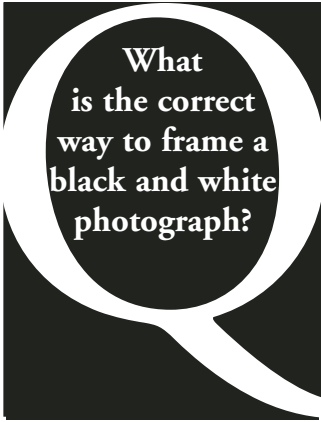


# Framing Black &

by Greg Perkins, CPF




What is the correct way to frame a black and white photograph?

A photographer may have a different answer to that question than a picture framer. When I was a retail framer I had several customers who were professional photographers or students in photography classes. With the exception of one, they all had the same idea of now a photo should be

framed. Their design concept was a white mat and a simple, narrow metal or wood frame, regardless of what the image was, or its size. Some were even very strict about all the mats being vertical, regardless of whether the image was or not.

I later found out why they were all so insistent on having their pieces framed this way. For their exhibitions, class critiques, etc., it was a requirement. The idea being that with all the photos presented alike, the uniformity provided a common ground so each could be judged equally. In that context, it has some merit; however the frame design will definitely look better with some pictures more than others so it leaves some at an immediate disadvantage.

Imagine if every person had to wear the same color and style of clothes. The look would flatter some people and be completely wrong for others. Requiring all photos to be framed alike really isn't any different than that. Since a white mat and narrow moulding aren't flattering to all photos, it will distract from some of them and minimize the importance of the focal point on others.



It all depends on who you ask.

Some photographers believe that this basic style of design is best for all their work to avoid distraction. I disagree. I find a white mat can be too light or bright for many pictures. For pictures with a white focal point, a white mat competes with it for attention. A very narrow, basic frame may not coordinate with the subject of the photo.

For example a picture of an ornate fountain in Italy may look better with a more classical moulding style. A larger picture may balance better with a wider frame. Photos present all the same variables other types of art do. Photos deserve to be treated individually, doing whatever it takes to enhance each one's specific color, style, size, and personality.

When a photo is framed like art, it also gains a sense of value. A frame design can help an average photo look great. When framed with an inappropriate mat choice or a basic, narrow moulding, the quality of a great photo can be dragged down to look like a cheap snapshot or travel poster.

When it comes to black and white photos, I personally feel they should be matted with black, white, or gray mats. Any other color adds an element that isn't present in the picture. I wouldn't put a red mat on a green and blue landscape since red isn't part of the picture. Red isn't in a black and white photo either so I wouldn't surround it with a red mat.

I do believe that mat colors other than black, white, and gray work better with other black and white images that are not photos (such as silk screens), that don't contain any gray tones. The bold contrast between the black and white in these items allows for the introduction of that new element of color. With the black and white photos, the graytones in them usually diminish the overall contrast, making them less bold and more susceptible to distraction by the foreign color.

If you have a customer who insists on a colorful mat, a common reaction is to suggest a white mat with a small accent of color as a second mat. We all see things differently, but for me, that accent actually pulls my eye from the photo.

# White Photography

As much as I am opposed to the introduction of a colorful mat, I would be more likely to use the color as my predominant top mat and place the accent of black or gray below it to serve as a transition into the photo. With all that color surrounding the photo, it isolates the black and white photo, in a sense calling attention to it.

Use the same criteria for selecting mats and mouldings for photos that you do for anything else. Here are some of the factors to consider that will enable you to make smart choices when framing black and white photos:

- Is the picture light, medium, or dark in overall color?
- What is the focal point within the photo?

What color is it?

- What is the style of the photo?
- What is the size of the photo?
- What type of room is it going in?
- What is the color scheme of that room?
- What is the style of the furnishings in the room?
- What is the size of the wall it will hang on?
- Are there other framed pieces in the room?

If so, how are they framed?

