

TIPS TO EFFECTIVELY DISPLAY YOUR PRINTS: TRADITIONAL AND ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS



Displaying prints: from framing and shelving to more modern, minimalist approaches.

We want to display our work to best advantage. Though we'd all like to have an unlimited budget for custom framing, most of us have to be more creative (and prudent) about our framing and displaying investment. This blog post looks at ways to show off our work without going bankrupt.

If you're using [Breathing Color's](#) canvas substrates, it's all the vogue to display a stretched canvas print on the wall (or an easel) without a frame. Problem solved! Breathing Color also offers a nice selection of canvas floater frames.

Now, about all those other substrates...



The first decision concerns archival vs. non-archival framing materials. Why is this important? Non-archival materials contain acid and other contaminants. A print in direct contact with wood frames, or non-archival matte boards, will eventually show signs of these contaminants leaching into the print, discoloring part or all of it. So, if you're going to use non-archival materials, it's recommended you frame prints that don't need to be around in fifty years.

In addition, use framing techniques that employ spacers, keeping the matte boards from touching the print. Alternately, buy acid-free matte boards to make your mattes and put behind your prints.

INEXPENSIVE FRAME SOURCES

Depending on where you live, you may have access to national or regional chain stores which frequently offer special pricing on frames and custom framing, as well as sole proprietor shops. Planning ahead to take advantage of these specials is a great way to stretch framing dollars. I like [Aaron Brothers](#), a western United States chain, which has regular 50% off (or more) sales and coupons on a wide variety of tasteful framing choices, both custom and pre-made.

I watch for styles I like, pre-shopping so I'm ready to take full advantage when a style I like goes on sale. Their website shows a variety of frame styles, very effective for finding the perfect match to a wide variety of images. Even if you don't live in the west, you can order from their website. Other local and regional chains run similar specials regularly. Ubiquitous art store chain Michael's offers regular framing specials as well.



Local stores also offer various options. In visiting various sole proprietor framing shops in the last year, I've found discount framing stores, discount bins within non-discount stores and even extremely inexpensive already-made frames offered by custom framers to use up extra moulding stock. Sharp eyes are needed; if you're watching, you'll be surprised by opportunities out there, even in rural areas such as the one where I live.

An advantage of framing photographs is that most often, photographic prints are displayed in very simply-styled frames, instead of needing to

purchase something ornate. Metal frames are a manufactured in a classically simple set of styles that are very cost effective. Pre-cut lengths can be ordered in sets of two pieces, in a full spectrum range of colors. Precision lengths are available by special order. Here are some online sources I'm comfortable recommending (there are many more):



- [Archival Methods](#)

- [American Fram](#)
- [Frame Destination](#)

Pre-cut mattes are available from a wide variety of sources; some nice sources for both frames and archival mattes in traditional photographic styles include:

- [Light Impressions Direct](#)
- [PictureFrames.com](#)

The ready-to-ship matte choices offered are in a limited color palette, as is true of most sites. Some sites will be happy to cut you a custom matte in a specific color. These places often make swatches available to facilitate choosing exactly the right color.

If you want to cut your own mattes, you'll need a dedicated matte cutter, either handheld or a professional tabletop model. Handhelds are best left to those who are extremely steady of hand; few things say "unprofessional and sloppy" more quickly than a poorly cut matte around a carefully created image.

You can put these mattes in a frame, use a desktop stand to display the matted print, or prop them up on a shelf or in a bookcase.

SHELVING



If you want to try something a bit different, get one or two pieces of moulding at a hardware store and mount them on the wall to serve as a picture shelf. You can rest prints on them along the length of the wall; I've seen installations that use multiple lengths covering the entire wall that look tremendous. I like the [Unfinished Red Oak](#) from Home Depot.

The moulding can be left plain, or you can stain or oil it, paint it—it's a great looking design and works well in many different environments when mounted to the wall as a picture rail. Metal framing lengths can be used this way as well. They can be mounted on the wall used with prints resting on the metal, leaning against the wall, just as with wood moulding. With some moulding designs, both wood and metal, it's possible to mount a second length of moulding on top, which can hold the prints perfectly parallel to the wall. If you do this, you'll be locked into one predetermined board height, such as 16 or 20 inches. Displays can be put up as well as changed very rapidly, and look very contemporary.

For something pre-made, multiple vendors offer shelves and ledges you just mount to the wall, such as the [Holman Picture Ledge](#), found at Pottery Barn.

