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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft- Framing and Presentation: Factors to Consider



Image: Gilded frame burnished with agate tool

Ask the Experts: “My professor says bad frames are dragging down my paintings, and she’s considering lowering my grade if I don’t show improvement before my senior show. I don’t think this is fair! Shouldn’t I just be judged on the art itself? I can’t afford a ton of money for frames!”

A: Presentation is an aspect of professional art that students often learn in the latter stages of education. At first, when learning the basics, presentation and framing aren’t a priority because the main concerns involve making the work of art, not exhibition. As the time comes to show and sell publicly, however, presentation becomes an important concern.

It’s been often said that a good frame can’t save bad art, but a bad frame can ruin good art. How art is presented is, whether intentionally or not, part of the overall viewing experience. This reality is something that all artists need to acknowledge.

Ideally, the presentation should complement the artwork without overshadowing it. This principle has as much to do with the display location as the work of art. Influential frame designer Robert Kulicke taught that frames are not furniture, they are architecture. This is an important point

for artists to consider: there is a relationship between the artwork and the space where it is installed.

For most artists, the gallery is the primary place outside the studio where new works are shown. Art dealers have a good concept of the tastes and types of interiors their clients prefer, and can give valuable advice about the style of frame to use.

When selecting a frame, focus on the colors, scale and texture of the art, as well as the quality of materials. Closed-corner frames are crafted with special attention to the joints, which are filled and hand finished. This style may be too costly for artists on a budget, and this level of presentation is not required by most galleries. What are more often preferred (or required) are high quality moldings assembled professionally, chosen to complement the art. Artists can make a modest investment in a few tools to make frames of this type in-studio from molding stock.

So, what about frameless presentation? This can be a valid aesthetic choice, but quality of materials and skillful craft will be much more apparent. With unframed art, the exposed sides become elements of the work. When displaying without framing, the care taken in preparing canvases and panels (which often goes unnoticed in framed art) becomes a main feature. This allows the viewer to consider the skill and attention devoted to all aspects of making the object. Gallery-wrapped edges can be left unpainted, painted a neutral color, or the image can continue “full bleed” around the sides. A wooden strainer frame on a panel can be painted, rubbed with oil for a transparent finish, or left plain. However the edges are treated, they can’t be ignored. Fingerprints, stray staples and remnants of packaging can disrupt the viewing experience and diminish perceived value.

Whatever presentation you choose for your work, it should be purposefully chosen as a harmonious enhancement to the art. Poor presentation allows the overall effect to stray out of the artist’s control, risking an amateurish or shabby appearance. Good presentation demonstrates professionalism and seriousness, and communicates how highly you hope your audience will value your art.