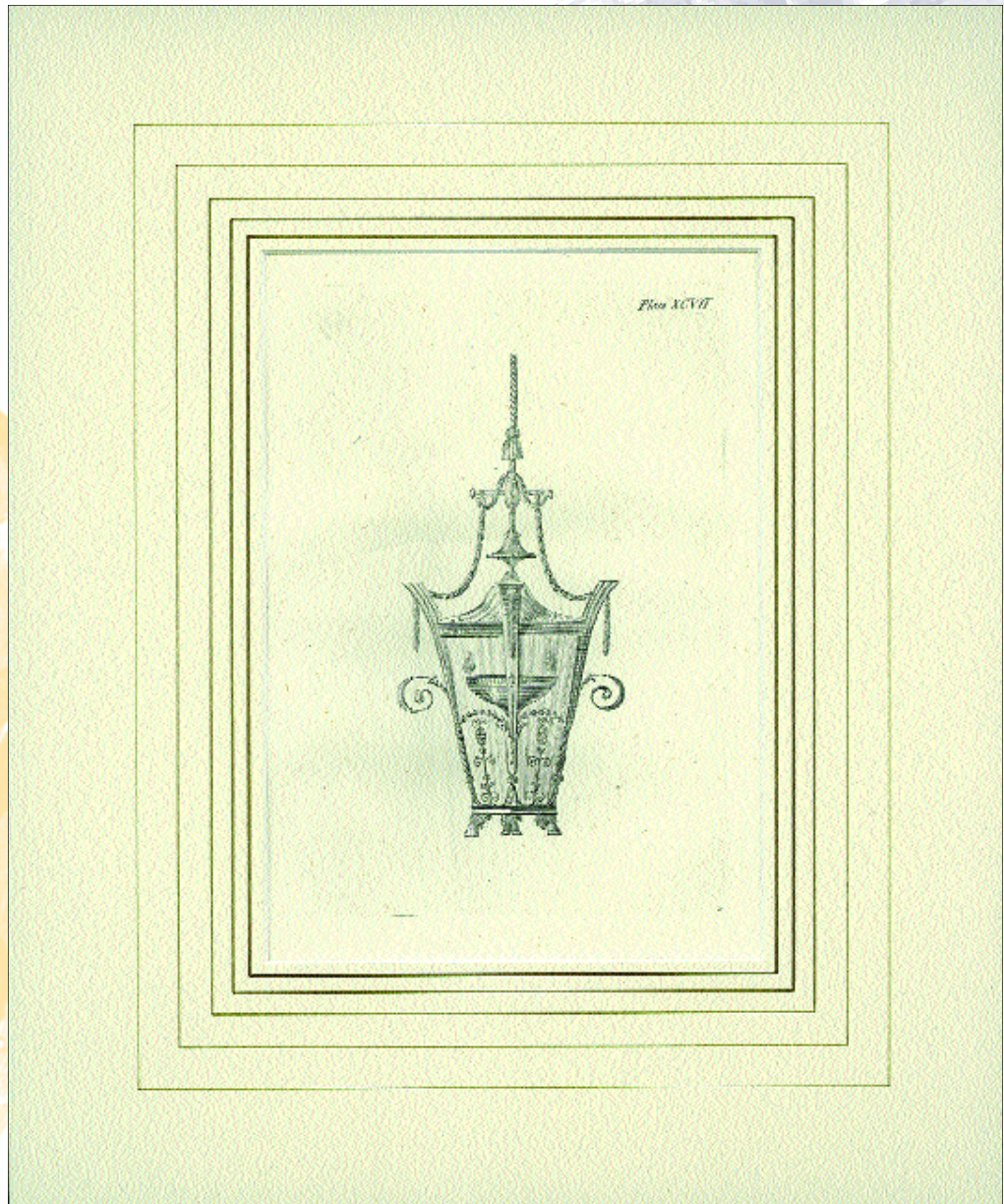


# Design and Layout Techniques

By Peter Miller, CPF

*Ink lines of varying widths and placement can be used to create infinite design possibilities.*



**A** question that I am often asked while demonstrating at trade shows is, how I come up with my designs for French mats? Back in the July 1995 issue of PFM, we explored how to use and control the ruling pen. I bet that within the past year you have mastered the ruling pen and are confident in offering this specialized service to your clients. I would like to share some of my ideas and practices in ruled fine design with you.

