

Traditional *French Matting*

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The history of using lines, panels, and other embellishment pre-dates the actual development of window mats by 300 or more years. Early artists working on parchment and paper often used line and panel, as well as other decorations around the edge of the print or drawing to set it off by directing the eye in toward the image. This practice is seen in manuscript illumination of the Middle Ages.

During the Italian Renaissance the practice of mounting drawings and prints onto larger sheets of paper for the purpose of binding into books or organizing into loose sheet folios became popular. The drawings or prints were trimmed to the image edge and then glued onto the mounting sheet. The mount sheets were decorated with painted lines and panels

along with architectonic, naturalistic, or religious designs.

This mounting and design technique continued until the mid-19th century in most of Europe and the

United States. The bound collection of the Italian artist, architect, and collector Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) entitled “Il Libro dei Disegni” (The Book of Drawings) is a well documented example of this practice.

The drawings or prints in the collections were viewed by placing the volume on a book stand or table top easel for short periods of time, then put away, effectively buffering the artwork from radical changes in temperature and humidity, as well as providing a protective, light-free environment.

With the development of sheet glass it became possible to protect drawings



This albumen print dates back to the 1870's. The French Mat design consists of ruled watercolor lines, with a watercolor wash panel between them. Closer in towards the image is gold leaf on rag paper, cut into strips, and pasted on the mat with rice starch. The gold leaf is toned with burnt sienna, applied with a stiff bristle brush. The mat is an unbuffered rag matboard. The picture frame is from Abe Munn Framemakers.

and prints while displaying them for a prolonged period of time. The ancient practice of painting and gilding on glass was revived by the 18th century Parisian framer, Jean-Baptiste Glomy, to create reverse painted glass panels that are the precursors of the line and panel designs used today.

Prior to the development of the modern window mat by the British Museum in the mid-19th century, the artwork generally came in contact with the glazing. The window mat, made of multiple sheets of laminated papers allowed the glazing to be spaced away from the art as well as providing an excellent surface on which to replicate the patterns of the Italian Renaissance and the line and panel of the French designers.

The popularity of line and panel decoration on mats has endured for the past 150 plus years in Europe and North America—not only for antique art but contemporary work as well. The influence of the art of French matting may be seen in the machine cut mat designs of the late 20th century which replicate the design elements originally found on French mats: V-groove, inlay,

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keystone, and stepped multiple mats.

Materials Used In French Matting

Matboard: The highest quality mats should be used in French mats because of the labor involved and the unique requirements of the paper surface to retain the inks and paints and prevent bleedout. Rag mats with a special surface size for French matting are available. The strength of the sizing used for the mat paper determines the mat's resistance to the penetration of liquids.

TAPPI T459 om-93, the Wax Pick Test and the TAPPI T530 pm-89, and the Hercules Method (H=Hercules, S=sizing, T=test) are used to determine the strength of the surface and internal size of the matboard. The recommended test results for French matting are T459 14 plus and T530 1000 seconds (time of penetration).

Colorants for lines and panels: Any combination of materials may be used to create the designs as long as they do not have a detrimental effect on the art's environment. The following materials are typically used for mats: pastels (oil and

chalk), watercolors, acrylics, Mat Magic powders, inks and paints, decorative papers and gilded panels, pressure-sensitive tapes designed specifically for French mats, colored pencils, and marking and drawing pens.

Laying out the pattern: The design should be laid out on a piece of the same type of matboard that will be used for the finished product. This is important because different colored surface papers and surface textures will affect the outcome. Make sure to double check the sample against the artwork to be certain everything works as intended.

When satisfied, transfer the sample to a layout template and the template to the mat, marking each corner of the mat. The traditional method of marking the corners when laying out the pattern is to use pinpricks, but a small dot made with a soft lead pencil will also work. Once the layout is complete, begin by inking in the lines.

Using the ruling pen: The traditional tool used to ink the lines in French Mats is the ruling pen. They can be adjusted to various widths and can accommodate a wide variety of inks

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and paints. The method for pulling a ruling pen along a straight edge is the same as cutting glass, a steady constant pressure with no pauses or stops along the way.

