

REVERSIBILITY IN FRAMING

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What's the point of framing? How about: to give the art a good home. Or, as Jeff Waneer puts it, to make money. We want to enhance the piece, we want to protect it and we want to ensure that all elements and components are reversible.

We are close to coining conservation/preservation as a framing term and with that in mind as an approach to custom framing, give me the framer with an attitude.

Conservation/preservation framing is defined as succeeding in doing no harm, protecting the work and making it reversible. This should be our attitude.

We should have etched into our memory the five environmental elements affecting conservation/preservation: light, relative humidity, heat, pollution and biological enemies (sometimes known as the framer).

We should share with our clients those aspects of environment so that they try to place the framed piece for the best conditions. The housing of the work itself is totally up to us, but it's still just one third of preservation; where it's hung in regards to potential damage from the room—e.g., outside wall, or community—e.g., subtropics or mountain top, makes up the other two parts that can dictate the fate of the piece.

So, what's our attitude; what's our approach to framing? Will it come apart? Have you built it and done a fit-up that's reversible? It's not reversible if it harms the piece or does not protect it.

There is an increasingly better case being made for ultraviolet filtering glass and acrylic, now. The industry is offering a better selection and better pricing, so, if this keeps up, UV glazing could become standard.

Of the many creative things we do as framers, fixing and changing somebody else's work is not one of them. Every now and then, these jobs come in to change mat colors or replace broken glass or repair and refinish older frames, and you just can't believe what you see when you open that old job.

For the moment, let's not worry about the lack of conservation standards because that job may be old enough to predate awareness of proper materials and techniques. But that was then. Now is now.

When you open up an older piece that's been matted and glazed, take the backing off first and remove whatever is holding it in. Then turn the package over so the frame can be lifted off without disturbing the bulk of the unit. (Won't lift off? So much for the glue drips, etc.)

For later reference, here's a code for the effects of non-reversibility:

A. Acid burns

B. Staining

C. Leaves a residue

D. Damages on removal

E. Devalues the work

Now comes the Top Ten List of Non-Reversibility in Framing. Or, how not to have a good time in the frame store.

Number 10: *Using Kraft based cardboard.*

Usually found in conjunction with a Kraft paper dust cover, both glued together onto the frame back. This is a problem of having so much glue (and often this was hot glue) that you are in for too long a clean-up session. This contribution to of reversibility are the codes A, C, D & E. The majority of framers now use the foam core products and there is the new lignin free corrugation to use. A foam core backing can preclude the use of paper dust covers when used with artists' tape.

Number 9: *Nails of all sizes holding a stretched canvas into the frame by nailing through the stretcher bars into the moulding.*

This is what they made offset clips for. And spring clips, if you just have to use them. Nothing should be used that could split the stretchers and possibly rip the canvas. This would be doing harm to the original therefore codes D & E.

Number 8: *Bracing that's nailed or glued to the frame moulding.*

This is one torn frame, coming up. Braces and strainers should be utilized by gluing to the backing board so it will come out with the backing. They could be attached to the framing with straps screwed in. D.

Number 7: *Cross-nailed frames.*

This one is guaranteed to render the moulding useless—at least at the corner. Since nails are used only to hold while the glue dries, the addition of a cross nail counters the set you already have. V nails are sort of reversible; depends a lot on how you hold your mouth when you take them out, but it can be done. This is also a D.

While thinking of wood mouldings, remember the best preservation action is to line or coat the inner raw surfaces to prevent acid migration onto the inner package. There are plastic strips, formed to fit the rabbet, or you can seal the wood with gesso or shellac.

Number 6: *Glazing that touches the Art.*

We have all slapped a piece of glass right on a cheap print in a cheap frame, but here we go, making judgments of value rather than protecting. There's no time when glazing should touch the art or a photograph. So when the job has mats, there's your shim.

Otherwise, use spacers by way of acrylic pieces manufactured for this purpose. Condensation can form inside the glass and transfer to the surface of the work and if it involves needlework, there's mildew. This will be C, D & E. Also, if you seam your glass, that helps prevent damage to the print and keeps down the shavings from the frame.

Then, what do you do when you're brought a piece that's stuck to the glass? I always thought a slow and deliberate shaking of the head was effective while mumbling um, um. Success has been had on lucky occasions with photographs by placing them back into water where they will soak off. (Sometimes the emulsion comes off the paper and stays on the glass.)

