

Designs for Vintage Photos

By Tim Franer, CPF, CMG

A spacer and fillet here, a fabric-wrapped mat there, and the charm of old photos can be enhanced with designs that are simple yet rich-looking



A traditional distressed florentine silver leaf frame (#1954 by Roma Moulding) is used in combination with a Nielsen profile (#100 german silver inner cap frame) to create a shadowbox effect. The vintage photo is submounted to a variety of solid core mats to coordinate with the lady in the matching frame.

When designing a custom frame for a vintage photo, there are a number of factors to consider. For example, is it of sentimental value, so that preservation concerns are as important as the design? Other common design questions include what type of frame works best with the photo, what type of matting is required, should a colored mat be used, will a fabric-covered mat be appropriate, what happens if a photo is mounted to a embossed pre-cut mat, what type of glazing should be used, and how do you enhance the overall appearance of the piece?

The small details incorporated into each of the following frame designs deal with these questions, and the solutions are what make these pieces work. All of the components go together in a way that complements the photographs, balanced against each other so that they don't overpower the image being framed.

Preservation

Many vintage photographs have been permanently

mounted to embossed, die-cut mats and cannot be removed from them without damage. Removing photos from their original mats is not recommended. This is part of the character and beauty of the subject that gives it a unique look from its own period. In some cases, minor adaptations can be made to correct damaged mat areas to preserve it in its original form.

An alternative to preserving a mounted photo is to have a digital copy made prior to framing. For extra security, burn files of the image to a disk for the family and store a copy safely for your own archives or consider using an online backup service. (Also check copyright laws when making copies of photographs because you need proper written approval from the original photographer if the copyright has not expired.) Preserving a vintage photograph mounted on non-archival materials also typically involves encapsulating it in its surroundings with archival framing materials.



The frame combination was used as with the photo of the man. The vintage photo is submounted to a 1" spacer, creating a floating effect for the original die-cut mat.



This corner view shows the difference in the mats that have been submounted to the original vintage photo of a man. A combination of mats was created to coordinate with the matching 8"x10" photo of the lady. The matting is a Bainbridge fabric matboard.

A Lady and a Gentleman

These two photos offer examples of how to give two items the same framing treatment (making them a set), even if one of them has an element that cannot be altered. In this case, that element was the original backing mat behind the photo of the woman.

The objective was to frame two original vintage photographs with a focus on style, color enhancement, and overall design. In

viewing the completed design, the focal point should be the photograph, not the frame or mat. Both photos measure 8"x10" with one photo mounted in its original presentation folder and one photo unmounted. After asking a few questions of the customer, we found that these photos are approximately 50 years old. They are in excellent condition, and it is apparent that they have been stored in a place where light has not been present. When someone brings in photos of this type to be framed, it is important to tell them about the benefits of preservation materials, especially conservation glazing. The goal is to create a frame and mat design that will let viewers focus on the subject. Since the photo of the lady is permanently mounted in its original presentation folder, that played an important role in the design. The photo of the gentleman, by comparison, could be properly mounted using preservation methods.

The original presentation folder for lady photo had a wonderful mat that added small details to the photo, like the deckled edges with an arch and embossed outline. The color of the existing mat is neutral but earthy and subtle in a tone, enhancing the photo. During the period when this photo was taken, an embossed logo was very common on photographic mats.

With these elements in mind, the designs for both frames were created, using a layout that would bring the eye to focus on the photo. To do this, it was important to use space and depth around the subject.

In the design process, the first option was to use a 2" metal shadowbox moulding to house each photograph. The simple moulding has a groove for the glass and backing with each 2" side finished on the inside and outside. The finished frame eliminated many hours of lining the inside of a shadowbox—a real timesaver. If a customer does not care for a thin metal frame, you could also use this frame as an inner frame and cap it with a more ornate frame that fits and complements the period and style of the image. Using two frames to achieve this look can also save time as opposed to using one frame that you need to spend time lining and installing glass.

Spacing around a photo is very important when you want to achieve a stronger focal point. It gives a subject breathing room and helps the eye to focus into, instead of around, a photo. Both of the images

were elevated using preservation quality foamboard spacers to help create depth. This adds another dimension to the overall design by enhancing the images. For the photo of the gentleman, several layers of spacing mats and a thicker board treatment were created with a reverse Bevel Accent. The different layers were created to help balance the overall appearance of the framed photographs. The fabric background mat was selected for its texture and subtle color. The same fabric mat was used for both frames to help create a sense of balance. The result is two vintage photographs that, although not identical, are certainly a pair. Museum Glass was selected for its conservation properties and clarity, as it was for all these projects.

