

# C O N T R A S T

*Using Color*  
*in Design*

by Greg Perkins, CPF

**C**ontrast plays an important role in frame designs. Whether you use a high or low contrast, achieving the right balance is crucial to the overall look. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines contrast as “the use of opposing elements, such as color, forms, or lines, in proximity to produce an intensified effect in a work of art.” With that in mind, note that the degree of contrast in art, framing, or room decor will impact how dramatic or subtle the presentation is. With high contrast, colors and shapes “pop.” When there is less contrast, the results will be more soothing and tranquil.

A true black and white color scheme will have the strongest degree of contrast possible. Imagine bold black squares against a white background. The definition between the white and black results in both high energy and high contrast.

Next, visualize a black and white photo of a landscape. There will be many tints and shades of gray, reducing the level of contrast. With the various grays softening the transition from light to dark, the contrast may vary from low to high, depending on the specific photo.

Various color combinations also create high, medium, or low contrast. After black and white, complementary colors produce the highest degree of contrast. Complementary colors are those directly opposite each other on the Color Wheel, which is the arrangement of colors in a circle in the order of the spectrum. Examples of complementary pairs are red/green and purple/yellow.



Photo 1: This woodblock print is high contrast with no visible mid-tones. The framing was designed to maximize this contrast.



Photo 2: This image reflects a medium contrast, with tan and brown reducing the striking difference between the black and off-white.

Pastel blue and dark brown are another pair that are rather high in contrast, but still not nearly as strong as black and white. If the brown is changed to tan, it reduces the contrast.

### Considering Contrast When Framing

In framing, there are four main categories to consider:

- How much contrast is there within the color scheme of the art?
- How much contrast should there be within the frame design, from one component to the next?
- How much contrast should there be between the art and framing?
- How much contrast should there be between the framing and the room where the art will be displayed?

### Contrast Within the Art

Before you start choosing framing materials, take a minute to carefully analyze the art. Some questions you can ask yourself are:

- How broad is the range of color from light to dark?
- Is there a light source in the art, creating strong highlights and shadows?
- Are the colors in the art clear and defined, or did the artist mix colors, thereby minimizing the contrast?
- If the art has a high contrast color palette, chances are a high contrast frame design will enhance it. Lower contrast in the art will usually reduce the need for contrast in the framing.

### Contrast Within the Frame Design

A frame design consisting of a black frame, white mat, and black fillet would be high in contrast. You can control the appearance of the contrast through the proportions you use. For example, a 3" wide black frame with a 4" wide white mat, and ½" wide black fillet will be much bolder than a design featuring a ½" wide black frame, 4" wide white mat, and ⅛" wide black fillet. Neither design is more correct than the other, but one will probably work better with a specific piece of art, depending on the degree of contrast.

When highly contrasting colors are used adjacent



*Photo 3: The low contrast of colors in this artwork, coupled with equally subtle framing, results in a soothing, blended design.*

to each other in a frame design, the results are typically very dramatic. Using the same colors, but changing their placement, can alter the appearance of contrast. Picture a gold frame with a triple mat of navy blue, antique gold, and dark green.

If we use the same gold frame, but placed the antique gold on top of the blue, it would blend with the frame, minimizing the contrast. The navy blue and dark green mats would also blend more closely, reducing the contrast where they meet. Again, neither look would be right or wrong, but the amount of contrast in the art may dictate which combination would be preferable.

### Contrast Between the Art & Framing

When framing art with strong variations in color, a high contrast frame design will generally be a good solution, as opposed to a low contrast design. Since the art should be the focal point of the completed frame design, avoid creating such a strong contrast that the frame overshadows the art.

When art with lower contrast is being framed, reduce the contrast of the frame design. It is probably

best if the framing displays slightly less contrast than the art because you want the eye to rest on the art, rather than the frame.

