

CROPPING AS A DESIGN TOOL

By David Lantrip, MCPPE, GCF

Custom framing is meant to preserve artwork in as close to its original condition as possible, and to present it in an aesthetically pleasing manner. Anyone who has been a framer for more than a week knows that some artwork presents particular challenges as far as aesthetics are concerned. Working in sympathy with the art to find its hidden potential is what sets a great framer apart from a good one, and loyal customers will reward that effort.

Amateur photographs—the sort of pictures taken with a smartphone or a point-and-shoot camera while on vacation, during the holidays, or at family events—might have problems that make them look, well, amateurish. This isn't to be taken as an insult to the casual photographer; it is merely to say that non-professionals are often unaware of the basic rules of good composition. These less-than-perfect photos are a big part of the memories framers are tasked with preserving and presenting.

There is only so much we can do with the artwork we are given, but knowing some basic composition guidelines can help us make an otherwise ordinary picture special—without any extraordinary skill or software. Much can be done to improve a photo by carefully considering mat opening sizes and cropping.

Casual snapshots do not always follow guidelines of composition, but carefully sizing the mat opening and positioning the photo appropriately can create a better end result. Customers may not be aware of such considerations, so education and a discussion at the design counter are necessary. Visualization software or a low-tech approach of using two mat samples as cropping tools are very helpful, as are framed before-and-after



Minimal cropping brings the main subject matter of the island and the horizon to points and lines defined by the rule of thirds, leading a viewer's eye to them in a more natural and balanced way.

examples. Such examples can help overcome any objections to covering more of the image than usual and will showcase the benefits of thoughtful cropping.

Naturally, the image will be smaller than the original photo; working with a larger print such as an 8x10 rather than a 5x7 will help. If scanning and printing are part of your offerings, it is an opportunity for an additional sale.

One very basic principle of composition is known as the rule of thirds. Imagine the image divided both horizontally and vertically into thirds, with two vertical and two horizontal lines across it. The focal point, or any objects one wishes to draw attention to, should be



Using the rule of thirds again, a casual snapshot becomes a portrait. Plenty of lead space allows the subject to gaze into the distance, expanding the feel of a sweeping vista.



feel less cramped or confined. Plenty of lead room in front of a marathon runner conveys a sense of motion, while a lack of it stops motion or makes it look like he is running out of the frame.

Adding a sense of motion is a simple matter with many images: simply crop out some of the background behind the moving subject and leave plenty of room in the direction of travel. A rather dramatic and artistic effect can be achieved by drastically cropping out nearly all of the background and providing a great deal of lead space. A casual picture of a person can look more like a portrait when the background is cropped closer with sufficient lead room in the direction the subject is gazing.

at or near one of the four intersections or along a line. In a photo taken at the beach, for example, the horizon line would follow one of the two horizontal lines, and the person featured in the picture would be at or close to an intersection. Using this guideline makes for a much more visually appealing and interesting photo.

Another consideration when composing a photograph is lead room, also known as lead space or nose space. Usually applied to moving objects or people, or in portraits, lead room is the idea that there should be some visual space in the direction the subject is moving or in the direction the person is looking. Thinking of a portrait, space in front of the subject will make the photo

Generally speaking, leaving plenty of uncluttered background around the subject of a photo is a good idea. It

allows the viewer to concentrate on the subject matter without distractions, and it may lend a sense of serene simplicity. Doing the opposite and filling the frame can also have very interesting results. Filling the frame, or allowing the subject matter to take up the entirety of the visual space, lends the photo a compelling sense of intimacy and forces the viewer to focus completely on the subject. This is a particularly powerful technique when the photo is very detailed or the subject is looking directly at the viewer.

Sweeping views of a landscape or cityscape call for a panoramic format, and nearly every camera, including those on a smartphone, offer this capability. People



An average sunset picture can be transformed into a dramatic, sweeping panorama. Note that the figure on the beach and the horizon are at 1/3 points. This would be a great opportunity to suggest working with a larger print of the photo.



often forget about it or don't know how to use the feature, but cropping can come to the rescue again by simulating a panorama. Because a lot of the image may be covered by the mat, this is another great opportunity to suggest working with a larger print.