Button Photo

The subject is a 6" round, button-shaped metal disk with a vintage photograph mounted and laminated to the face side. The button has a pin anchored to the back. The layout and design was created to complement the round shape of the disk. A 19"x19" shadowbox frame, a 2.5" bevel liner, an 8" circle opening centered on a 19"x19" panel liner, and a solid backing behind the circle opening give this design a feeling of visual space.

A deep frame, a hand-covered brown suede fabric, and a hand-wrapped Flexible Fillet add a richness that brings the viewer's attention to the photograph. The vintage photo button was mounted to a 1" spacer to raise the photo off the backing. Extending the photo outward gives the viewer an illusion that the image is floating in space. The frame is a 3" deep shadowbox with an antique gold tone finish. It provides a subtle enhancement to the vintage look and the color tones in the photo.

A dark brown suede fabric was hand applied to the liners, while the backing board behind the 8" opening is a lighter shade of tan suede. When using dark colors inside a shadowbox, hand-wrapping the side bevel liners with the same fabric as the backing board helps enhance a dimensional look. Adding to this sense of depth, an antique gold leaf fillet was placed at the bottom of the bevel liner and backing. A non-embellished fillet provides an accent that is subtle, rather than the overpowering effect an ornate fillet would have. The 19"x19"x3/8" panel liner has an 8" centered circle cut out with a 25 degree bevel. A silk fabric antique gold-covered Flexible Fillet was placed around this opening. This fillet adds a custom look that brings attention to the finished piece.



Two frames were stacked to create a deep shadowbox frame around a button photo. The top frame is a Max Moulding P592142 attached to profile 993W. The bottom moulding was modified to match the width of the top moulding, then the two were glued together.

A close view of the 6" round button photo shows the 1" spacing between the button and background fabric matting. The panel liner, custom cut by Raphael's, was covered with dark brown suede fabric, with the background mat a lighter beige suede. Both fabrics were from Frank's. The inside lip of the 8" circle was covered with a antique silk Flexible Fillet, also from Frank's.



Portrait of a Man

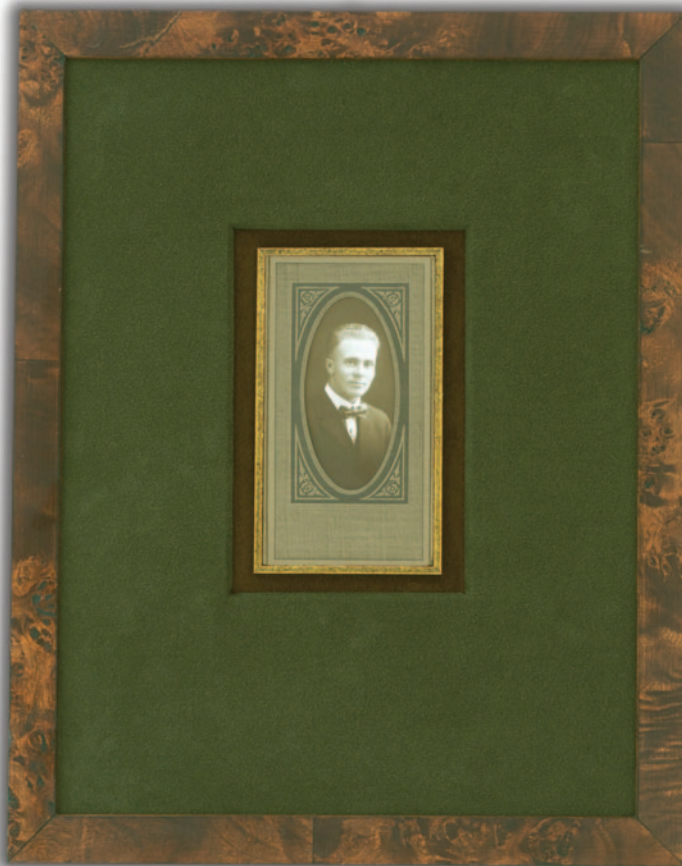
This vintage photographic portrait of a man was attached to embossed matting, so a design had to be created around the mat and photo. The embossed mat is 3.5"x6" with a weighted bottom. The die-cut oval opening was common during this period. To enhance and give richness to this design, two hand-wrapped suede mats were made. The top dark green one was laid out with a weighted bottom and with equal sides and top. The back mat is dark brown suede.

