

# MASTER CRAFTSMAN



OLIVER PETERSON

## MASTER CRAFTSMAN BEN MCHUGH, FRAMER, HAMPTON PHOTO ARTS

Fine art has been called an attempt to bring order out of chaos, and a salve to the unbearable crudeness of reality, but the impact of a brilliant painting, drawing or print is often lost without a proper frame to display and safeguard it. A beautiful presentation can make even a less-than-masterful work stand out and set the mood.

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BEN MCHUGH  
CONSTRUCTS A  
FRAME

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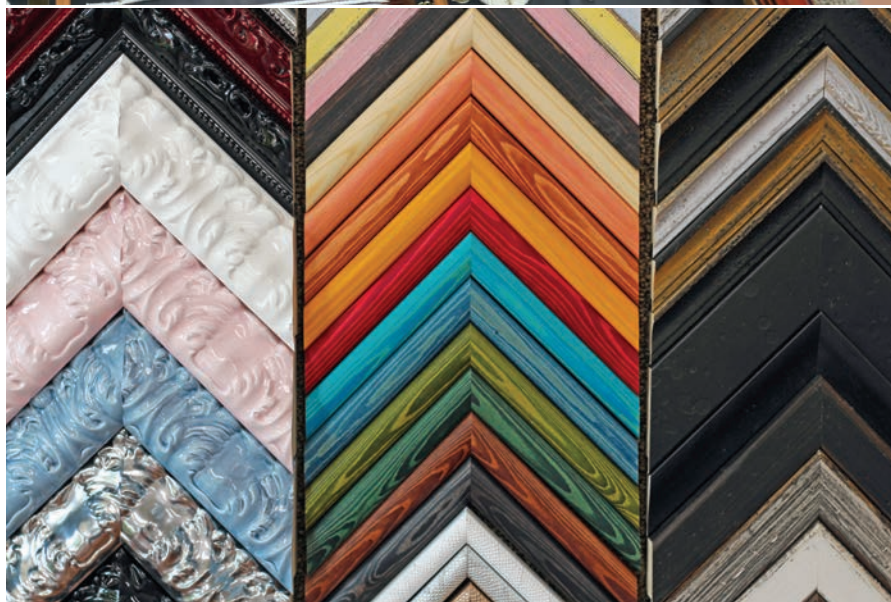
Ben McHugh of Hampton Photo Arts in Bridgehampton and the store's newer outpost, HPA Southampton, has perfected the art of making other people's creations and treasures look better leaving his shop than when they arrived. After years working in his family business, the framer can mount just about anything, from Pablo Picasso prints to Manny Pacquiao's boxing trunks.

"I learned from the people who worked for the shop throughout the years, and I gradually started knowing more and more, and just sort of learned it all," the 40-year-old McHugh says, explaining how, from a very young age, he grew up developing film, enlarging photographs, selling art supplies and anything else that needed doing at his father David McHugh's constantly evolving business. He eventually moved from the photo department to framing, though it would be some time before he was deftly finding solutions to even the most complicated jobs.

Still, in spite of his apparent mastery of his trade, McHugh scoffs at such titles. "People who call themselves a master of anything—aren't," he says. "There's always something you can learn. It's taken me until now to feel comfortable that I can do most things and be competent." McHugh describes completing a wide range of projects, including framing all manner of two-dimensional art, sports memorabilia, jerseys, beach glass, seashells and so much more. "Everything that has a different shape is a different mount... We did a pair of Manny Pacquiao's shorts and I think the mat in it had like 16 different cuts in order to get the angles to go around this thing," he says. "It's all about solving problems and being resourceful, like a little MacGyver."

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McHugh is more comfortable in the workshop than he is interacting with people, but he's cultivated a keen eye for framing and often leads customers to just the right blend of frame, mat and glass during consultations. "I love the customers and I love doing it," he says, describing an innate ability to read people and find what they want.

Along with his framing talent, McHugh has also added an incredible amount of creativity and innovation to Hampton Photo Arts' other offerings. Whether it's "Instaframing" Instagram photos to be shown individually or in expansive arrangements, or exhibiting customers' artwork at Ashawagh Hall each November, his ideas engage the community and keep Hampton Photo Arts relevant while the threat of online shopping looms large. "It's not just making another picture frame. We can have fun with it, like putting gift certificates to local businesses in our picture frames," McHugh says describing another smart initiative that sets his store apart from the competition. "It's sort of like a Golden Ticket, so when someone buys a readymade frame from us and assembles it at home, they might get a gift certificate to another local business," he explains. "It was just fun to do. It's local helping local, you know, to cross-pollinate."

After three decades serving the community in the Bridgehampton Commons, Hampton Photo Arts opened their second store, HPA Southampton, in 2017. "There was a glass ceiling in Bridgehampton and we just ran out of space," McHugh says. They first looked for an industrial space to manage their growing

workload, but ended up with a combination workshop and retail store at 21 Windmill Lane in Southampton Village for just a little more money. "We've been able to stretch our legs here," McHugh adds, noting that the new location offers all the same services and products with the addition of classes and rotating "artist takeover" exhibitions.

Together, McHugh's shops do it all, from consults with interior decorators, to home visits and art installations, pickups and delivery, custom mirrors, hanging gallery shows and even reprocessing low-resolution digital images into printable files. Readymade and custom frames are a large part of Hampton Photo Arts' bread and butter, but McHugh says photo services—making high quality, archival prints for both private and commercial customers on a variety of materials—remains the largest segment of their business.

"We do printing for Sotheby's, we do printing for other commercial places, we do printing for artists, so we do a lot of printing and we do a lot of big printing," he says. "That is a fair share of what makes the store go. It can't be just framing, and the reason why we've been around for so long is we've been three-headed. If the photo end was down or we had a slow month, the art end would make up for it, or if the art end was down, the framing would make up for it," McHugh continues. "So doing the three different services in one place, you can weather any storm."

— Oliver Peterson