French lines, marbled papers, fillets, and spacers. The Filipino people appear to have been influenced by global design trends, conservation framing care of their art, and a general appreciation and respect for it.

Framing was distinctly upper quality with framing designs and proportions being very progressive, like the art it surrounds. Art and framing design flourished large and in groupings. Framing employed mostly single mats, but were both 4- and 8-ply thicknesses, many in conservation white. Art was often displayed in multiple

opening mats stacked one above the other in the same frame (see Photo 3), or in clusters of two, three, and four pieces as a group of clustered, individually framed images.

Contemporary images of flowers of all kinds in assorted color—from monochromatic grays to vivid tropically painted silks—were placed between 4'x12' acrylic sheets and used as freestanding room dividers. These were truly breathtaking. Many pieces were also hung in groupings, like the set of three 4'x8' graphite Trumpet Lilies on the wall of the hotel waiting room, or the sets of two stacked etchings in one single frame in each bathroom. Here, art was never minimal or absent, but abundant and honored.

Proportions

Over the past few years, framing educators and writers have been promoting the concept of wider mats with varying mat widths and exaggerated proportions. Uneven proportions for mat borders have become a hot thing in design and many have embraced it with great enthusiasm (see Photo 4). It is an easy up sell and creates a unique appearance to many otherwise traditional images, even open editions.

Interestingly enough the framing design I saw in Manila was every bit as progressive as I have ever seen



Photo 6: Horizontal Made Into Vertical—Large 24"x20", horizontal, abstracted, monochromatic flowers were enlarged to 34"x50" using white double mats of 8-ply thickness with an inner liner mat of 1". Converted to a vertical piece for the end of a long corridor hallway.

done in the United States (see Photo 5). The double-weighted bottom and side proportions on the long, narrow, modern 8"x30" wide images transformed these images to have overall dimensions of 24"x40" once framed. Stacked two high on a side wall in a hallway, they were fantastic. These framed images showcase uneven, nontraditional mat proportions, as well as the clustering commonly seen throughout the city.

Large 24"x20", horizontal, abstracted, monochromatic flowers were made even larger (to 34"x50") and vertical for the end of a hallway (not gallery) with oversized mat proportions (see Photo 6). White double mats (with an inner liner measurement of an inch) of 8-ply thickness were used in this treatment. The appreciation for art and framing design was evident here.

Illusions of Depth

The inner design application I saw in Manila was also quite innovative. There were matted images set back from the glazing by a spacer of 1/2", 4-ply mat along the inner edges of basic boxy, light maple-colored hardwood, for additional depth (see photo 7 and Diagram 1). I found it an intriguing design treatment.



Photo 7: Inner Depth/Detail—This detail illustrates the illusion of depth created inside the frame creating a mini shadowbox for the double opening stacked art.

Acrylics or oils on paper were mounted to a backing as thick as stretched canvas, about 1/2", sides trimmed with 4-ply rag mat as mentioned above and otherwise floated center and glazed as (see Diagram 2). Stretched canvases were float mounted center of white linen rag mat with the sides of the canvas trimmed using 4-ply museum rag board and no glazing. Proportions varied but the frame edges were always lined with 1/2" to 3/4" rag mat spacers (see Diagram 3).

It is a clean look which allowed for conservation treatment of the art while allowing for innovative uses of proportion and balance. Framing felt contemporary and minimal.

Asean Art Awards

For years I have been following the Asean Art Awards, a Philip Morris-sponsored competition that has been held for the past eight years. It is designed for artists from eight participating Southeast Asian countries: Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and two invited, but noncompetitive countries. (This year they were Cambodia and Laos.) This past May, final judging was held in Bali, Indonesia.

One of the most pleasant surprises for me was that one of my hosts during this trip was one of the original organizers of this event. Mr. Rey Anthony G. David, president of Great Wall Advertising in Makati City, Philippines, graciously shared stories, photos, and the history of this competition held for contemporary Asian artists. It was a treat beyond my expectations. And his wife is a framer to boot!

We discussed the development of the art scene in Southeast Asia and how it continues to parallel what is happening globally both economically and technologically. This year, for the first time, competition was also open to three-dimensional and photographic pieces, and from the hundreds of participants the winner was Singaporean artist Francis Ng Teck Yong with a color photographic C-print*. There has been some controversy over the winning image this year being a photograph. (Even with contemporary thinking, the evolution and acceptance of new artistic media, be it computer generated or a photo, is still a struggle.)

We discussed the evolution of art, contemporary art, and the need for acceptance of all art, and how to handle it. Seems the United States is not the only country challenged with the computer generation and the 21st

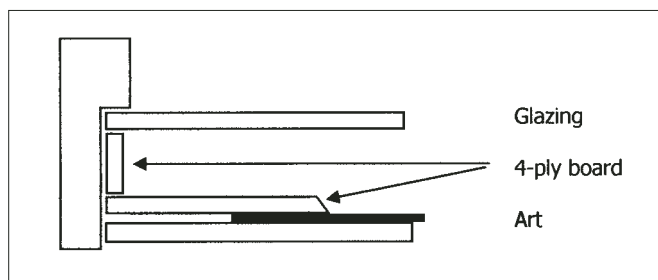


Diagram 1

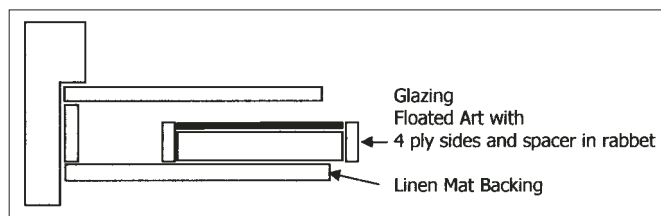


Diagram 2

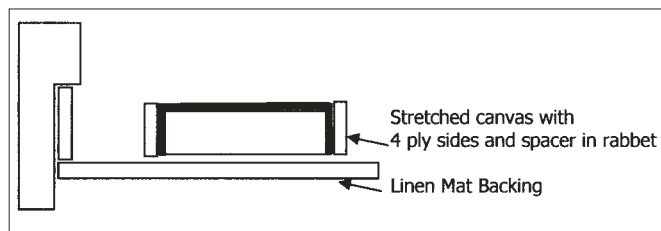


Diagram 3

century. The awarding of a photo image this year illustrated acceptance and encouragement by judges acknowledging new directions and artistic experimentation.

So why discuss the Asean Art Awards? I think it is a good example of artistic fine art direction. Art often interprets the social and personal needs of the artist, viewer, and collector whether it be minimalist, traditional, historic, or computer-generated. Designing for this art must grow along with it.

Design is interpretive, like art itself. All too often we are faced with framing inexpensive open edition images the customer wants done well and innovatively, but for the least amount of money. Perhaps the new horizon of framing design lies in the ability to push the boundaries, to enhance contemporary images with contemporary 21st century designs, and to think and design outside the box—like a photograph winning the eighth annual Asean Art Awards. ■

**Permission could not be obtained by the time of this printing to show the winning photo.*