

When Shadow Boxing, Think Outside the BOX

When I became a part-time picture framer 28 years ago I averaged a few hours a day, three days a week. After two weeks of training (about 18 hours) I was given my first custom frame order. It was a shadow box project. The object to be framed was a dimensional pewter family tree with the family members' names dangling like leaves off each branch. I was excited about working on my first "real frame" and didn't even consider that it might be difficult.

Being a framing novice, I had no fear. I didn't know enough to understand that I may have been getting in over my head. You might say I was thrown to the wolves, or pushed into the deep end of the pool, but I believe it got me off to the best start in this business. It built my confidence.

I went about the job in an orderly fashion, beginning with the mat that the "tree" would be mounted on. Reading

my invoice, I saw it called for black velvet (it was popular at the time). I liked black so I thought it was great look, not realizing it would be a total dust magnet. I worked in a frame shop without a compressor. I had no means of blowing dust off the velvet or the glazing. My fun project was soon becoming a complete frustration but I plugged along and got it finished.



Objects are enhanced when framed with beautiful moulding, mats, and fillets, just like all the other things you frame. Use the same principles of style, color, balance, etc. to create the designs that will do the most for each object you frame. This brooch is surrounded by Larson-Juhl's Chateau moulding, silk mats, and Chateau fillet.

The other people I worked with inspected my work and to my amazement, it passed. I later found out that my co-workers had all kept putting the project off because none of them wanted to deal with the dust. (Being naïve sometimes has its advantages.) Since I wasn't aware the project would be as challenging as it was, it didn't occur to me to think I couldn't do it.

The experience also taught me just how important it is to have the right tools for the job. My job would have been much easier, quicker, probably better, and definitely more profitable

if I had had those tools.

While my naïvete may have helped me with my first shadow box, being naïve can also get you into a lot of trouble. A better approach is to learn as much as you can about all aspects of your business rather than taking on a challenge you are not equipped to handle. Framing objects can be fun and profitable when you understand how to create the right type of design for the object, know how to handle the technical aspects of its construction, and have a profitable pricing structure in place. In fact,

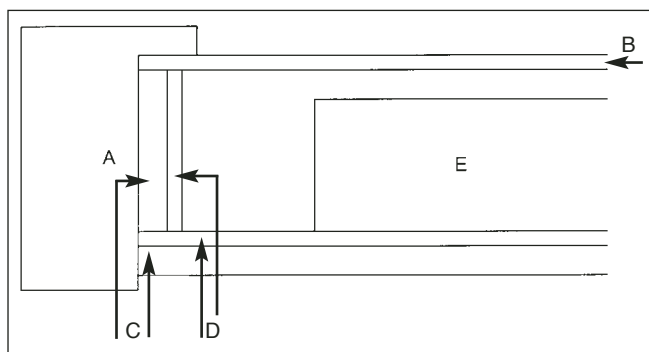


Figure 1: Shadow Box with Mat Strip Spacers—This is the most basic shadow box design. It is easy to assemble, but perhaps not the most appropriate design for your customer's treasures.

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------|
| A. Shadow Box Moulding | D. Matboard |
| B. Glazing | E. The Object |
| C. Foam Board | |

many of the shadow boxes I've done over the years have been my most enjoyable and rewarding projects.

Shadow boxes can take on many looks. The most common and basic design simply consists of a deep moulding, glazing at the front of the frame, a mat at the back, and mat strips lining the inside of the frame to hold the glazing and mat apart (see Figure 1). But you have other options that are as easy and also more elaborate.

Many of the objects your customers bring to you are valuable. The value may or may not be monetary. Some of these objects hold sentimental value that far exceeds what the item will ever be worth. Also, there is often an interesting story related to the objects customers want you to frame. Your frame designs will become the "home" for your customer's special memories. Make sure you are providing design options that live up to the memories those objects hold.

You can create a more special looking shadow box by substituting a second moulding for the mat strips that typically line the inside of the box (see Figure 2). Also, if the frame that looks the best with the object isn't deep enough, you can extend its depth by adding another

frame to the back (see Figure 3).

When you are framing objects that look best with wider frames, don't settle for the standard narrow shadow box. Select the frame you want and add an extender to make it the right depth for your project (see Figure 4). You will also see in this diagram that a mat border and fillet were added to enhance the design. They help set off objects just as they do when used around a piece of art. The frame design on the opening page of this article is an example of this construction method.