The 11.5"x15" outer mat was cut out of a 12-ply mat with the window opening 3/8" larger than the vintage photo.

A 7/8" hand finish burl wood frame (#60353 from Roma) is placed around a handwrapped deep green suede mat from Frank's Fabrics. The outer mat is 12-ply, giving a dimensional effect when placed against the deep brown suede background mat. The vintage photo is in its original mat, which has been inset in a reversed cut antique gold leaf fillet. The fillet-framed photo was centered and placed on top of the dark brown suede background mat.

tograph. Using a 12-ply mat provided a nice, thick bevel, and it created a dimensional effect around the image. To enhance and put focus on the photo, a 3/16" antique gold leaf fillet was cut on a reverse angle to fit on the outside of the photo mat and glued together to form a small fillet frame. The photo was then mounted in that fillet frame, which was centered and attached to the dark brown suede background mat with a 3/8" border on each side. A 1" burl wood frame was selected for its style, character, and color.

This design provides an example of how to combine a deep rich mat color with suede fabrics with a vintage photo. The hand-wrapped suede colors and texture along with the burl wood frame and gold leaf fillet create a rich look that cannot be achieved with just a paper mat. Fabric-covered matting always creates a custom look that give an old photo the rich look it deserves.



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Photo of a Young Girl

In this vintage image of a young girl, the photograph came attached to an embossed, die-cut mat. The intricate detail in the embossing between the brown line borders calls for a simple mat and frame design. This vintage photo has a brown sepia tone finish with wonderful shades of light and dark. When designing with this type of photo, using a light-colored mat border will help enhance the subject, bring out the gradation, and provide focus on the subject. A light-colored, 4-ply solid core rag mat was selected for this design because the bevel has the same color as the face of the mat, eliminating the white bevel line, which would have interfered with the transition from the mat to the image.

The outer mat is 16"x18" with larger side borders and a smaller top and bottom mat. The reason for this is that the customer brought in an existing frame to use. To give this photo extra dimension, a double mat was designed with a 1/4" foamboard spacer between the two mats. Between the photograph and back mat, a 4-ply rag mat spacer was used to give an appearance of floating. The outer mat window opening was cut 1/2" larger than the photograph's mat to give the appearance of dimensional spacing. To create a customized effect, a hand-drawn Winsor Newton liquid gold ink line was drawn on the top mat 5/8" from the window opening. The hand-rubbed, black fluted frame with small embellished corner ornamentation works very well with the subject, bringing out the sepia and gray tones. The dark frame provides closure in this design.

When you view each of these pieces, the first thing your eye does is gravitate to the subject because the frame, mat, and dimensional aspects create that sense of visual flow. The richness of each presentation was achieved using hand-wrapped matting with deep colors, and the simple, neutral rag mat using spacers creates strong sense of depth compared to the more common double mat with a 3/16" inner mat.

A final thought for framing vintage photography. When an image comes to you mounted on the original mat, it's almost always better to create your design based on both the details of the image and the character of the embossed, die-cut mat. Keep it simple and clean, and don't overpower the subject. Add in preservation framing practices, and these simple designs will remain beautiful for generations to come. ■

Interested in learning more about these design techniques? Come to the National Conference in Las Vegas, where Tim will be teaching these and other techniques in several framing design classes.



This closed corner fluted frame adds a sense of completeness to the vintage photo of a young girl. An outer solid and color core Alphasag Artcare #8667 mat from Bainbridge was selected because of its non-white bevels and archival properties. The Colonial Cream #8667 Bainbridge mat was used as an inner mat. A 1/4" spacer was placed between the top and back mat, creating a dimensional effect around the photo. The photo is in its original die-cut mat and was attached to a 4-ply backing then mounted to the back mat.

The Colonial Cream #8667 Bainbridge mat was used as an inner mat. A 1/4" spacer was placed between the top and back mat creating a dimensional effect around the photo. The 4-ply spacer raised the photo from the back mat. A hand drawn liquid gold line was placed 5/8" from the mat window opening.



Tim Franer, CPF, CMG, has framed artwork for heads of state, corporations, galleries, and fine homes for more than 30 years. Tim consults with industry leaders to define color and design, and is a speaker and educator on art, design, and framing. Tim is an instructor of seminars

and workshops throughout North America, Europe, South America, Australia, and New Zealand. He is currently development, design, and educational consultant to NielsenBainbridge, as well as consultant to The Fletcher-Terry Co. and Roma Moulding.