### Contrast Between the Framed Art & the Room

Most framers focus (correctly) on enhancing the artwork to be framed, rather than the room it will inhabit. However, with all of the moulding and mat choices we have today, it is possible to enhance both most of the time. When a low-contrast frame design is placed into a highly contrasting room decor, it could look faded and out of place. If a highly contrasting frame design is placed into a soothing, low contrast decor, it may be unsettling and too powerful for the room.

A framer's objective is to make the art look its best. Part of that comes from the ability to relate the framing to its environment. If your beautiful framing clashes with the room, the art won't look its best. Keeping in mind that framed art should be an accent within the room, you don't want your frame designs to be so perfectly matched to the decor that they just blend in.

In order to create the most appropriate frame designs for your customers, you should find out as much as you can about where the piece will hang. When asking about the color scheme, also ask if there is high or low contrast. If your customer doesn't understand what you mean, ask if there are very light colors mixed with very dark colors or if the colors are all light, all dark, or all medium in value. You should be able to decipher the level of contrast from what they tell you.

If your customer tells you she has white walls, a white sofa, and white carpet, you may be thinking very low contrast. However, the next thing they tell you is they just purchased dark "Espresso" brown end tables. Suddenly the room jumps to very high contrast. By digging a bit deeper and finding out the details, you



Photo 4: High contrast framing is set in a low contrast room.



Photo 5: Low contrast framing was used to add to the soothing mood of this room.

will be better equipped to make smart choices in selecting the components for the frame design.

### Creating Frame Designs

Once you have studied the art and reviewed the room decor with your customer, you can be more confident and more effective in creating a great frame design. Let's study several different examples to see how contrast was handled in various situations.

#### High Contrast (Photo 1)

This black and white woodblock print is high in contrast since there are no mid-tones to diminish it. The sharp edges of the design provide crisp definition that plays up the contrast even further.

In order to balance with the art, a high contrast black and silver frame design was used. Another form of contrast is the sharp lines of the moulding profile next to the rounded shapes on the inner lip of the frame.

#### Medium Contrast (Photo 2)

Even though this piece of art includes the high contrast of black and off-white, the way the artist incorporated tan, brown, and rusty-red tones into the mix reduces the overall contrast. Since the art is bold and the colors vary from light to dark, this fits into the medium contrast category.

The framing is low contrast since the frame, mat, and fillet all blend with each other.

#### Low Contrast (Photo 3)

The artist used a monochromatic color palette and stayed within a small range of lighter tones. The result is a low contrast piece of art.

The mat, moulding, and fillet feature the same range of colors, providing a low contrast frame design. This art would look ideal in a light, subtle room decorated with natural colors.

#### Sitting Room (Photo 4)

In this room, notice how the orange chairs blend in with

the red walls and the warm wood of the table. The actual decor is very low in contrast. However, when colors this bold are used, high contrast framing looks great in the setting. The crisp white mats and black frames are equal in drama to the room, so there is a good relationship between the two.

*Bathroom (Photo 5)*

Aside from the stark white bathtub, the colors in this room are neutral and soothing. There isn't too much contrast. In this type of situation, you can introduce more colorful art. However, the goal here was to create a tranquil retreat; therefore, the natural colors in these pieces of art are more appropriate. The frame designs maintain the same look as the room, creating a harmonious blend between the various elements.

### Review

The amount of contrast you choose for each frame design will impact the overall outcome. You can reduce or increase the degree of contrast by altering the amount of each contrasting color you use. By selecting wider or narrower mouldings and mats, you can also affect the desired amount.

Remember to ask your customers about the contrast in the room where the art will hang. Since there is usually more than one way to frame any piece of art, you can often coordinate with both the art and the room.

Contrasting shapes can also be used to enhance your frame designs. A sleek, contemporary frame can dramatically change in appearance by inserting an ornately patterned fillet inside of it. Or, perhaps a rounded

moulding profile can be used to reduce the severity of a high contrast color scheme.

There isn't a single "correct" way to use contrast. But depending on the art, the room where it will be displayed, and your customer's personal taste, you can strive to create the best look for each situation. ■

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