HOLMAN PICTURE LEDGE, 2', MODERN WHITE



A nice groove cut into the shelf or an up-thrust lip in some models helps hold the prints in place. In using all these approaches, you'll wonder if you should mount your art, or not. Download [this helpful Breathing Color Blog post](#) for a careful consideration of various mounting methods.

And now, for something completely different...

INEXPENSIVE, ALTERNATIVE DISPLAY METHODS



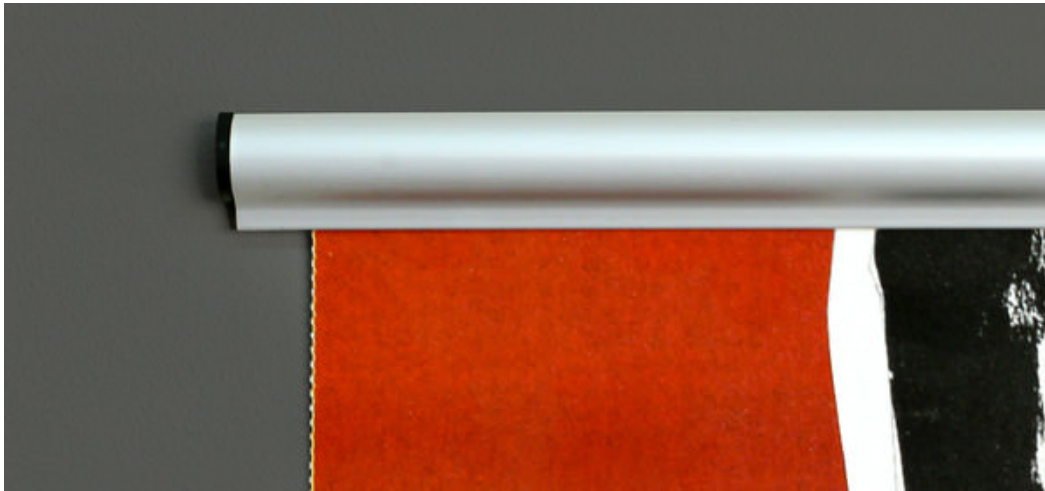
For an elegantly simple look, try these methods of displaying your work.

Swiss Clips



Swiss clips are used with a sheet of glass to hold the sheet against the print and mat, and are almost invisible once assembled. The clips are either clear plastic or very thin metal, and are designed to support the weight of the glass as well as the print. These were very popular in the late 60s and early 70s, and are making a modest comeback. They're one of the most inexpensive methods of putting a glass-protected print or print and mat on the wall. You can see one kit [offered by Blick](#).

Metal Hanging Rods



These rods are often called poster hanging rods. They're simply tubes with slits in them to hold the top edge of the print in place. You slide the print in place, quickly and easily, and enjoy an elegantly minimalist look. A nail hole in the back makes hanging as simple as driving a nail. The original design was aluminum, offered in silver and black. Other companies now offer a variety of options, some nicer, some not so nice.



A wide variety of lengths is offered; 72 inch horizontal dimensions are accommodated by some models.

You can see the original [here](#).

Sometimes these tubes are sold as singles, other times as pairs, with the second one used on the bottom as a weight to help the print hang straight and flat.

A note about this method of displaying your work: as it doesn't use glass, this method offers minimal protection to your carefully-crafted images. People using this method for serious display will usually spray their prints with one of the clear protective sprays available to protect against moisture, fingerprints, airborne pollutants, etc. See the discussion on this later in this blog entry.

Curtain Wires With Hooks and Clamps as Weights



Another possibility for a nice, minimalist look, particularly useful in work areas, is a curtain wire, such as [this kit from IKEA](#).

You could also use clothespins, threading picture hanger wire through the pins' springs, anchored on eye hooks in the wall's studs to have a quick, and easy display. To preserve the integrity of your paper hanging on these wires, be sure to use plastic or stainless steel clothespins; the wood ones will definitely not be acid free!

Make Hangers with Dowels and Eye Hooks

I once mounted a photo exhibit using multiple images printed on long rolls of paper, each 25 feet or so. To hang them, we got large half round

dowels, cut them to fit the width of the roll, then drilled holes in them so we could bolt the front dowel to the back. We used bolts with wing nuts so they could come off easily after the exhibit concluded. Next, we went to a custom paint counter, and asked them to make us some neutral gray paint, confirmed with an actual spectrophotometer, in use in most professional paint counters these days. After painting and final assembly, we embedded eye hooks with picture hanging wire attached into each top assembly. We bolted another set to the bottom of each length of images, to help them hang straight, and hung these vertical displays from the rafters.

You don't have to have 25 foot lengths of prints to use this method; it looks great on most sizes of images.