## Design #1

**Title:** Parrot Tulip

**Photographer:** Len Prince

**Source:** Bruce McGaw Graphics

**Image Size:** 11  $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 9  $\frac{1}{2}$ " (part of the bottom was covered by the mat so the visible portion of the image is 9  $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 9  $\frac{1}{2}$ ")

**Inner Moulding:** 18" x 20  $\frac{1}{2}$ "

**Outer Moulding:** Dimensions measured to fit Inner Moulding

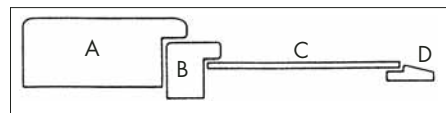
**Glazing:** conservation-quality, UV-filtering glass

**Mat:** 5" top border, 4" sides, 5  $\frac{1}{2}$ " bottom.

**Fillet:** Dimensions measured to fit inside mat

When I look at this photo, I see the tulip as the obvious focal point. With that in mind, my goal is for the tulip to be prominent in the completed frame design. Since it is white, I chose a dark colored Artique mat that would con-

trast with it. Because the mat blends with the dark background, the contrasting flower becomes more dominant in its contrast. Many people hesitate to use dark mats, perhaps finding them heavy looking and maybe even depressing. Some people try to "lighten up" dark art by surrounding it with a light mat. In reality a light mat border causes the dark colors in the art to look even darker. Here a white mat would also have competed with the flower, diminish-



A. Outer Moulding  
B. Inner Moulding  
C. Mat  
D. Fillet

ing its importance. Therefore the dark mat is truly the better choice.

This subject of this photo is timeless so we don't know if it's new or old. The dramatic lighting and high contrast give it a contemporary edge so I chose that direction for my frame design. In order to balance with the dark mat, I wanted a lighter frame. I must still avoid distracting from the tulip. The pewter finish of this Larson-Juhl frame looks light against the black mat, yet the white flower is still lighter and more prominent in the complet-

ed design. Due to the simplicity of the moulding profile, I decided to use a stacked combination to add both interest and depth.

A fillet that matches the moulding was selected to create a strong, classic outline around the photo. This helps pull the viewer's attention in from the frame to focus on the picture. Fillets also help enhance the customized appearance of a frame design, adding both character and perceived value.

After I selected the mats, mouldings, and fillet, I chose my mat border sizes. Four goals for the mat were: 1) to avoid having borders similar in width to the frame moulding; 2) to provide visual relief from the frame; 3) to avoid crowding the picture; and 4) to make the photo look impressive. The stacked moulding combination is 2¾" in width so I chose wider mat borders. This varies the mat from the frame and also keeps the frame from closing in on the photo. Elongating the top and bottom borders also adds a stately look.

Although this is a reproduction print, I chose Conservation Clear glass from Tru Vue to help prevent the inexpensive print from fading. By protecting the print from light damage, it helps ensure your customer's investment will look good for many years to come.

## Design #2

**Title:** Pemaquid Light

**Photographer:** Christine Triebert

**Source:** Graphique De France

**Poster Size:** 15 ¾" x 11 ¾"

(I trimmed off the white margins making this approximately 5" x 7")

[Ed note: Remember, never alter a customer's artwork without their written permission.]

**Moulding:** 17" x 20 ½"

**Glazing:** anti-reflective, UV-filtering glass

**Mat:** 5 ½" top border, 5" sides, 6" bottom

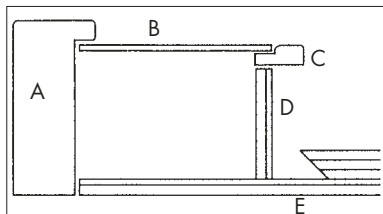
**Fillet:** Dimensions measured to fit inside mat

Some black and white photos are printed in sepia tone. Although this creates a different color scheme, the same principles apply when selecting mats and mouldings. On newer photos, the sepia finishing process is typically only used when the photographer wants to enhance the sense of age. Of course there are many vintage sepia photos around, too.

My first step was to select a mat color. To me, the true focal point of the picture is the dark top of the lighthouse. I avoided using a dark mat that would compete with it. The

photo has a natural sense of depth due to the fence receding into the horizon. My goal was to enhance that depth so I didn't want the mat to blend with the fence either. The logical mat color choice became white. This Artique matboard is the color of the background sky and lets all the details in the art stand out.

