

The Essence of Design

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There is a very distinct difference between art and design, and yet the two seem nearly interchangeable. Art is original work that arouses an aesthetic response in the viewer. Design is usually thought of in terms of objects, like a picture frame. (This can also be known as functional design.)

The earliest decorations and embellishments were done on tools and weapons, items used for survival and day-to-day living. Hence, design seemed to have a practical purpose. Yet any effective design also has an aesthetic side that could well be the whole purpose of the design. This, then, is called visual design.

Visual Design

When an artist creates a heavily textured, brightly colored painting, he expects the viewer to react to the lines, colors, and texture. A chair can also embody line, color, and texture, but it also has a function. A poorly designed chair will not hold us when we sit, but a bad painting offends only in the eyes of the viewer.

The relationship between art and design is subtle. It can be a piece of needleart framed on the wall or a chair with a needleart cushion used to sit on every afternoon.

The relationship is also an intimate one, for the same principles govern both a wall hanging or a

framed limited edition. The elements of line, color, texture, shape, intensity, and space are the building blocks that create both art and design. The factors of proportion, balance, emphasis, rhythm, and ulti-

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mately, unity are the mortar that hold the blocks together in an aesthetic way. Visual design is the organization of materials and forms in such a way as to fulfill a specific and aesthetic purpose. For framers, this purpose is to enhance and protect the art.

Distinguishing a good design from a bad design in framing is actually quite simple. If the framing works well and enhances the art with smooth transitions from outer frame to inner artwork it is a good

and unified design. If, however, the viewing is jarred or if the eye is caught up in an area of decorative embellishment or color, then perhaps the design needs improvement. The Design Process

The creation of a design is a matter of problem solving consisting of five stages: definition, creativity, analysis, production, and clarification. It is no coincidence that I keep saying framers are “problem solvers.” Although most framing designs are intuitive, the formal progression is both conscious and unconscious.

Definition

All designs begin with a concept, or definition, of what is required. When a photograph is brought in to be framed, we begin to pull mats and mouldings to work with the image. But first we need to determine what type of photo it is (ie: color RC, B/W fiber-based, Ilfochrome Classic). Only then have we truly defined what the project is. While this helps to determine what supplies are required, more evaluation is still needed.

Creativity

The creativity stage immediately follows and is when framer imagination kicks in. Will the framed presentation be a traditional accent, or will it be the focal point of the room? Is it to be understated or bold? What are

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the colors of the room, the styling, the period?

This is the point when designing goes all the way, possibly selling up to the extreme. Remember if a triple mat is the desired end, then at least a quadruple needs to be shown to the customer. Consider deep bevels, fillets, wrapped mats, embossing, or stacked mouldings.

Analysis

During analysis, the limitations, or rules, are determined. This stage goes hand in hand with creativity and definition and should actually be actively and consciously considered during these stages. This is when time limitations, corporate budgets, or conservation requirements are brought into play. Does the photo require unbuffered materials? What is the required depth for a christening dress or bridal bouquet? How is a pistol to be suspended in a shadowbox?

Production

The actual production process is just that—execution of the designed project. The first three stages take place with the customer and front desk frame designer, while the last two take place primarily in the back room. Sometimes the frame designer and production framer are the same person, sometimes not. If a project is well designed, the production stage is easy. If not, this is when potential problems begin to show up.

Clarification

During clarification the framing project is complete and ready to be reviewed. It could be appraised or critiqued as many as three times. The first time is in the back workroom at the completion of the project. This is when the piece is checked for glass smudges, fuzz, or hairs in the frame...is it perfect? Second, it is reviewed by the frame designer at the design counter who may verify the choice of colors or spacing used in his design. Third, but no less important, is when the framed design is finally presented to the customer for approval.

These five stages are rarely noted as individual stages, and are most often unconscious decisions. If, during clarification in the front room, the colors of the selected mat appear less than perfect or the moulding is slightly shallow for the number of mats, perhaps additional education must be given to the designer. In turn, if the completed project consistently has fuzz or rough cut window openings, perhaps the production framer could use a mat cutting brush-up course.