PROTECTING YOUR PRINT ON DISPLAY

Once your print is out on display, it's immediately under assault from airborne contaminants such as dust (dry or oily), moisture, insects, ozone, food fights, and ultraviolet rays from both natural and artificial light. To protect against these contaminants, we use either glass or protective sprays and varnishes. Which you choose depends to some extent on what method you're using to display your work. Glass comes in standard, glare-free, and ultraviolet blocking glass; UV blocking is recommended for optimal print longevity. Sprays can block ultraviolet as well, though not all do; another advantage of sprays is they can incorporate anti-fungal agents, though not all do.

Coatings to Protect your Images



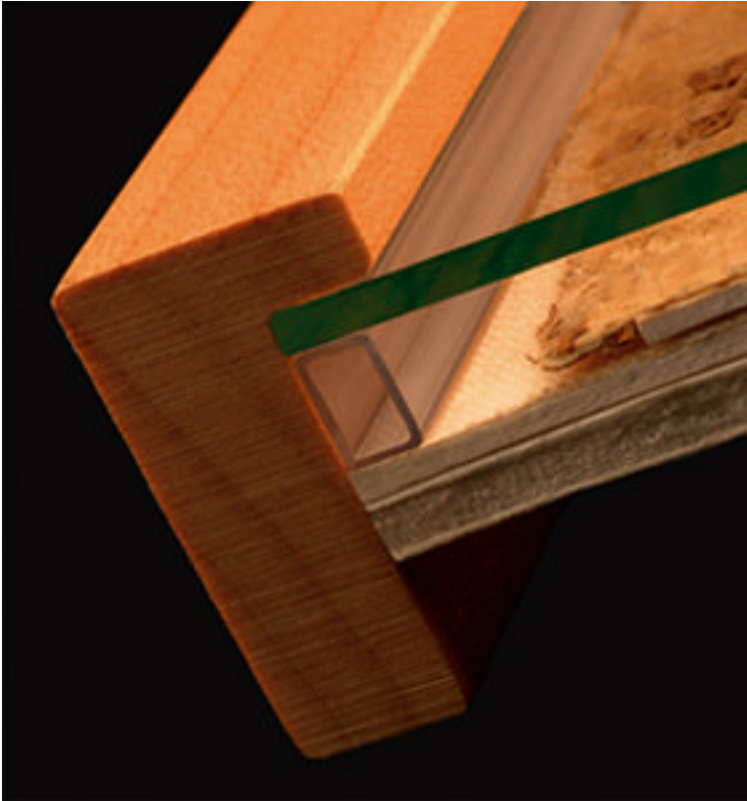
If you're going to spray or varnish your prints with a protective coating, you'll want one that's going to extend the life of the image, not shorten it. Breathing Color offers [Timeless](#), a very good varnish, as well as a roller system with which to apply it. This method is sometimes preferable, especially if you don't have a spray booth or live where spray booths require city permits, commercial licenses, etc. The Timeless varnish includes a high UV-blocking component (very desirable) as well as antifungal agents, necessary in high humidity climates.

Why Not Use Both?

Some people use both glass and spray; indeed, one of the most respected names in imaging, Henry Wilhelm, recommends both. He tests prints for longevity. You can read some of his test results on [his website](#), as well as an amazing amount of freely downloadable information about the care and feeding of photographic prints. For most papers, Mr. Wilhelm's tests show that an image will last a certain number of years exposed directly to air, a longer number of years under glass, an even longer number of years when under UV-blocking glass,

and the longest number of years when the print is sprayed as well as under glass.

Spacers needed to prevent damage



One of the most important considerations when putting glass over a matte or directly over a print is condensation. Moisture can get under the glass, and if the glass is resting directly on the print, can cause immediate and permanent damage.

For this reason, proper framing technique uses tiny spacers to hold the glass above the print or matte, preventing direct contact of glass to image/matte. The spacer can also keep the matte from touching the print, also desirable. These spacers are available from multiple framing sources, such as:

- [Art Spacers](#)
- [Frames by Mail](#)

They're a really good idea, and add another professional touch to all your framing.

CONCLUSION

Our galloping tour of display methods is at an end. I hope you've seen some new ideas for how to show off your work to best advantage. If you have a different way you display your work, please share it below. We'd love to hear about it.



Kevin O'Connor helps design and test software, is a graphic designer and photographer for multiple clients and companies, and fixes people's (and companies') color.

He has consulted to multiple companies, including Apple, Sony, Fujifilm USA, and X-Rite. He loves teaching good color practices to enthusiastic learners.