



Framing for a Tablecloth

by Stuart M. Altschuler, CPF, GCF

Whenever I visit frame shops in my travels, I often hear a common plea, “What can I do to set myself apart from the other framers?” That question is the key to survival for small- to mid-sized shops. Being able to offer something “different” helps to ensure customer loyalty as well as a steady stream of new customers looking for that area of expertise.

If I am willing to take on a task no one else wants, I set myself apart. As a result, I have a reputation in my local area as the framer who handles things no one else will do. Many people think of me as the framer who can do the most unusual, complex, or off-the-wall projects.

So it follows that I was asked to frame an antique tablecloth made by my client’s aunt approximately 100 years ago. The piece is round; its diameter is 38". I figured I would need a 48" round frame for this job, but do you have many sources for a round frame of that size? Neither do I. But that didn’t present a problem for long; in fact, it became an opportunity to build something custom for my client. It also gave me the opportunity to share with you how I made this frame.

When building a frame, before doing anything else, I draw up plans for the project. I know that sounds like a simple thing, but how many people design with a table saw instead of a pencil first? No matter how simple or complex the design you are planning, never cut anything without first thinking through what you need to do and then writing it down. You

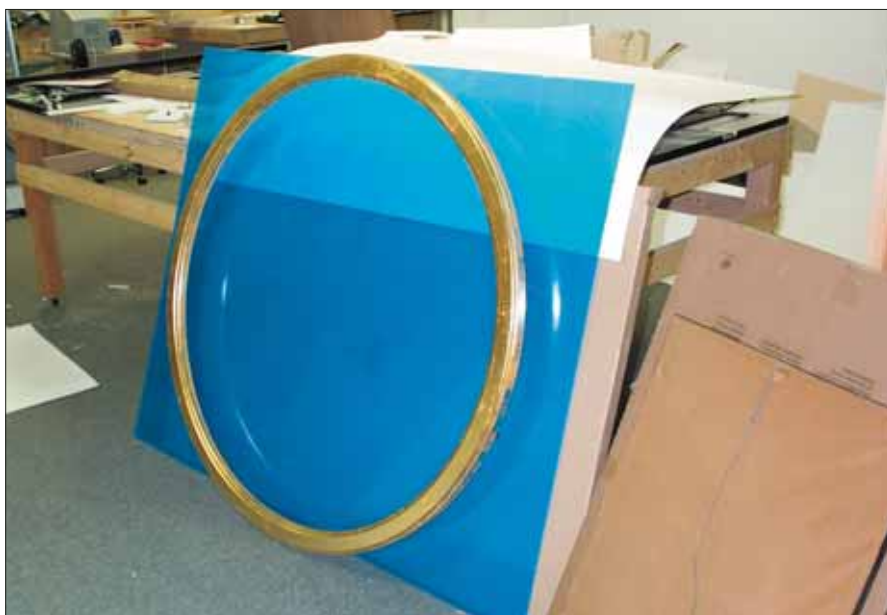


Photo 1: The finished frame was gilt and ready for the tablecloth to be installed for the client.

wouldn't cut a mat or chop a moulding without having a work-sheet, so don't make that mistake for larger projects. Thinking that you will work it out along the way will lead only to frustration and lots of meaningless sawdust.

The Project

In this case we started by looking at the dimensions required for the frame. While the tablecloth was approximately 38" in diameter, we would need some space around it so that the beautiful edges would show. And when deciding on the matting to be used, we realized that despite the fact that a mat would have to be custom made, we would still limit the size to a 48" inside diameter. This would simplify the job because we would be able to use the standard-sized materials readily available to us (foamboard, glazing, matboard) without the need to custom order materials and do lots of patch-work.

In order to cut our curve more easily we chose to make a 20-sided frame. That meant that each piece would have to represent 18° (for a total of 360°). Next we had to find the dimensions of each of those sides. Once that was done we could begin to think about the process for the entire project.

To build this round frame we made a 20-sided frame that was wider than the circle we wanted; then we would cut a circle out of that 20-sided frame. However, because of the size of the frame, before we could even assemble the 20 sides we needed to make a

clamping table to allow us to put the 20 sides together using glue and temporary screws. (*Note:* Using your underpinner for this assembly won't work because any mechanical fastener must be removed prior to cutting the round or you could damage the blade or bit of your cutter.)