Number 5: *Drymounted art on rag paper.*

At least, the wrinkles are out and it looks smooth. And don't sucker in to that customer's comment that it's okay 'cause it's his piece. This should include any collectable piece, whether or not on rag paper and would also include photographs on fiber paper. Use codes D & E. here.

Howsoever . . . the wonderful world of photographs contains many opinions of how to mount both color and black & white, so let's just touch on a couple of points here. An Ilfochrome (aka Cibachrome) can be hinge hung so that no orange peel effects, and other textures, will result from pressure mounting. Ditto for the RC papers, though they can be successfully drymounted. These color photos are practically all plastic and pretty inert so your main responsibility is to provide UV filtration in the glazing.

Number 4: *The use of wood pulp matboard.*

We are all certainly supposed to know by now that the only way to go is with rag or alpha cellulose boards. There is sometimes the possibility of repair to acid burned papers by those qualified, but why set it up to happen? Since the introduction of Alpha mats, I haven't used pulp board and couldn't be happier. However, when designing with black core mats, I use 4-ply rag underneath and even this could be questioned. This is an A, B, C and E.

Number 3: *Frames overloaded with staples, brads or framers points.*

The average is one hundred fourteen more than you'll ever need, but ain't those air tools fast. The only time I use too many is when there's a speck of dust I have to go back in for. The problem here is basically over-handling the piece and certainly wasting a lot of time. D.

Number 2: *Pressure sensitive tape.*

Even the use of the newer acrylic-based tape cannot be considered reversible when used on the art itself. They are, in fact, acid-free but won't peel off right. C & D.

Number 1: *Masking tape.*

Need we say more? Bless those little artist's hearts who are so efficient getting ready for a show that they tape down their work to the back of a mat. All the way around it. Again, this problem is often solved by the conservator, but

should never have occurred. Twenty years ago, I thought masking tape was really framers tape and we bought it in case lots. Call this A, B, C, D and E.

The only acceptable hinging method at this time is the use of Japanese paper and rice or wheat starch. (Jeff Tichenor has made a good point that technology is changing so fast that we should be constantly prepared for updates and new methods and research.)

When there is a need to remove a piece from its mat, the currently recommended method is to cut the hinge off the mat, leaving the part pasted to the art in place. It can be pasted over on the next mounting. Otherwise, one can still dissolve the paste with a wet Q-tip and lift it off, and even clean off the residue.

When making paste, one should take care that the hinge does not end up wet enough to cause cockling of the art. A lot of folks say to have a mayonnaise-like consistency and to let the pasted hinge set up until it looks a little dull and then adhere it to the art.

To some, the alternate use of pockets and folded rails instead of hinging is completely reversible, and this is true. This method's only problem is the concomitant bellying out that will occur at some point from good old gravity.

We must be careful when framing objects that have lately been identified as not too suitable for framing. So many of the shadow box jobs of clothing and silks are showing to be rotting right before our eyes. This does not suggest a solution; only the reversibility is questioned. It would be great if we could only frame a copy as can be done with old newspapers and the like.

Articles can be attached to shadow box backgrounds in so many ways, but will it come apart? Silicone glue still seems to be okay because it will peel. Tying and strapping items down could leave marks or shade from fading.

Often times, the least amount of harm to a piece comes from mounting through the front by way of using a separate moulding that is hinged and latched to a secondary box. Heavier objects can practically be put on shelves and the glass serves as the front stop.

Don Pierce says, "don't do anything you don't know how to undo".

There are many other things to list while in a broad definition of our responsibility, many of which are in the "do no harm" category. Even screw eyes

can be considered questionable since they have been known to ease out - therefore you have a damaged piece after it falls.

Everything that goes out of your shop has your name on it in that each piece reflects your standards. Is each first class? Or do you have secondary standards for unimportant pieces? And whose evaluation is it that says unimportant?

Maintaining proper reversibility is simply choosing to do it right. Frame to the art, not the customer. You are the professional; you are in control.

Remember, “ars longa, vita brevis”, which freely translated means that well done piece of art is going to be around a lot longer than us.

We have greater knowledge and better information now as to the care and feeding of works of art on paper, especially, so our responsibility is becoming greater and much more clear. We must take the power of this knowledge and deliver a better product and a finer service. This is our responsibility; this is professionalism.

Choose to do it right.