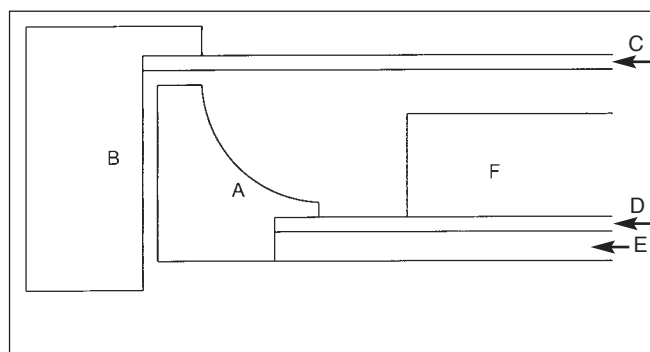


Figure 2: Shadow Box with Liner as Spacer—Substituting a nice moulding for the mat strips that typically line the inside of the shadow box provides your customers with a beautiful design for their homes, as well as additional profits for you.

- | | |
|------------------|---------------|
| A. Inside Frame | D. Matboard |
| B. Outside Frame | E. Foam Board |
| C. Glazing | F. The Object |

In my opinion, the best way to learn about shadow box framing is to read as much as you can for both design and technical knowledge on the subject. If you can, visit other frame shops to see what ideas they are displaying. Then frame several objects to display in your store. You may even have some of your own family treasures to frame and this will be a good way to get them done.

Keep your displays varied to generate maximum interest. For example, if the first object you choose is a porcelain figurine, avoid other objects with a glasslike appearance. Another choice could be a christening gown. A third idea is a collage with objects and photos to commemorate an occasion, such as a wedding or vacation. Diversification is the key. Show your customers what you can do for them.

As you go about designing the framing for the objects you choose, there are several things to think about. Make sure each of your shadow box designs looks very different from the others, communicating a variety of ideas. Use a broad range of products. If one frame is gold, use a wood finish on the next. Each one you make should have some upgraded products or techniques, like those you want

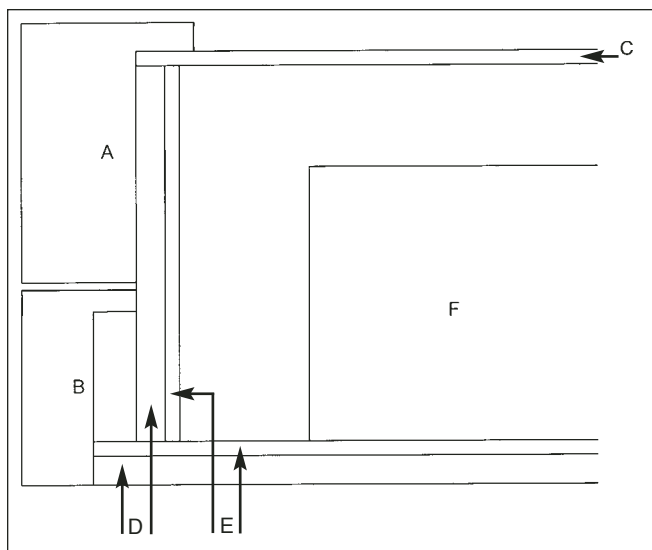


Figure 3: Extended Shadow Box—If the frame you want to use for a isn't deep enough to hold the contents, find a second frame you can use to extend out the back, creating the depth you need.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------|
| A. Moulding | D. Foam Board |
| B. Moulding to Extend Depth | E. Matboard |
| C. Glazing | F. The Object |

more of your customers to purchase.

Next go through the process of actually framing each of the objects. As you do this, keep close track of the time it takes to complete the job. Even go so far as to record the

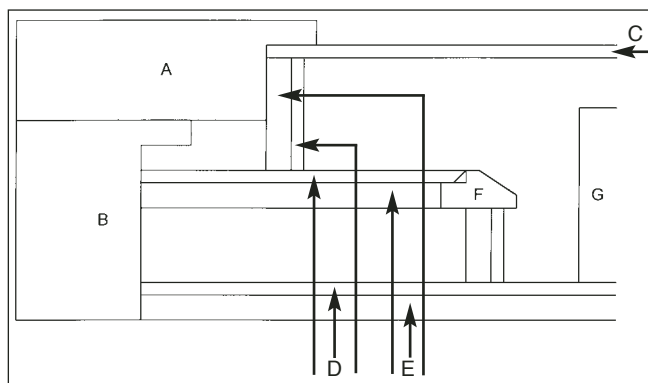


Figure 4: Wider Frame with Mat and Fillet—Very few of the deep mouldings are wide. Some objects, especially those that are large or heavy, look best in wider frames. Select the moulding you want and simply make it deep enough using an extender. Since objects are often more significant than the other things you frame, your shadow boxes should incorporate mat borders and fillets like you use for prints, etc.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------|
| A. Moulding | E. Foam Board |
| B. Moulding to Extend Depth | F. Fillet |
| C. Glazing | G. The Object |
| D. Matboard | |

time somewhere so when a customer brings in something similar, you'll know approximately how much time to charge for. By taking this hands-on approach when learning about shadow boxes, you should be more comfortable working with the objects your customers bring in. ■