Cutting a circle is not complicated as long as you find the center of the circle, set a cutter on an arm the distance of the radius, and pivot that cutter around the center. You'll get a perfect circle

How many of you will cut a "test mat" when you are working on a very complex design? We do it all the time. It saves us time and aggravation, not to mention that we don't ruin our good mats. We did the same thing with this project. Using the sizes we had calculated, we cut 20 pieces of 1/4" hardboard (Masonite) and dry fit them together on our newly made clamping table. They fit fine, which verified our calculations for the project. (Another sample testing material we could have



Photo 2: After the two 20-sided frames were built, they were glued to each other to form a roughly sized frame.

every time. In our case the cutter we used was a router. And, we needed to make a special jig or pivoting arm for it. (Woodworkers call that a router circle cutting fixture.) We made ours adjustable so that it would cut any diameter we wanted up to and including 54".

used was foamboard, but we chose not to use that because we decided we wanted to keep this sample "frame" for our records.)

Next 40 pieces of 3/4" poplar were cut to size. I'd like to address two things here—first, why use poplar? And, second, why were 40 pieces necessary when we were

making a 20 sided frame?

Well for the first question—because poplar is a wonderfully easy wood to work with. It has all of the features of a hardwood (which it is), all of the features of a softwood, and the drawbacks of neither. It is readily available, and relatively inexpensive. (We paid about \$50 for the wood to make this frame.) The only problem

you would in shingling a house) and glued them together.

Clamping a multi-sided frame is not a lot of fun and requires lots of clamps. My colleague, Brian Foley, who worked on this frame, always says you can never have too many clamps. To make the clamping easier, we chose to use pocket screws to hold the individual sides together while the

removing the screws did not diminish the strength of the frame.

With the frame securely attached to the table, multiple pivoting passes were made using a straight cutting router bit on both the inside and outside of the frame (see Photo 3). When making this, or any other, cut on the router safety dictates that you not bite off more than the router can chew. Making several cuts (each cut deeper than the last) will give you a much safer and cleaner cut. This technique was used on all router cuts for this project.

This frame was not sanded until a first coat of gold sealer was applied. Do we do such good work that our lumber is perfectly smooth after every cut? Hardly. However, we have a much better way to get things smooth. Rather than sanding, first we plane and then scrape. While many people may know what planing is, fewer people know about scraping. This entails using what appears to be a flat metal piece, but is actually a flexible metal piece that has a sharpened edge to scrape the wood by running the scraper over it. This results in a very fine wood shaving being removed and thus the wood is perfectly smooth.

At this point all that remained to be done was the rabbet and the edge detailing. A $\frac{3}{8}$ " rabbet was created making the inside dimension a perfect $48\frac{1}{8}$ " (our 48" diameter with the standard $\frac{1}{8}$ " allowance for the package) using a rabbeting bit in the router. Finally an inner and outer edge profile



Photo 3: The frame shape to be used for the project (in the foreground) was routed from the 20-sided construction.

with poplar is that it is not aesthetically pleasing. In our case the frame was to be gilt, so the look of the wood was irrelevant.

As for the second question—why were 40 pieces necessary when we were making a 20-sided frame? We used $\frac{3}{4}$ " thick wood and wanted a frame that was $1\frac{1}{2}$ " thick total. To achieve that end we actually made two 20-sided frames, offset them to add to the structural integrity (much the way

glue was drying. We glued and screwed each set of 20 sides forming two frames. Finally we glued the two frames to form our rough sized frame. We now had something from which to cut our circles (see Photo 2).

After building our router circle cutting fixture, cutting the circles was easy. First, we removed the screws that we had used to hold the sides in place. Because of the strength of the glue we used,

was chosen and routed on the frame.

Putting It All Together

The frame was then brought to our finishing shop where it was gilt and antiqued using traditional methods. A fabric wrapped mat was made for both over mat and mounting background. The tablecloth was stitched to the mounting background using cotton thread.

We chose to use glazing on this piece to protect it from outside forces. Acrylic with UV-filtering qualities was chosen for the glazing. This was cut freehand using a plastic cutter after tracing from the mat. Because of concern about the bearing surface of the

acrylic—(would the mat margin be wide enough to support the weight of the acrylic so that it didn't bow in over the middle of the piece and wind up touching the tablecloth?)—spacers were used. The frame was then backed and made ready to hang using two D-ring hangers facing upward requiring the piece to hang on the wall using two hooks.

In the end, my client was overwhelmed with emotion when she saw her Aunt's handiwork so prominently framed. It took us over six months to complete this piece and the client paid handsomely for it, but the end result was a satisfied customer and plenty of referral business. ■