Ruled lines can be as simple and straight forward as a solitary line echoing the window opening of a mat. The art to be framed may allow a design involving a multitude of lines, to be enhanced by a sponge painted panel and a gold toned bevel. Which ever the case, the artwork to be framed will essentially dictate the extent of the design to be executed. Be certain that you, as the designer, do not cross the line that allows the framing to be more important than the artwork itself. This long standing philosophy among fine framers will provide you with the general guidelines for designing French mats for almost any piece of art.

# for French Mats



I first became intrigued with the idea of French matting in 1985, when a sales rep. came to the shop urging me to take on a line of “custom” French mats. As Bill showed me the set of samples and explained the pricing, it immediately became apparent to me that I could learn this beautiful and intricate art. I also realized that some of my competitors might be using Bill’s source, and that if I became proficient at French matting, then I could offer my clients “extremely” competitive pricing for this unique service. As I look back, all that I can say is, “Thank You, Bill.”

A tremendous amount of the creativity and energy which is

transcribed to the surface of the mat is influenced by the piece of art that I am framing. I must always be inspired and led by the art in order to transform the mat into an integral component of the framing

As with the fundamental aspect of frame design, the first element that I look at is color. I treat the choice of color for French lines in exactly the same manner that I decide on the mat color. In essence, I do not introduce a color to a design that is not existing in the art being framed. Of course, artistic license could come into play under the right circumstance. The analysis of color will define the most prominent, secondary and

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and subjective. Objectivity refers to the degree of detail and complexity of the artwork being framed. Subjectivity refers to the designer/framers “gut” reaction and feeling towards the artwork.

As you are contemplating the design of a French mat, keep in mind how you want the viewers eye to see the completed presentation. French lines, their thickness and their placement, can be instrumental in the direction that the eye will travel. A series of lines proportional spaced will draw the eye from the outer perimeter in toward the art, compared to a single line positioned near the window opening.

In the opening photo on the left, notice that the lines are thickest near the outer edge and thinner as the eye travels in towards the mat window. This technique will help to accentuate a drawing which has a great deal of depth such as a view looking down a narrow European street. If you were French matting a still life, in which case the subject matter dominates the foreground, you might consider using thicker lines closest to the window opening, and allow the lines to become progressively thinner as they approach the outer edge (as in the opening photo on the right).

One of my good friends is a landscape designer. He has helped me, both at my home and my gallery, to design and implement some beautiful planting beds. One of the tidbits of information that he shared with me (I later read about this concept in a monthly publication) was to always arrange plantings in odd number groupings. I don't recall whether this is the European or American approach to design, but I started thinking about French mats and ruling lines in the same way. There always seems to be greater interest and visual appeal in looking at three fines as opposed to two.

There are many examples of French matting available. If a client comes in with an old mat which has French lines, save that mat. Build a “library” of good examples of original French mats.

tertiary colors. That becomes the backbone to a successful mat design.

For example, let's say we are matting an English Godey fashion plate and the image depicts a figure wearing a yellow gown with blue trim.

The use of blue in the French lines would most likely be limited to a single line. Yellow could be introduced, perhaps in two or three lines, as that color is more important to the etching. Since it is an etching and the ink used was “soft black”, I would decide to use a stone gray ink for my base lines. I describe base lines as those lines that provide a form to the design of the mat. Base lines might be any appropriate color, but in most instances the color would be relevant to the more subtle tones in the artwork being matted.

“How many lines do you need?” and “What kind of space is required between lines?” are two commonly asked questions.

Unfortunately, there are no definitive answers. Mat design is both objective

## for French Mats

You can easily replicate or adapt many great early ideas to fit an antique print or perhaps a contemporary watercolor that you are framing.

French mats are designed, as we know, to be complementary to the art. Design does not have to mean “bold”. The subtlety in French matting is the defining reason why this art has been prevalent in framing since the Nineteenth century. A well thought-out and executed French mat will provide the viewer with a constant, long lasting and interesting presentation. So many design element in framing, as well as in life, are specifically for the moment, soon to become obsolete. The test of a good design is its appeal over time. A beautiful etching housed in a wonderfully designed French mat will not become a victim of time.

The following series of drawings illustrate a few basic line configurations that are commonly used. Remember that these designs, although suitable for many different applications, are easily adapted and arranged for special presentations. Of course, when I began providing French mats to my clients, my designs were simple and to the point. As I became more confident in my skills and design efforts, I was able to more readily let the artwork that was being framed “speak” to me. My French mat designs became tailored to each specific application. Be careful not to over design a mat. A selection from your core of French mat designs (your basic elementary designs, such as the ones on these pages) may be all that is necessary for that perfect mat-to-art relationship.

