

Ready, Set, Design!

From Photo Portrait to Work of Art

by Bill Hugunin, CPF

How many of you have spent hours at the counter trying to get a design that both you and the customer feel good about? How many times has the customer started to take control of the process? How many days have you been behind in production because you spent too much time on the counter? How many times have you thought, “Calgon, take me away”?

I derived the following method when I found myself spending too much time on the counter and not being able to get any work done in the back. I have used this method for the last six years to achieve great results for our team, including a 90% closure rate with an average ticket of over \$200. This can be used for virtually every item, or items, presented to you. For this article, I’ve chosen a beautiful, professionally photographed portrait that was recently brought into the gallery.

I have separated my design philosophy into three stages: Get to know the art; Know your products; and Romance the design. Let’s get started!

Get to know the art

Get to know the artwork that has been presented in front of you. Give it a soul. What I mean by this is make it important to you somehow. When we are shopping for ourselves we usually do not have difficulty choosing the items we want. However when we shop for someone else we always ask ourselves questions: “I wonder if they’ll like this?” “Would this work with their couch?” and so on. It can become a long, drawn out process.

When you become attached to the artwork you will feel compelled to create a beautiful design. In order for this to happen you should ask some questions about the art. Ask where they got it, how long they have had it, if they



The veneer of the outer moulding and the gold sheen of the inner profile were chosen to complement the violin in the photo as well as the shimmer of the subject's hair.



met the artist, if they are the artist, if it was passed down through the generations, etc...

Once you get the customer talking about their art you can establish a connection that can be hard to break. Now remember that they should talk about the art, not their ideas on design; this is where you need to remain in control. The customer will now feel more comfortable and get a sense that you are genuinely interested, which you are if you gave the art the aforementioned “soul.”

Let’s look at the example I’ve used here. On the previous page we have an upscale studio portrait where the

girl is seated in a manner similar to many Masters painters works. (“Mona Lisa” ring a bell?) The first thing that I asked is, “Who is the photographer? This is beautiful work.” Obviously the person had spent a considerable amount of money to obtain this portrait so it was very important to them. I let them know that I also appreciated it.

I know some of you are thinking that I am suggesting you feed customers a line but that shouldn't be further from the truth. Remember we are framers, we frame art! If we didn't appreciate art then we probably wouldn't be here. All you're doing is taking the time to love your job.

At this point it's time to give our design a direction based on the “soul” of the artwork. In the case of this portrait I saw a “Romantic Classical” approach.

Know your products

Know your products! Know your products! Know your products! I cannot say this enough. The more you know your products the more efficient you can be. Work smarter not harder. I take the time to understand and feel out each new line of mats and frames that comes in. This is also covered in our sales meetings once a month.

Knowing your products is just like your florist knowing their flowers, how to care for them, and what works best for certain occasions. The same is true for framing. We should know our mouldings and mats and when it is best to use them.

Let's go back to the photo portrait. The girl is holding a violin. The violin is beautifully veneered in mahogany. This sent a signal to my brain to use a mahogany veneered frame (not so hard is it?). The main difference was that I chose from subject not color. I chose Larson-Juhl's Stradivarius; it just so happened the name of the product line was linked to the subject with the highly recognizable name in the history of the violin. Now all this was done inside my head without showing anything to the customer yet, but I was letting her in on the visual of my design (very important, which I will explain later). So much for the romantic part of my design, now how about the classical?

When I think of classical I think of Old World gold. I could be wrong but I am betting that most of you are too. I also see a very delicate nature to this portrait that should not be overshadowed. So to give homage to her beautiful spiral curls I wanted to use a delicately gilded frame with a pattern that would complement those curls. In comes a water gilded inner moulding. Again, all of this was done in my head without showing the customer any materials yet.

This is why it is crucial to know your products for this method to work.

Romance the design

Now that I had my design idea, it was time to romance the design to the customer. This is done by going back over the key points of the art with the customer and explaining what you are going to use to harmonize the framing to the art.

In the case of the portrait, we had the violin (the romantic element) and we decided that a mahogany veneered moulding was the obvious choice. While you are explaining why this is important, go to the wall and pull your corner sample. Now for the classical element. While talking to the customer about the “seated position” and the girl's “beautiful curls,” I pulled from the wall my gold frame and placed it properly within the design. Now you can position your corner samples onto the art so that your design can come into focus for the customer. If you have executed the three stages properly the customer should be right on track with you and understand your design completely.

This part of the method is the most abstract and therefore somewhat difficult to



Taking the time to evaluate and ask questions helped to create a dynamic frame design.

understand at first. If you parallel this to interior design you will find that designers will “romance” a room or home to get their ideas across because they usually only have pictures or small swatches of color to show their design. Basically it's about getting the customer on the same wavelength as you are so that when you put down your samples, they are not thinking about something different.

To sum all this up just remember three things: get to know the art, know your products, and romance the design. I truly believe that this method can work for any framer willing to work give it the “ol' college try.” ■

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