

You're a *what?*

FRAMER



Claudia Minicozzi has helped the Federal Government's coinmaker turn money into art.

As a custom framer in Washington, D.C., Claudia was part of a framing team that created an elaborate display of coins for the U.S. Mint. The shop in which she works also counts the White House and the Smithsonian Institution among its customers. "We do a lot of jobs for organizations and Government, mostly framing objects and presentation pieces," says Claudia.

Everyday customers needn't have high-profile projects, though. Framers like Claudia put baby slippers, sports jerseys, antiques, and other personal keepsakes on display. More typical items include paintings, photos, and certificates. But whatever the object being preserved, the outcome is the same. "We help to make things look good," says Claudia.

Claudia's work starts with a customer consultation. She helps customers select glass or Plexiglas; the molding or frame; and, if they want, a mat to surround the item.

Spending a few minutes to an hour or more with customers, Claudia talks to them about their options, shows them samples, and explains costs. "If people are having trouble deciding what they want," says Claudia, "I start by asking how things are framed in their house: Do they have black frames? Gold frames? Then, I'll ask

how they decorate: Do they prefer traditional or contemporary?

These types of questions really help to narrow down the look that they want to create."

To further help her customers decide, Claudia might hold corner samples of frames up to the item. "You're watching their reactions," she says. "They might say something like, 'That won't do,' or 'Wow, I like silver!'"

Some framers now use computer software to create an image of how a finished product might look. But the projects that Claudia and her colleagues work on are so customized—involving nonstandard materials such as silk or linen, for example—that the technology wouldn't be of much use.

In addition to getting the perfect look, function is a consideration. One challenge to framing, says Claudia, is ensuring that the weight of the item will be supported when it is hung on a wall. Large or heavy items may require thicker molding, special backing, and sturdier wire to hang securely.

Preserving the item might be another concern. To protect items from light or to reduce glare, framers can use certain types of glass; to prevent damage, they often recommend acid-free mats.

Many framers cut mats, and some even assemble the frames themselves. To finish the work, the framer carefully cleans the plastic or glass, often

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From t-shirts to national treasures, almost anything can be displayed well by Claudia Minicozzi.

using a special tool or vacuum to make sure that dust and other particles don't get inside. He or she then arranges the item or items to be framed, along with any matting being used, and inspects the piece one more time to check for imperfections. Finally, the framer attaches a backing and hanging fixtures to complete the job.

Sometimes, a customer requests a type of material that isn't in stock. In those cases, it's often up to the framer to gauge how much of the material to purchase. Other tasks might include computer entry of project details, such as cost estimates and customer communication; setting up displays; and keeping the shop clean and neat.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) doesn't collect data on framers. But according to the Professional Picture Framers Association, there are about 12,000 retail frame shops nationwide. And the occupation is relatively easy to enter because, like most retail sales jobs, custom framing does not have rigid educational or training requirements.

Many of these workers' tasks are comparable to those of retail salesworkers, who earned a median hourly wage of \$9.20 in May 2005, according to BLS. But the work of framers is somewhat more specialized, which may lead to higher earnings. For example, industry sources suggest that workers who do advanced or museum-quality framing often earn more than others in the field. Supervisors and managers of these workers earn more, too. And owning a shop can mean more sporadic—but significantly higher—earnings.

Claudia and other framers are on their feet most of the day, and they interact with people a lot. "It takes an outgoing personality," Claudia

says of her job. Having good listening skills, an artistic eye, and patience also come in handy.

Most custom framers learn on the job. Many have a degree in art, although they are not required to have one. "It's a good job for someone just out of art school," says Claudia, "or for people who are retired and want to do something creative in their spare time."

Framing can be ideal for almost anyone who has an interest in art or who wants to work in an artistic environment. "It's a lot of fun," Claudia says. "We deal with some really special pieces."

Many expensive items pass through a framer's hands, but inexpensive ones are often just as valuable. "People come in with things that have been painted by family members, or something they got from a street artist for \$10," says Claudia. "Some of it's really quite good."

The range of quality may vary, but all the items that Claudia deals with are important in someone's eyes. "You'd be surprised at the treasures people bring in," Claudia says.

And with her help, those treasures are protected for years to come. ○○○

