



# Reflect Your Expertise

by Stuart Altschuler, CPF, GCF

Oftentimes, we are so busy in the frame shop that we don't stop and take a look at what our customers are bringing in to be framed. Because of this, interesting projects can often come through the shop without notice. Yet, we can get new and profitable ideas and opportunities from many of these jobs.

Over the past few months, my clients have had me frame quite a few mirrors, some in ways that I hadn't thought of. I didn't recognize the opportunity here until a customer asked if we did mirrors. We now have a small mirror gallery in our shop and sales are quite brisk. The pieces that you see in the photographs are all relatively easy to make by following the directions provided here.

## Designer Style

The first piece that we will discuss is the free form gilt designer style mirror frame (see Photo 1). This piece is done using several tools from both the frame shop and the wood

shop. In order to have a smooth contoured frame, you need to first make a pattern to cut the frame from. To make the pattern, I used my computerized mat cutter to create the first template. Then, I used the CAD program to draw the desired shape and size for the frame.

Whenever I am ready to cut a new design on the mat cutter, I position the cutter head in the up position (as though I were changing blades). This allows me to see that the mat will be cut as I expected without wasting a sheet of board or damaging the blade if the head would have tried to go off the board. Then I cut this on a piece of scrap mat. Once I am satisfied that this is indeed the shape that I want I will cut three more exactly the same. These four mats are now taped together using high tack

ATG tape. If you don't have a computerized cutter, you will have to cut this mat freehand. Since it will be very difficult to get exactly the same shape you will find it easier to cut this from a thick, 8-ply board.

Now it's time to make the final pattern. Because it is an interim pattern, the pattern that you have just made

will not stand up to the router when the final frame is made. Use a piece of ¼" hardboard (or Masonite) that is cut slightly larger than the outside dimension of the frame. Now place the mat on the hardboard and, with a white china marker, trace the shape of the mat onto the face of the hardboard. Cut the hardboard so that you are close to, but not over, the line. Then, using a drum sander, sand to the line. The easiest tool to cut with is probably a jigsaw, although you can use whatever you like.

Repeat the process for the inside of the hardboard. How-

ever, here you will make a hole using a drill so you can start the jigsaw at that point. When sanding, you won't be able to get into any tight corners with the drum sander but can do so by hand. (I wrap sandpaper around my burnishing bone.) With the pattern completed, you are ready to make the frame.

There are several ways to make this frame. One is to build a rectangular frame using any hardwood where the width of the rails and stiles is wider than the pattern template. An alternative method would be to use plywood as the base for the frame. Most plywoods would be unacceptable because they contain many voids. However, Baltic birch plywood is solid core. It is relatively inexpensive and can be purchased either at a hardwood



Photo 1: This Free-Form Gilt Frame creates a designer-style mirror.

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dealer or a specialty woodworking shop. While it might cost a few pennies more than making the frame out of a hardwood, this is the method I recommend because it requires less work.

Size the piece of  $\frac{3}{4}$ " Baltic birch plywood slightly larger than the pattern. Cut the inside using the same procedure as outlined above to a size slightly large than the opening. Now, using a pattern cutting bit for your router, rout both the inside and outside of the frame to the exact size. To complete the millwork, we have to make a rabbet to hold the mirror.

Rather than having this rabbet be the same funny shape as the mirror (which would require you to cut the mirror in the odd shape), you will find it easier to make a fake rabbet. Do this by gluing and screwing four strips of  $\frac{3}{4}$ " x  $\frac{1}{2}$ " poplar to the back of the frame. This little trick will allow you to use a rectangular mirror.

Lastly, before installing the mirror, finish the frame. You could paint it using any decorative finish you might desire. I chose to gild the frame. I used a very simple method. First, I sealed the frame using a coat of garnet shellac. Then I applied a coat of Aqua-Size using a poly brush. Then I laid gold metal leaf to the entire frame. Finally, I sealed it with a coat of super blonde shellac.

