



## *Flying Buttresses*

**T**he options for decoratively shaped openings can occupy a picture framer's imagination for hours. There are geometric arrays of angles and lines that radiate patterns to all four corners of the opening; there are rectangles with altered tops; and then there are artistic elements. Beyond the actual design of the artistic elements, there is the critical question of placement. The artistic element can be a single crest on the top or perhaps a pair of mirrored ornaments along the sides. The most automatic, common, and pleasing choice is to position the artistic elements at the bottom corners.

There is good reason for this; it gives a psychological feeling of weight and stability to the presentation that is comfortable for all viewers. This placement formula is likened to the flying buttresses that serve to stabilize the soaring walls of Gothic architecture. To call it a psychological stability is a telling

*The inspiration of an old architectural detail enhances an artistic matting idea.*

parallel to its architectural counterpart. In the earliest days of Gothic architecture, people were not accustomed to seeing high stonework with so many windows. Everyone was fearful that the buildings would collapse. There were

tales of cases where builders were ordered to add these external structures—flying buttresses—as much to soothe public fears as to support the open stonework. Regardless of whether or not this is just an architectural legend, it shows what an effective formula this is to instill solidity in all the decorative arts.



*The maroon inner mat is  $\frac{1}{8}$ " wide. The tall vertical pillar of the decorative element is  $\frac{1}{8}$ " wide and 4" tall. The area of maroon at the angled top is  $\frac{3}{8}$ " wide to show extra color. It is a nice surprise when there are spots along a narrow reveal that can be slightly wider. The triangle at the side is  $\frac{1}{8}$ "x $\frac{1}{8}$ ". Small jewels on the outside of the corners in all these examples take their inspiration from the flying buttresses of Gothic architecture. Spots add color and extra weight to the presentation. The rounded, tarnished silver frame is rough enough to look authentic but light enough to allow the contrasts in the picture and the matting to be dominant.*



### **A Primitive Print**

It is always good to have an example constructed with only straight lines. Geometric ideas can be adapted to many styles, and it is a reminder that decorative matting is not exclusively the province of the computerized mat cutter. All the time spent talking about efficiency, the lines to be measured, the stops to be set, and the overcuts to be estimated with the manual mat cutter may be balanced by the time necessary for development, drawing, and testing with a computerized mat cutter.



The curves at the bottom corner were constructed using the design program. There is a template that simply flares the corners. You can also adjust the flares of each layer independently. The inner layer is less flared than the outer layer, and the dark reveal widens toward the bottom to form a more solid element. The entire corner element is  $\frac{3}{4} \times \frac{5}{8}$ ". The small curved triangle at the outside is  $\frac{1}{4} \times \frac{1}{16}$ ".



However you describe this element – classical, Jacobean, sophisticated, maybe Moorish – it appears more traditional than the element in the previous example. The entire corner element is  $1\frac{1}{4} \times \frac{5}{8}$ ". The small arc to the outside has a radius of  $\frac{5}{16}$ " and is  $\frac{3}{16}$ " wide.

There is a  $\frac{1}{8}$ " wide pillar with an angled top about half as tall as the opening. Also, note that the maroon reveal at the angled top is slightly wider than the rest of the  $\frac{1}{8}$ " inner mat, making the spot a great opportunity to include a little extra color. But the best opportunity for a little extra color is the small triangle at the sides of the pillar. This small triangle is another nod to the flying buttress inspiration. With its function as support and grounding, this small triangle can be likened to the smaller secondary structures designed to further strengthen the larger flying buttresses.

The print here is mounted on matboard and trimmed at a bevel. This is not always an option for real prints, but think of it as a placeholder for any object or floating item where the edges would be visible. This formula for creating a three-color mat with a double mat and a wider portion of the background color can be used in many situations.

Another aspect of this presentation's effectiveness is physical depth. The shadows created by spacers bring more life to cut work than when all the layers are affixed flat against each other. There is a thin spacer between the top two layers of the mat, a foamboard spacer under the mat, and a thinner foamboard spacer supporting the print.

## A Black and White Drawing

Just as the first example was designed to be simple using lines, this corner element was designed to be as simple as it could be, but using curves. A flared corner like this can begin in the

design program. It is easier to evaluate the proportions of the decoration when the entire design is in view. And in the design program, changing the character of the curve is a matter of clicking rather than redrawing.

The artifacts' smaller curves and lines to the outside need to be constructed using the drawing program. In such an informal presentation, adding this extra detail to the element might seem out of character; isn't simplicity always better? But in exploring this flying buttress formula, it is critical to see the effect of this small addition to bolster the element.

Once the design and testing of the corner element is finished, it must be integrated into the opening and mirrored onto the opposite side. It is possible to design the element so that it would snap into place, then merge into the rectangular opening—all using the design program. But this can be tricky and the drawing program processes to integrate and mirror are used for several other ideas in decorative matting. Any framer with experience using the drawing program will find this integration and mirroring process easy.

## A Traditional Landscape

Everything about this presentation shouts traditional – the academically rendered image, the muted colors, the standard border widths, the aged gold frame, and the Victorian structure of the decorative curves. However, the presence of curves like this in matting is not exactly traditional. It seems reasonable, though, that if there had been matboard and tools to work it 200 years ago, there would have been decoration

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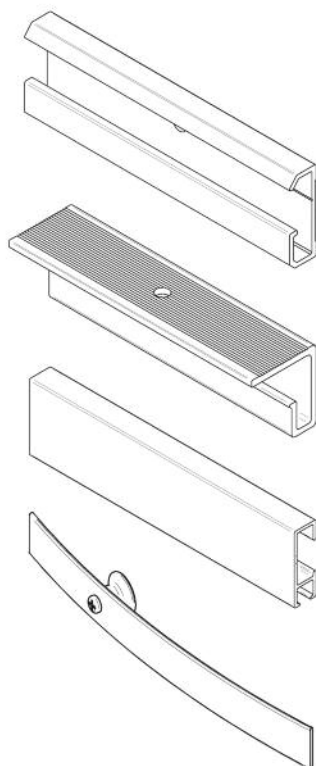


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exactly like this in matting. There was certainly no lost opportunity to add decoration to any other surface in those times.

The curve at the corner is composed of two curves. The first curve flares out and a second flares back in so that it meets the bottom nearly perpendicularly. Once again, notice how the dark middle reveal widens toward the bottom. The additional arcs at the sides of the curves form the small jewels and a little more of the dark middle color is exposed. It would be possible to fashion this corner element without this arc, but with the idea of the flying buttress in mind, it is easy to see that these small additional elements provide a more solid connection to terra firma.

The art in these examples was chosen almost randomly. The pictures are intended as symbols for various styles to illustrate the malleability of the idea. The rising pillars and the jewels at the sides can take almost any shape—lines or curves, complex or simple. But this formula for constructing and positioning decorative elements at the bottom corners is almost universally effective in adding the sense of stability. **PFM**

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**Brian Wolf, CPF, GCF**, has been a picture framer since 1973 and has developed several techniques of mat decoration over the years. He invented mat carving and adapted traditional French matting into several unique painted treatments. Brian works with Wizard International as director of standards and training, continuing to develop his designs for CMCs. He lectures and leads workshops across the U.S. He has authored several books and videos and was awarded the PPFA's Award of Distinction for Leadership in 2000.