Principles of Design

The principles, or fundamentals, of design are the sum of both the elements and factors. And it must be stressed that, although all of them will be identified and discussed individually, no element or factor

ever works alone. In order to create a unified design, all must meld into a single, cohesive, well-planned, and perfectly executed presentation.

Elements and factors are individualized and categorized only for identification and analysis. It helps us better understand them, their potential in framing, and their interaction with each other in a complete design. These principles are the same ones used by artists in the production of their artwork but they have been modified to translate into the world of picture framing. As an artist uses them to produce a masterpiece in pigment, so a framer will produce a masterpiece of framing design.

Elements of Framing Design

There are a number of individual elements that together comprise the whole of a well organized and controlled framing design. The elements are considered the psychological portion of a design, those over which an artist, designer, or framer has total control. They are interpretive, and the desire to use them in a particular way comes from within. This is often an unconscious knowledge, such as just knowing when a particular moulding and mat combination looks right. This is why designs created for the same art image may vary drastically when it comes to the layout and execution of framing. Individual framers all have individual tastes, and what

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works for one may never work for another.

The individual elements are line, color, texture, shape, intensity, and space. These are the raw materials of any design equation which are put together into a finished presentation. In framing, these six elements are present in the appearance and visual feel of moulding, mat board, fabric, paint, pigment, decorative paper, deep bevels, fillets, glazing, and artwork.

Factors of Framing Design

If the elements of design are the building blocks, I've already said the factors are the mortar that holds them together. These are integral to the use of the above elements. They are the physical organizers that hold the design together. Even if the perfect colors and textures have been selected to beautifully showcase a piece of art, if the balance or proportion of the presentation is off, the design will not hold together.

As applied to framing, the principles begin to be established as the initial questions are asked of the customer to help select the correct interpretive uses of the elements. These include noting artwork size, period styling, room placement, color, and decor. These facts all help establish the basic guidelines during the analysis portion of the original design process with the customer.

The basic factors are proportion, balance, emphasis, and rhythm.

Although unity is considered a factor, when adapted into framing it works best to say if all of the elements and factors are implemented correctly for any given work of art or object, then unity will be achieved. Additional factors of style, scale, and placement are sometimes interchanged with the ones targeted here. They have not been dismissed, but rather re-established and recognized under a different title.

Style will be addressed as the period of determining the correct direction to head during the definition stage; scale is addressed under proportion; and placement is also known as emphasis.

Designer Integrity

The quality of a design that makes it a unique expression of its time, designer, or creator, is called its integrity, or unity. It is a quality or state of being complete, a whole. Understanding the advantages and limitations of selected materials to be used contributes to its integrity and effectiveness. In framing, that includes knowing the predictability of mounting techniques, characteristics of buffered boards, and what exactly the selected glazing may be expected to do.

Designer integrity as a framer comes from years of successful dynamic framing, from winning national competitions to establishing a reputable, state-of-the-art facility. It also stems from a desire to keep abreast of modern developments by

knowing how to best enhance and protect artwork. Reading trade publications, attending workshops, distributor open houses, and trade shows all add to framer knowledge and integrity.

Summary

In December, I wrote an editorial about the freedoms and limitations of framing design with respect to the artist and his work. This month, I embarked on a two-year series of bi-monthly articles on just that topic. As a successful frame designer and artist, I will be talking from both sides of the fence. Knowing what the design limitations are can be every bit as vital to a successful design as knowing how to cut a mat or miter a frame.

It is vital to never invade the artist's space or extend their image beyond the artist's boundaries when designing for preservation. Decorative framing is another issue altogether. As framers, we are enlisted to create an environment to house a piece of artwork, photo, or object collectible. As designers, we must work to visually enhance, showcase, and work in a unified manner with the art, but never detract or draw the eye away from it.

Welcome to my world of understanding design. Talk with you again in April as I bring you Part Two: Line.

Happy Valentine's Day. ■