Once you have created the template, this framed mirror takes about three hours to make. With the gold finish, it commands a very high price, roughly equivalent to \$20 per foot.

## Japanese Screen

The second mirror project is a Japanese screen (see Photo 2). This was relatively easy but quite beautiful. In order to make a screen, you can simply make three frames of the same size. The size that I chose was 16" x 48", or a 1:3 ratio. If you use a ratio close to this, you will have an easier time balancing the screens when finished.

After the three frames were built, an acrylic mirror was installed (mirrored glass would have been okay) and backed using a traditional shoji paper (see Photo 3). Any decorative paper could be substituted.

Alternatively, using a channel frame, both sides of the screen can be mirrored. A double action hinge, at the top and bottom, between each of the frames turns them



Photo 2: Shown here is a mirrored Japanese Screen.

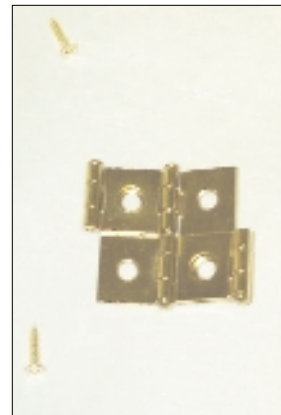


Photo 4: Double action hinges were used to join the mirrors.

into the screen (see Photo 4). These hinges are available at specialty woodworking stores and from some large home centers. This is a relatively easy job and offers the benefit of selling three frames at once. We add a half-hour labor, plus \$50 to cover our additional costs.



Photo 3: Shoji paper was used for the backing of each piece of the Japanese screen.

## Trumeau Frame

Another interesting mirror frame is a trumeau frame. This type of frame has been very popular in New England for framing wedding invitations. The invitation goes on the top and the mirror goes below (see Photo 5).

The feature that distinguishes a trumeau frame is an additional crosspiece in the middle of the frame. This can be easily accomplished using a T-moulding. If you do not want to mill one yourself, some suppliers offer different finishes that match other traditional mouldings that are in their line.

There are two ways to install the crosspiece. The first is to use a butt joint. Cut the T-moulding so that it fits between the side rails of the entire frame and glue it

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using a good pva glue. When you first cut the T to size, it will not fit because the top of the T will run into the top edge of the rabbet. This top edge of the T has to be removed. You can do that carefully with a band saw or a hand held back saw. I prefer to use an x-acto knife whenever I can (although sometimes it's not possible because the wood is too hard). The second method is to use a v-shaped miter joint.

Finally, what about the measurements? I carefully measure the size needed to accommodate the mirror, as well as the artwork that will be displayed above, and add the thickness of the v-shaped moulding plus a  $\frac{1}{4}$ " allowance. This yields an allowance of  $\frac{1}{8}$ " for both packages. If you aren't sure that your measurements are precise, when you position the T-moulding, leave an exact amount of space at the top portion and then size the mirror to fit the bottom.

The vertical pieces are what I referred to as the frame rails in the previous paragraphs. The piece across the frame is the T-moulding, as it needs to be cut to fit into



*Photo 5: Trumeau Frame*  
courtesy of Presto Frame & Moulding

the frame. Some people just fit the T between the outside edges of the frame. However, this results in an unsupported crosspiece.

## **A Note About Mirrors**

Mirror is not just plain silver and its not just glass. These days you can find clear acrylic mirror from your plastics distributor. While this may not be the solution in all cases, use the less heavy acrylic when the weight would become prohibitive. Also, in glass there are several styles other than silver, including smoked, antiqued, and veined mirrors, to name a few. Your glass supplier should be able to inform you of all of the choices and their associated costs.

Framed mirrors are essential home furnishings, just like framed artwork. Yet, despite the huge opportunity, many framers don't actively solicit this business. Merely having some samples will increase your chance of sales and your clients will begin to think of your shop as an innovative, creative place to find all of the new looks. That is when your business can shine like a new mirror. ■