A pause at the beginning or end will often result in a blob of ink on the mat. In most cases, a line with a bulge or an overshoot corner can be carefully trimmed away after it has completely dried when using Mat Magic inks.

After the pen has been loaded with ink or paint, test it on the fallout from the mat window to be sure the line width is correct and to get it flowing properly. Begin with the line *closest* to the window, and proceed in a clockwise rotation around the mat.

Watercolor Panels: A light wash coat of clear water is applied to the panel when using watercolor paints for panels, evenly saturating it to avoid uneven areas and tide lines. Do not let the water wash get outside the lines as it will flow the paint over the lines. When applying the color wash it is important to avoid the last (wet) panel from meeting the first (significantly drier) as is the case when working in a standard rotation (left or right).

The top panel should be done first. Next apply the wash to the left side, then the right, and wash the bottom panel last in a left to right direction. Watercolor will lighten as it dries, so it should be applied slightly darker than desired.

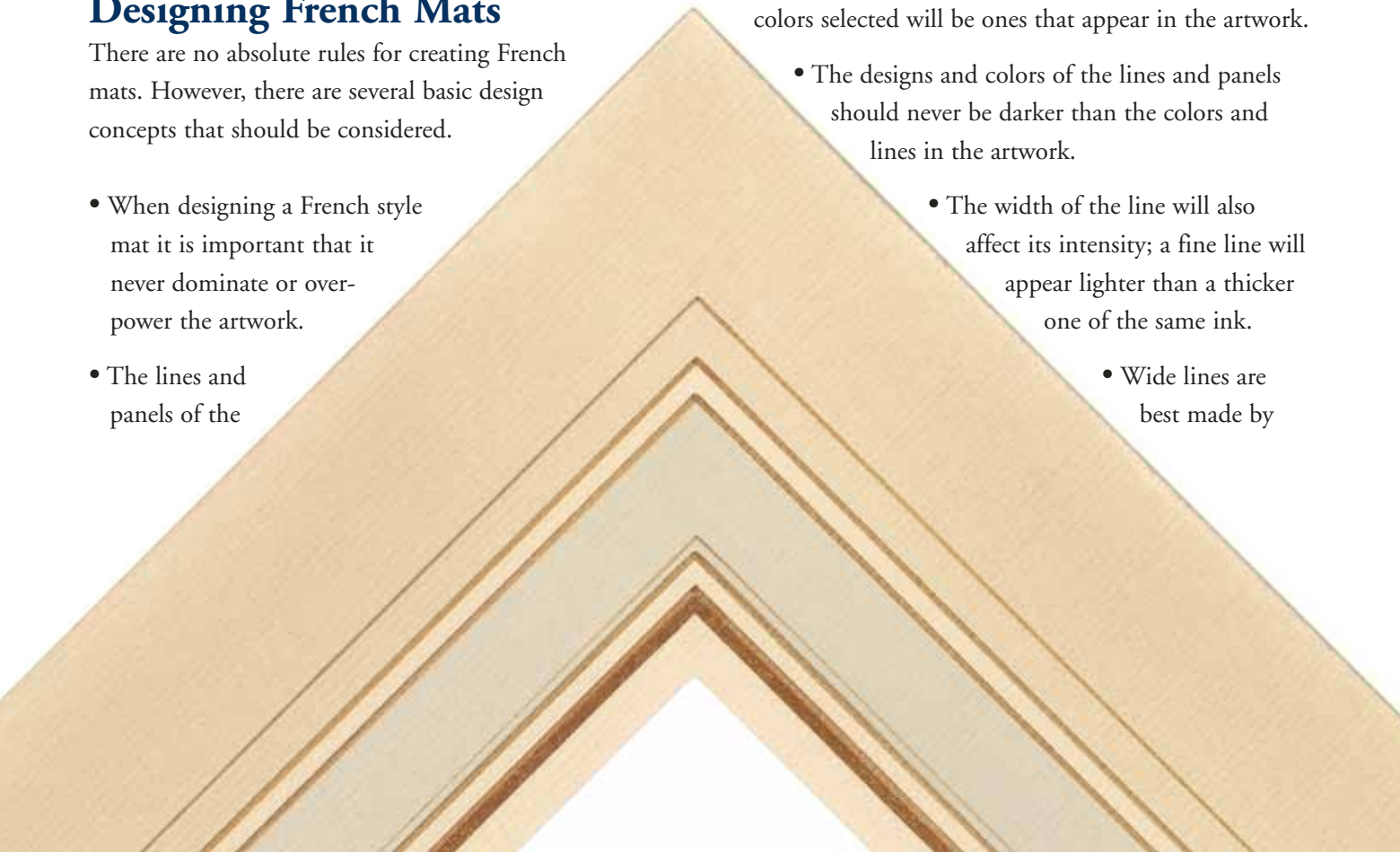
Designing French Mats

There are no absolute rules for creating French mats. However, there are several basic design concepts that should be considered.

- When designing a French style mat it is important that it never dominate or overpower the artwork.
- The lines and panels of the

French mat should create a visual funnel that passively directs the eye to the image.

- The design of the mat in some manner often replicates patterns found on the frame selected for the art.
- Select line and panel colors using the same guidelines as when choosing matboard colors. In most cases the colors selected will be ones that appear in the artwork.
- The designs and colors of the lines and panels should never be darker than the colors and lines in the artwork.
- The width of the line will also affect its intensity; a fine line will appear lighter than a thicker one of the same ink.
- Wide lines are best made by



laying down two or more narrower lines side by side, allowing each to completely dry before continuing. Thin lines may be extended around the window without allowing for the drying time which is necessary for wide lines.

