

Matting for Today's

By Patrick Sarver

Matboard is a key element in the design of wall art, one that plays an important role in providing an environment for artworks while also having a significant role in the design and look of the final product. As with the art itself, the role and the design trends involving mats evolves with the times and the popularity of various styles. The style pendulum for mats swings from the simple to the ornate and from strong to subtle colors. So, too, does the use of textures and surface effects. And, of course, there are always special touches and the option of customized mat creation for one-of-a-kind projects to meet the individual needs of clients.

So where do the trends in mats lie today?

"A lot that's out there seems to be mimicking what's being done at Pottery Barn," says Vivian Kistler, senior chairholder at the Color Marketing Group and editor of the *Color Names Reference* book. "There are big white mats—and some black mats—that are plain. There is a lot of white, with some coordinated colors. In the commercial marketplace right now, there are not a lot of mats with patterns. Nor do there seem to be any dramatic designs going into hotel rooms now. The stores and the end users are creating a demand for a solid look. At NeoCon, even the flooring was tone-on-tone at the most. You don't see contrast; patterns are not that defined. At High Point, Phoenix Design, for example,



Plain white matboards, often with wide borders, are a strong trend in today's commercial market, as seen in this setting featuring Bainbridge mats, framed in Nielsen Profile 56.

Market

did have some colors in matboard, but there's not much like the marbles and metal leaf and words on boards like there used to be.”

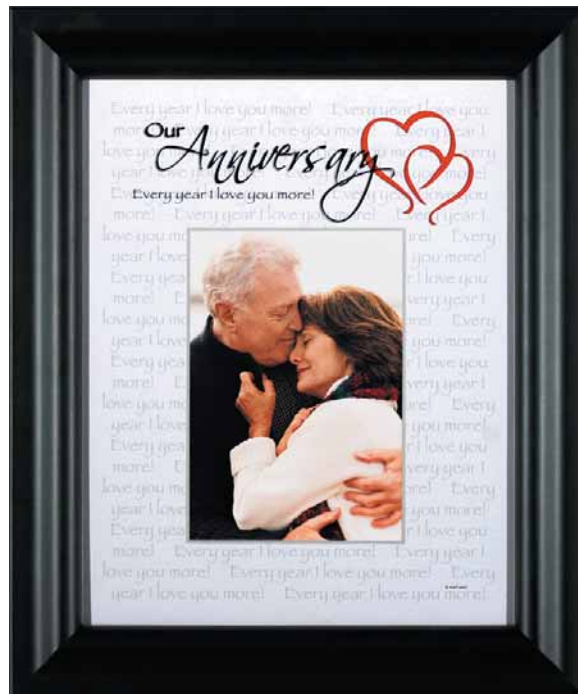
At the same time there are more matting options than ever, from color to texture to special effects. “There really are more specialized matboards being used and more designs to choose from,” says Malynn Pullman, co-owner of Matboard Design Corp. “What once was a small offering of designer matboard now has become a huge part of the entire matboard and picture framing industry. We have printed boards that go from urban to country to contemporary to coastal. The designs are very universal and have a feel of dimensional textures. And what we are seeing at this time is a trend toward 'natural' textures and those taken from nature.”

Subtle colors, natural textures, and subdued designs seem to be the order of the day. “We find that most of our volume customers today tend to choose subtle, soft textures in a warm neutral palette,” says Kevin Mitchell, director of sales of Specialty Matboard. “The trend toward earth tones also remains strong, as it has been for some time.”

“OEMs are definitely playing it safe in keeping colors neutral, and that's because their clients are,” says Kistler. “There are lots of neutrals, which is why white mats are doing so well. When colors are used, it's the really soft blue, like sea foam, as well as greens and spa blue—soothing colors. In the future, I do think there will be an influence from all



Plain white mats are sometimes accented by wrapped decorative beveled fillets, such as Faux Fillets from the Vicki Schober Company.



Digital printing on mats is a creative option that can be used for special occasions, gifts, and memories. This printed anniversary mat was created for standard photo sizes by Pictures Plus.

this exposure to China and the color red that people are seeing on TV. But for now the neutral colors are dominant.”

This view is echoed by Pullman, who does see some element of color being used, but even there the tendency is toward the restrained look. “Neutrals are the top selling boards, but also on the top of the list are reds and dark chocolates,” says Pullman. “We sell everything from soft, subtle patterns to the heavy layered textures. However, there is definitely a trend to more subtle patterns today.”

Even for companies that focus primarily on subtler shades of matboard, the trend is toward the plainer looks. “We have a very classic line of matboard, with a muted color palette and no decoration or texture,” says Marc Schotland, director of marketing of Legion Paper. “Even with that, we continue to find that the most popular colors continue to be white and warm white.”

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Another trend, albeit much less pronounced than the emphasis on subtle colors and patterns, is the increased use of oversized art and matting. This trend is one that is being seen more often for contract framing projects.

