

Distressed and Gray Brighten Frame Outlook

BY ALLISON ZISKO

Home decor trends continue to influence the design and sale of photo frames, which have primarily become a wall art business.

Distressed woods and rustic finishes, coastal looks, and lots of gray is what consumers want in frames to complement their casual lifestyles, manufacturers said. And picture frames can no longer be your typical behind-glass, drop-the-photo-in variety; they must have alternative photo displays and serve several functions, which is why many of them now feature chalkboard or corkboard styles with clothespins or other clever means for attaching photos.

“We look at it as a home décor category, not just picture frames,” said Jamey Yarnall, director of marketing for the upscale channel for Nielsen Bainbridge Group, whose frame brands include Burnes of Boston, Pinnacle and Gallery Solutions, and whose other home brands include J. Hunt and Jimco in lighting, Thro Company in soft goods and Patton Picture Company in framed art, mirrors and clocks. “We tell retailers, ‘Be the room.’ What consumers are looking for ... is the one-stop-shop to answer their needs for home décor.”

Wood is the strongest material in tabletop and wall frames right now, with rustic finishes and gray washes and a few color accents, Yarnall said, though he noted a slight increase in metals and polyresin, two materials that had been in decline. Plain white frames are also starting to emerge as strong sellers, he added.

“Key trends in frames include shabby chic, rustic farm, distressed woods, mirrored and color,” said Jeffrey Zunick, group president of home decor for Lifetime Brands.

Michael Wluka, vice president at Malden International Designs, said, “Anything that’s distressed is still strong. Gray, gray and more gray—light gray, dark gray, distressed gray. You see it in flooring, in furniture, in wall units.” Gold accents and gold lettering, a strong trend in tabletop, also prevails in frames, such as gold script fonts on a white background, Wluka said.

Sentiments frames remain popular, and while “Live, Love, Laugh” is a perennial best-seller, according to Wluka, wording has otherwise moved beyond labels like “grandma” and “happy graduation” to cuter and cheekier sayings.

Coastal looks, meanwhile, are “a monster,” according to Wluka. “All 50 states carry coastal, whether they have an ocean or not,” he said. “Coastal has come up pretty strong,” agreed Yarnall, who identified subsets of coastal themes, like country coastal (naturally bleached woods) and gray coastal, that are trending.

Zunick noted that multi-opening collages drive the frame business in various materials, in both basic and everyday colors and distressed finishes.

Sizes Evolve

The most popular sizes of frames used to be 5-by-6 and 8-by-10, but the popularity in recent years for wall décor pushed those sizes to 11-by-14, 16-by-20 and other larger dimensions.

“Multi-opening collages that hold six or more photos are working well,” said Lifetime’s Zunick. “Also there is a big uptick in adding larger sizes into the collage, especially 5-by-7.”

Nielsen Bainbridge is looking at what Yarnall calls “digital sizes,” which correspond to poster frames and printer paper sizes, even artist sketchbook sizes, resulting in frames with dimensions like



Above: Coastal-themed frame from Malden
malden.com

Right: Large-scale collages from Lifetime Brands
lifetimebrands.com

8-by-12 (an emerging photo processing size), 9-by-12 (the size of portfolio prints, photo processing prints and artist pads), 12-by-18 (an emerging enlargement size) and 13-by-19 (printer paper size). Donald Shread, creative director of NBG Home, said the company also considers the aspect ratio, which is the proportional relationship between the width and height of an image, when creating frames. Choosing a print, mat or frame that has the same aspect ratio as the original image eliminates the need to crop. Aspect ratios have changed over the years; the typical ratio on digital cameras and smartphones is 4:3. Squares are also starting to catch on, Shread said, due to Instagram. “Using squares in wall galleries breaks things up and adds interest to the wall.”

Yarnall also believes tabletop frames may be making a comeback. “We attribute a lot of this to the Pinterest phenomenon,” he said. “It has opened a lot of eyes to the fact that you can decorate with frames.”

Business Shifts Online

The photo frame business at brick-and-mortar retailers across all channels of distribution has shrunk dramatically, vendors said, in favor of online business. “Nothing comes close to Amazon,” Wluka said, though there are plenty of other players, such as Send-A-Frame, which Wluka called “the king of it.”

After the online channel, big boxes and warehouses are among the top channels for frames, according to Zunick, while Yarnall singled out the craft channel, mass marketers and the off-price segment. “Close-out retailing has embraced the treasure hunt mentality,” he said, and excites Pinterest-inspired consumers. “They’ve created a great atmosphere at retail, especially in the photo frame part of the business.”

Nonetheless, frame makers face the constant challenge of digital photo-taking, which is a double-edged sword. “The opportunity is that all of these photos that are taken could be put in a frame. But they’re not,” Yarnall said. “But I think people are more confident with producing photos and creating their own décor.” ■