- Generally, the most complimentary panels are those that are done with light semi-transparent washes. The wash color should be thinner (lighter) than the line color.
- In most cases narrow, closely spaced lines should be placed next to the mat window and the lines and the spaces between them become wider as they move away from the window. This placement creates a depth of perspective that pulls the eye to the art.
- Thicker lines placed near the mat window with progressively thinner lines toward the outer edge will dramatically bring the artwork forward. This technique works well with still life and other art that has little or no perspective.

- Simple line and panel designs with light watercolor washes, which enhance skin tone, work well with portraits.
- Botanical prints and landscapes are often embellished with flowing patterns and bold decorative paper or gilded panels.
- Architectural prints and drawings allow for the use of elaborate geometrical patterns and fancy corners.

Keep in mind that mats for antique prints or historic documents should look aged and faded. When replicating antique mats or pre-mat decorated mounts for historic artwork, sepia colored ink is used to produce lines because it more closely resembles aged Medieval iron gall inks, which were originally black. A small amount of black mixed with raw umber will produce a cool sepia, black and burnt umber produce a warmer sepia.

The French Mat corner samples seen on the previous pages are examples of traditional, antique, 17th century French Matting designs.

Suggested reading:

Brian Wolf's Fantasy Finishes for Mat Decoration, Columba Publishing

Frame Aesthetics and Preservation, Hugh Phibbs, Picture Framing Magazine, Feb.1998.

The History of Mat Design 1290 - 1990, Don Pierce, Kris Anderson, PFM, July 1994

Tips for Using Ruling Pens and Markers, Greg Perkins CPE, PFM, March 1993

Mat Decoration, Hugh Phibbs, PFM, March 1993

Design and Layout Techniques, Peter Miller CPE, PFM, July 1996

The History of French Mats, Kristen Anderson, PFM, March 1993

Architectural Style Mats, Greg Perkins CPE, PFM, July 1996

Traditional French Mats, Jim Stull, PFM, June 1997.

[Ed Note: If you'd like to attend a hands on seminar about French Mats, Paul will be teaching a class at the National Conference in January 2002.] ■

Mat corner samples on pages 100, 104, 106 courtesy of The French Mat Co.