One more tool to have on hand is the Dutch angle, also known as the German angle or Dutch tilt. This is a technique borrowed from cinematography in which the camera is tilted at an angle. The result is that horizontal lines are askew, either dramatically so or at a subtler angle. The intention is to convey to the viewer a sense of unease, confusion,



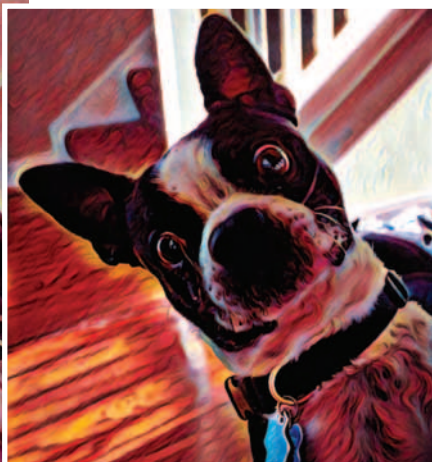
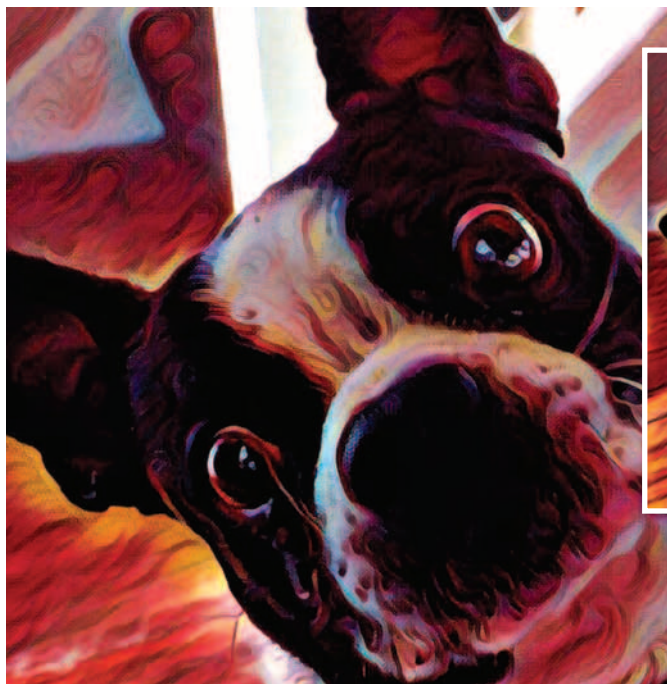
Placing the subject near the edge of the frame and giving it plenty of lead space in front adds a more dynamic feel to an otherwise fairly static image. Severe cropping isolates it from a cluttered background, fixing the viewer's attention on the shuttle and 747 and creating a great sense of motion in the photograph.

unrest, or even intoxication in the character. It was used masterfully by Alfred Hitchcock in many of his films and by the photographer Garry Winogrand. In a less serious photo, maybe a child enjoying a piece of birthday cake, it can introduce an element of whimsy. Granted, creating a sense of psychological tension is not likely to be a common request from customers, but it may be just the perfect thing for the right picture. It is most effective when there are obvious horizontal lines in the background.

As with any other discussion of design, there are caveats, both from practical and design standpoints. There are many other rules and guidelines to good composition, and like any others, they are made to be broken.

The guidance presented here is meant to give a framer a starting point to help a customer get more out of their casual photos.

Other decisions, such as point of view and background, are made in the viewfinder and are therefore beyond our abilities as framers to address. This naturally leads into a discussion of the framer's role in art, and whether we should make artistic decisions. A



Filling the frame with the subject gives a strong sense of immediacy, a very "in your face" experience for the viewer. This little dog provided his own Dutch angle, a perfect reflection of his goofy personality.



Lacking visualization software, a low-tech approach with two mat samples can give a customer a better idea of the beneficial effects of careful cropping.

photograph by a professional was created with knowledge of composition, and so any rules that were “broken” were most likely done so deliberately. It is not our place to overrule the aesthetic decisions made by another professional.

All of the cropping suggested is done by adjusting the size of the mat opening and the positioning of the photo, rather than trimming. Trimming should be a rare necessity, and the decision should be discussed with

the customer; and even then, only done to images that can be easily reprinted. With most pictures being carried around on a phone, it should seldom be an issue.

A framer does not have to be a professional photographer (or painter, or cross stitch expert, for that matter) to design beautiful framing to enhance and preserve artwork. On the other hand, some basic knowledge of how artwork is created and the principles behind the artistic vision are of great benefit. Customers always appreciate expert advice, and a solid knowledge base allows a framer to have an intelligent and helpful discussion with their customers. This translates to better design, customer loyalty and, ultimately, better sales. So go take a closer look at art and photography, appreciate what went into it, and help your customers appreciate their own work in return. **PFM**

David Lantrip, MCPF, GCF, is the director of education for Franchise Concepts, and the franchisor for Deck The Walls, The Great Frame Up, and Framing and Art Centre stores. He has served in a number of roles in the PPFA including as a member of the International Board of Directors and serves on the Chapter Relations Committee as well as the Guidelines Task Force. David recently earned a Masters in Mass Communications degree from the University of Florida.