“As the only company offering oversized cotton board for artwork larger than 40"x60" as part of the Rising line, we've noticed a trend to oversized mats for artwork that needs 60"x104" board,” says Schotland. “At the same time, there's also more of a pronounced trend to 8-ply matboard.”

Mats with digitally printed designs are another option that are available to OEMs and contract framers. While the potential for this new technology in matboard design seems large, to date there seems to be only limited use in the production framing business. “I have not seen much in the way of digitally printed mats,” says Eugene Price, corporate account manager for Wizard International. “It is still a relatively new technology for production framers. They have to understand how the finished product will look on different types of matboard with various inks, what the longevity is, and how the printing process works in general. Those who are using it—generally to make memories, corporate gifts, or advertisements—are trying to expand their product base by creating new customers or are trying to create unique add-on sales of products that other companies cannot do. But most production-framing customers still don't know that printing on matboard is available. The printed mats I have seen at Pictures Plus are geared for the tourist/visitor market. Another use is specialized printing for the



Burlap (left) and Sisal (right) mats from Specialty Matboard reflect a current trend towards natural textures in specialized matboards.

hospitality business, such as company logos or names on matboards.”

In keeping with the subtle colors and designs in vogue today, one way to add a special touch to mat designs is with decorative beveled fillets, which are paper-wrapped strips that are made with



Metallic looks, such as this copper mat from Specialty Matboard, are among the many options available to meet clients' specialized requirements.

decorative, plain, and suede textures. “These are used in combination with matboards by OEM framers,” says Vicki Schober, president of the Vicki Schober Company. “They provide a narrow, colorful texture under a neutral top mat instead of relying on a 'heavier' matboard border for the artwork. They are primarily used by those wanting to differentiate their framing presentations. The choice of using specialized mat treatments depends on a designer's taste, the artwork style, the market the framed artwork is being sold to, and current trends in wall décor. Some markets, like the furnishings industry, tend to use these accents more; others prefer the Pottery Barn look, with neutral matting styles.”

While matboard suppliers are emphasizing the designs and styles that are selling well today, they are also developing new kinds of matboard that will meet today's special needs as well as new types of products that will expand the creative options for designers in the future.

“For clients who need product without glass, we are developing a line of matboard that will be moisture resistant and 'glassless,’” says Mitchell. “This will allow customers to use matboard as design elements without

fear of damage from broken glass or the risk of exposing it to moisture in the open air or to cleaning. In addition, we have developed a new metallic series that works as a design element to complement frame finishes and prints with sheen,” says Mitchell. His company also continues to develop new types of traditional specialized matting products. For example, he says, “We have a ‘tapestry’ matboard that has a very distinct floral motif that incorporates a leaf pattern.”

CUSTOM ORDERS

“Due to trends and economic conditions, OEMs are not stocking as much specialized boards as in the past,” says Mitchell. “Instead, they are tending to order just what they need to fulfill orders and to make their inventory turns.”

At other times a production framer needs a special mat for a client that must be custom-ordered. Most larger matboard suppliers can fill those needs, especially when the number of boards runs in the range of a few thousand.

“We work with clients to learn what they are looking for so we can help them fill their matboard needs,” says Pullman. “Most production framers usually order from our line and tend to stick to the standard 32”x40” or 40”x60” formats, but we also produce custom matboards for special niches with custom designs and in custom sizes.”

“In many cases the custom orders we create are for customized colors on existing or ‘archive’ patterns that fit a designer’s particular need,” adds Mitchell.

Even matting accessories can be customized for special client needs. “We have designed custom embossed mats that coordinate with our Faux Fillets for a company in the photographic field,” says Schober. “We also customize our Elevations™ mats, which incorporate Faux Fillets, for OEMs wanting their own proprietary looks.”

HIGHER-END MATS

While most wall art is made with matboard that is cost-conscious, there are many production-framing projects—especially contract framing for hospitality and corporate clients. Matboard companies have found that many of the companies they deal with have a need of better specialized matting for those kinds of projects.

“Typically, specialized matboards are used with posters and open edi-



While neutrals are the top-selling boards, reds and dark chocolates are also among the most popular colors at Matboard Design Corp.

tions,” says Mitchell. “Our new Gallery Line, though, which incorporates conservation quality core, we find is being specified for more higher-end projects.”

“The boards we produce are decorative so they typically fit with posters and digital print framing,” says Pullman. “But we also offer a line of alpha mats that we find are being used for more limited edition artwork.”

While the trend today is toward larger, plain white mats, there are still many instances when specialized matting with the right color, texture, or special effect is needed to meet the needs of clients. Today’s options offer matting designers a lot of choices, and those choices can result in designs that can make or break a contract sale or provide just the right touch to make a product stand out and sell well in today’s marketplace.

“The OEM industry is very familiar with what a designer matboard can bring to their product,” says Pullman. “When the right board is chosen, it can really enhance the art, with each element playing off the other to create something appealing to the client and end user.” ■



There is also a trend towards using oversized mats like the 60”x104” cotton mats from Legion Paper’s Rising collection.