Next I looked for a moulding that would provide a



- A. Moulding
- B. Mat
- C. Fillet
- D. Mat
- E. Foamboard

balance with the colors in the photo and the light mat surrounding it. Since the photo itself is sharply detailed and has contrasting colors from white to dark brown, I chose a moulding that would similarly contrast with the mat. This Mission style frame from Larson-Juhl coordinated with the photo, both in style and color. I selected the shadow box profile to provide the depth I wanted so I could enhance the perspective in the picture.

I mounted the photographic print on foamboard and reverse bevel cut it to conceal the mounting board. Since the frame is fairly deep, I stacked up additional pieces of foamboard (see diagram) to bring the photo further forward in the frame.

The mat behind the photo could have been dark to provide contrast with the upper mat and balance with its

darker tones. However, I chose to use the same white color as the upper mat to emphasize the shadowing and the depth of the presentation. To add some definition and provide the color balance mentioned earlier, I chose to add a fillet inside the mat. The fillet color contrasts with the mats on either side of it, helping to create a strong band around the picture. This helps pull attention back from the dark frame to the photo.

The mat borders are elongated, with larger margins at top and bottom. Elongation is often a good treatment for pictures that are vertical, pieces with vertical subjects, or strong vertical lines. In this case, the photo has all three. By making the top and bottom borders wider it dramatizes all those vertical elements. An elongated mat can be the same width, both above and below the picture. In this case, the bottom was made wider because the lower half of the picture is much darker so it appears bottom heavy. A bottom-weighted mat helps “lift” the weight so the picture appears more balanced in the completed framing.

The result of this frame design has very clean lines, but has the added interest of depth and shadows. Since the photo is recessed approximately halfway into the frame, it begins to pull the viewer’s attention inward. From there, the receding line of the picket fence leads us to the lighthouse.

I used Museum glass from TruVue to prevent fading as well as minimizing reflection and distortion.

## Design #3

**Title:** “Hotel De Ville”

**Photographer:** Robert Doineau

**Source:** Graphique De France

**Image Size:** 9 ½" x 11 ¾" (the image was cropped to approximately 6" x 6")

**Inner Moulding:** 19 ½" x 21 ¾"

**Outer Moulding:** Dimensions measured to fit Inner Moulding

**Glazing:** conservation-quality, UV-filtering glass

**Mat:** 4 ½" borders all sides

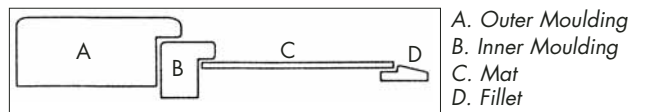
**Fillet:** Dimensions measured to fit inside mat

This is another reproduction photo but let’s assume it’s an original. When fine art photography is framed or, for that matter, any irreplaceable photos, they should be treated as conservation projects. Use the appropriate mats, mounting boards, and hinging techniques.

For more of a classic or upscale look, use white or off-white mats. Off-white works well here since the figures are

dark. The Artique matboard I chose is just slightly more off white than the lightest color in the picture to ensure the photo is seen first.

The moulding selection from Larson-Juhl is dark to provide strong contrast like the photo itself. A coordinating fillet was selected to complete the design. Make sure when using fillets with conservation projects that you take



A. Outer Moulding  
B. Inner Moulding  
C. Mat  
D. Fillet

the right precautionary measures to ensure the acidity in the wood won’t harm the picture. Things to consider are sealing the raw wood on the back side of the fillet and lifting the fillet off the photo with a rag mat spacer.

Notice that this design is the opposite of Design #1. It featured a dark picture, light frame and fillet, and dark mat. See how the difference in the lightness of the photo plays an integral role in the overall color scheme of the framing that surrounds it?

The mat border is uniform on all four sides. It could easily have been bottom weighted since the lower half of the art is heavier. It would also have looked fine with an elongated mat to emphasize the vertical figures and lamp post. With even borders, it addresses the square format of the photograph, maintaining an overall flow throughout the design.

The glazing I used for this piece is Conservation Clear glass from TruVue. The clear feature leaves the photo looking sharp and detailed. The conservation qualities of the glass protect the photo, again presuming it is an original or irreplaceable picture. ■