Often times my designs will include intersecting lines, offset corner extensions and geometric shapes. These designs, as I indicated earlier, are not merely creative whims. The basis for these designs come from the artwork which I am framing. Sometimes, these added elements can be very obvious. Whether it is a repeating pattern of a French drapery material in an interior design print or an offiet comer of a oriental woodblock, spend some focused time studying the art prior to ever picking up the ruling pen.

In fact, I recall framing a pen and ink drawing of the monument in the center of Washington Square, NYC. My client asked me to design a mat which I felt would best suit this wonderful drawing. After spending some time studying the art and contemplating different approaches, I focused in on the actual structure of this monument. The architecture included some steps, much like a pyramid, and a few subtle five-pointed stars ( in honor of Gen. George, I'm sure). The steps and the stars became the element of design that I was looking for. The entire presentation was extremely successful and I am frequently reminded by my client as to how much they continue to enjoy the piece.

When appropriate, regions of the country such as the Southwest and periods of history can be a great source for ideas for interesting line designs. For instance, the Art Deco period offers us many terrific shapes, patterns and images that can be adapted to French mat design.

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# Design and Layout Techniques for French Mats

creating French mat designs under our belts, I would like to share the simplest and most effective technique for preparing the mat for ruling lines with you. The only tools required are as follows: a very sharp #2 pencil, a thin profile ruler with accurate 1/16" or centimeter graduations and a fine point marker (I prefer the red Sharpie™ pens).

#1 Decide on the design pattern, i.e. number of lines, spacing and colors. A quick sketch on a piece of scrap is adequate.

#2 Using the Sharpie fine point marker, mark each appropriate calibration where the lines will intersect directly on the surface of the ruler.

#3 If the mat is weighted by 1/4", mark the outside edges of the mat up from the bottom comers by 1/4".

#4 Line up the ruler, beginning at either the 0 mark or at

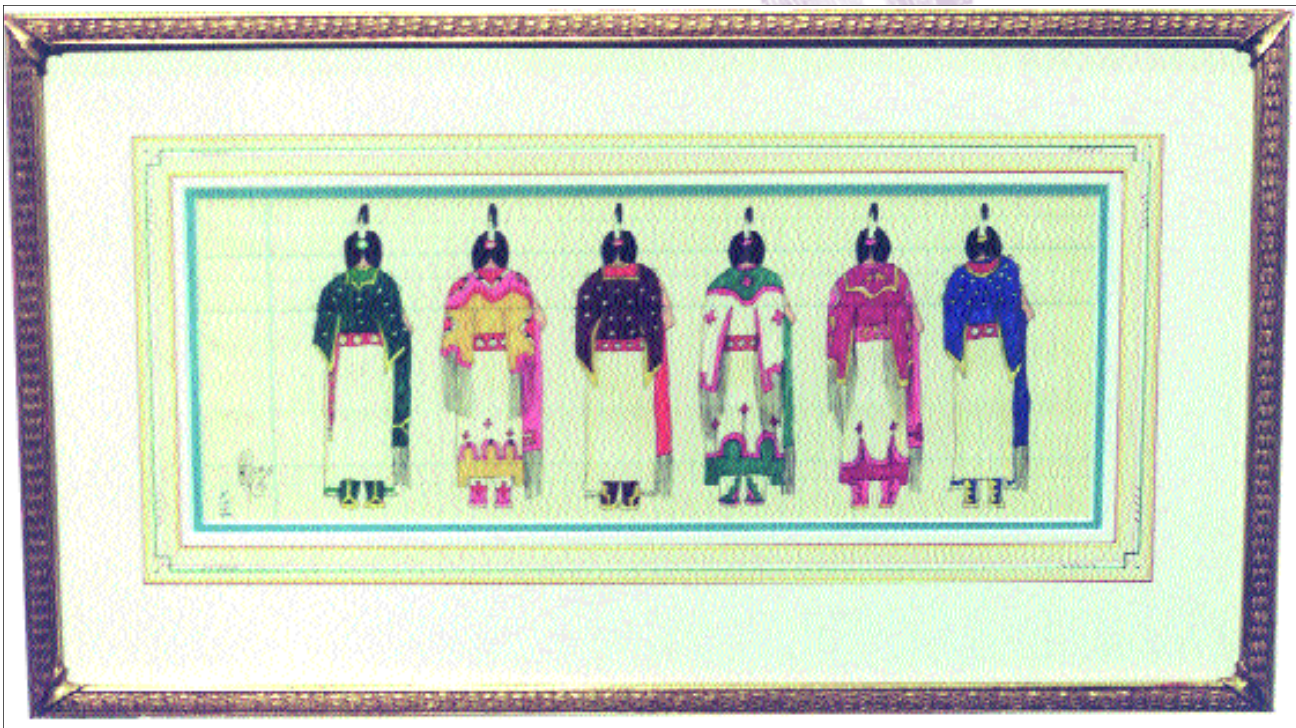
the 1" calibration. Begin from the inside corner of the window opening to the nearest outside corner of the mat (or the mark compensating for the weighted bottom). Be deliberate and consistent as you position the ruler. This position must always be at a 45 degree angle to the side of the mat and always start at the same place on the surface of the mat. I always set the ruler at the top of the bevel in the window opening.

