Etching Photos onto Acrylic

WITH THE SILHOUETTE CURIO

A start to finish tutorial using Silhouette Studio Designer Edition

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Introduction

The Silhouette Curio™ has been around for several years, and although it got off to a slow start, it’s gaining a cult following as we discover more and more things it can do and do well. Photo etching is a case in point. The Curio’s high clearance and platform system make it perfect for etching acrylic, but it turns out that Silhouette Studio® Designer Edition is also perfect for preparing photos to be etched. I hope you’ll be as excited as I was to learn how to combine the two to create beautiful renderings of your favorite photos.

Project Overview

We’ll learn photo etching through completing a rectangular plaque project that simply consists of an etched acrylic piece mounted on a wooden base. Working with a fixed set of materials and dimensions will let us focus on the etching process with fewer variables to distract us. You should, however, find these instructions adaptable to any photo etching project you have in mind, especially after you have worked through the sample project.

What You Need

- A working knowledge of the Silhouette Curio and Silhouette Studio Designer Edition
  
*Unfortunately, this is not a beginner project, but I have included very detailed instructions as well as a list of Learning Resources to help you get up to speed.*

- Silhouette Curio machine, including base and platform set

- Silhouette Studio Designer Edition or above

- Curio Adhesive Mat in good condition, size depending on your base

- Curio Etching Tool (or other Curio compatible etching tool)

- Craft Chameleon 4 x 6” 4 hole rectangular acrylic blank, ~ 3mm thick

- High tack double-sided tape

- Small, soft, firm artist’s brush

- Pacon ProtectoFilm™ (optional)

- A suitable photograph in digital form (see Section Two for details)

- Finished wooden base, 4 x 6” to 5 x 7”, black (see this section for details)

- 4 decorative nails (included with Craft Chameleon etching blanks)

- Hammer
Choosing a Photo

The better the photo the better the etching

While I’ve found this technique to be pretty forgiving, you can improve your odds of a result you’ll love by using the most suitable photo you can. A few guidelines ... the right photo...

› Is not be dependent on color or fine details
  • close up photos of a person’s or pet’s face are ideal
  • architectural photos work well, too

› Is a continuous tone photograph or image; not a flat logo, line art or clip art style image

› Has clear focus on the subject

› Has good lighting and contrast professional photos are ideal, but not required

› Does not have a busy or distracting background, dark or transparent backgrounds are best

› Is at least 500 pixels on the short side after cropping, the larger the better

› Has the right aspect ratio (shape) when cropped to match your blank and design layout. For example, the Craft Chameleon acrylic I am using for this project is 4 x 6" with 1/8" holes drilled at each corner. You need to allow for a margin of at least 1/8" around the holes and edges for a resulting design area of 3.25 x 5.25". Text, borders or flourishes can be added in addition to the photo, so be sure to take that into account as you plan your project.

I've listed a few Photo Editing Resources in the back of this book in case your favorite photo needs some adjustment to fit these criteria.
Importing and cropping your photo

1. Use **File ▸ Merge** or drag & drop to place your photo on the mat.

2. **Paste, Merge** or create the shape you would like to use for cropping. *Here I used Copy on the existing inner rectangle and File ▸ Paste in Front to keep its position.*

3. Size and position the photo with respect to the cropping shape as desired. *Feel free to change the line color and thickness of the cropping shape for visibility.*

4. Select both the photo and the cropping shape. ✔️ *Make sure the shape is on top.*

5. Open the **Modify** panel and click the **Crop** button.
3. When the etching run has finished, brush away dust as necessary to carefully inspect your piece. As long as your piece has not been removed from the mat, you are free to reload and perform additional etching.

4. Remove the mat from the base.

5. Remove the blank from the mat by bending the mat slightly away from the blank.