#5 With the sharp pencil, carefully, accurately and lightly leave a pencil dot on the mat surface next to each of the corresponding red marks on the ruler. Repeat this process at each of the four comers. The pattern has now been transferred to the surface of the mat. The lines are ready to be ruled.

As I mentioned earlier, many of my French mat designs involve complex patterns and intersecting lines. By following the next few steps, you will find that the method of pattern transfer is as remarkably simple as the process that I just outlined. There are only two other tools that are required. Both should be already in your repertoire of tools and supplies: Mylar or Acetate and very sharp tool such as the pointed end of a pair of dividers or a compass.

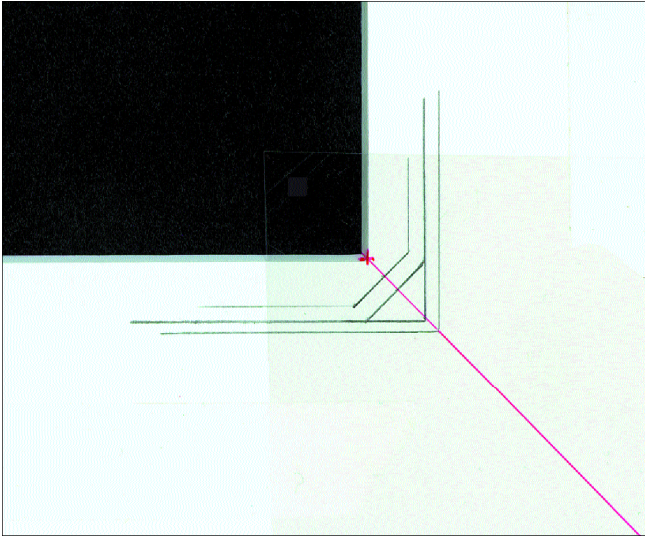
#1 Once you have designed your pattern, accurately "rule" one complete corner detail in pencil on a scrap mat with a window opening. This will determine all of the meeting points and intersecting lines.

#2 Cut a 6" square of clear Mylar or Acetate. Draw a straight line with the red Sharpie marker from corner to corner. 1/2" in from one corner on the red line make a small "x".



*Some artworks suggest certain design elements because of their style or period.*

# French Mats



*A piece of mylar or acetate and a red Sharpie pen are useful for marking mats for designs as well as copying designs from already existing mats.*

#3 Place the Mylar square over the ruled sample corner. Line up the red line so that it registers from corner to corner. Position the small red “x” directly over the top edge of the bevel in the mat window corner.

#4 Firmly holding the Mylar in place with one hand, proceed to pierce the Mylar at each important point of the design with a fine, sharp pointed instrument. I have tried straight pins or sewing needles but their respective points are actually too fine and too difficult to see.

#5 Position your Mylar pattern on top of the mat to be decorated so that the red line is at its proper 45 degree angle and the “x” is directly over the top edge of the bevel in the window corner. Holding the pattern in place, insert the sharp point of the dividers into each of the holes of the pattern. Don’t apply so much pressure that you leave craters! Leave enough of a mark that you can see each of points in the mat surface. Repeat this process in each of the four corners. In a matter of just a few moments, you are ready to rule lines without having to draw any pencil lines on the surface of the mat.

If your pattern is really successful, save the sample design that you completed prior to making your pattern. If you are very organized, save the mylar pattern. Personally, the design itself is more important to me, as often times I might make a subtle adjustment to the design necessitating a new pattern anyway. Before you know it, you will have a portfolio of original designs to offer your customers on future projects. Also, I try to photograph my best mats both for record keeping and also for an excellent sales tool for you and your staff.

These techniques allow me to remain extremely creative and productive without expending needless hours on preparation. If you have to labor too long to be creative, you will probably feel less confident in offering these services to your clients. Hopefully, these techniques will open some doors for you and allow you time for other important things. ■