



WHEN TO CALL A CONSERVATOR

By Matthew Horowitz

Proven methods for examining customers' art during design consultations.

When I was young and working at my father's frame shop, Goldleaf Framemakers of Santa Fe, we had frequent visits and an excellent relationship with an art conservator. Years later, I worked at Lowy in New York City as a painting conservator, where framing and conservation were housed under one roof. You could have your fine art restored and framed simultaneously in the beautiful brownstone on 80th Street.

Eventually, when I moved back to Santa Fe, we provided the same full-service offerings at Goldleaf. I ran the conservation studio, and my father and brother took care of the framing. Since opening my own independent restoration business, I've found myself working closely with numerous frame shops. They find me a comforting resource and a place to send their valued customers where they know they will be treated fairly and their art will be cared for.

It is not uncommon for conservators and framers to work closely together, particularly when your business deals with a lot of high-end artwork. But what if you own a regular frame shop and mostly frame contemporary works or other artwork and posters? It is inevitable that at some point a piece of art will come in your front door with some conservation issues and you will want to recommend a conservator or simply be able to explain basic condition issues through the lens of conservation. In this article, we will go over a method for examining artwork while assisting your customers with their framing needs and when to contact a conservator.

First of all, when looking at a painting or work on canvas or panel, you can learn a lot by holding the artwork up to the raking light. The lighting in your showroom, direct light coming through a window, or even a flashlight can reveal an

entire story. All you need to do is graze the light beam across the surface of the painting, revealing the bumps, waves, texture, and sheen of the artwork. In such an intense lighting condition, an attentive person will notice issues such as warping, bubbling, or even flaking of the paint layer. This process takes only a few seconds, but will often tip you off to possible issues with the painting. It is not uncommon to discover paint loss or even a small tear as the light dances across the surface. It gets even more interesting when you shine the light from behind.



● Holding paintings up to the raking light helps to identify tears, distortions, and ripples in canvas.

It is also very important to look at how loose or tight the canvas is stretched around the stretcher bars when applicable. If you see ripples as you move the artwork around, the canvas might be too slack, which can cause issues down the road. If this accompanies lifting in the paint layer or other deformations, you may want to contact a professional conservator.

Another issue to look for is surface dirt and grime or discolored varnish. If something appears dry or has a yellow or brown or even gray cast, it's likely the painting is relatively dirty. I like to ask clients when and where painting was produced and where it's been stored for the last several decades (or longer). This can be a clue as to how dirty it is.

When paintings are dirty, oftentimes the medium in the pigment is also dried out. The combination results in a general flatness or even foggy appearance. It's amazing to see just how much a good cleaning and fresh varnish can enhance the general saturation and contrast in the painting.

Many of these issues could be an indication that you might want to connect your client with a conservator. As I mentioned earlier, many frame shop owners work directly with me at Revive, creating an easy and seamless customer experience for their clients. We certainly appreciate the referrals, and I do my best to help out my framing colleagues when they are in a bind. Certain issues—such as a dirty painting, for example—are far from art emergencies; however, it can be an opportunity to build a relationship with a conservator, which can really

come in handy down the road in case you have an accident with someone's artwork. The biggest red flags to look for (all noticeable in raking light) are torn canvas, major warping, or signs that the paint is lifting off the surface of the canvas. Also, if you notice anything resembling mold spores, you may want to have it checked out.

I've noticed over the years that a lot of framers offer to stretch canvases for their clients. This can certainly be a lucrative business; however, if it's not done properly, there can be problems. I'm not talking about stretching fresh canvas for an artist. What I mean is when you want to stretch a finished, often older painting for a client. When visiting other countries, excited collectors often purchase paintings and choose to transport them without stretcher bars (if they were even stretched to begin with). In other instances, someone might have an old painting with inadequate or otherwise deteriorating stretcher bars. A large part of my business involves providing new custom stretcher bars and some sort of reinforcement to the canvas substrate before



● (Left) This painting has obvious surface distortions as well as dirty, yellow varnish. (Right) After treatment—most distortions have been mitigated.

stretching the artwork. Frame shops will often take on these sorts of jobs and can quickly get in over their heads.

The biggest problem I see when paintings are stretched in frame shops is that many framers either stretch canvas over strainer frames or simply join stretcher bar moulding with glue and mitered corners.

A wonderful characteristic of true stretcher bars is that they are designed to expand and contract easily. Traditional stretcher bars utilize a mortise and tenon joint along with an extra-wide, triangular slot into which a key can be placed. I'm sure that many of you are very familiar with this mechanical wonder, but if you aren't, I hope the description gives some insight.

Mortise and tenon joints require a special jig specifically in the case of stretcher bars due to the wider slot for the keys. Because of this, it is difficult to produce them in your shop unless you have a very skilled carpenter and



● Keys come in all shapes and sizes. A quality stretcher bar will come with custom-made keys that fit perfectly.

extra time to spend machining them. We had the expertise and resources to do this for a while when I was at Goldleaf, but it is extremely difficult to produce a tight enough joint that squares up perfectly every time without the utmost attention. I recommend stretcher bars from Simon Liu Inc. in New York or Foster Planing Mill in California. Both companies will produce stretcher bars at custom

sizes. There are other companies who will do the same at varying price points and degrees of customizable shapes and sizes.

This option seems more expensive than building things in-house, but when you run into a problem, you can easily incur hundreds of dollars in labor and sometimes an avoidable trip to the conservation studio by using real stretcher bars. To be clear, I always recommend contacting a conservator for re-stretching an existing painting, par-

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ticularly if it is very valuable—but if you insist on doing it yourself, set yourself up for success!

The other issue I often see is the improper addition of strip lining to paintings. I really do recommend speaking to a conservator about the proper method for doing this. It can become rather complicated and cause damage you may not have expected. I always recommend consulting with a conservator in situations where the art needs to be stretched or modified in some way in order to fit in a frame. The liability involved can be significant. I can't count the number of times one of my well-meaning framing (or gallery) associates has called me having lost a night of sleep worrying about a treatment gone wrong. We creative people might also find it tempting to touch up areas of paint loss or edges with pigment ourselves, but this can cause serious problems down the road and should always be done by a conservation professional.

Previously, we discussed the different aspects of conservation and restoration pertaining to paintings and other artworks. Familiarizing yourself with these basic aspects will help you to determine when to call a conservator and how to describe the issues. Much of the time you will not need a conservator, but knowing when it is necessary and what to do can really help you to provide a supe-



● Authentic stretcher bars are made with a mortise & tenon joint and wide slots for keys.

rior customer experience and protect you from any liability, providing quite a bit of peace of mind. **PFM**



Matthew Horowitz

Matthew Horowitz has been working in the art conservation industry since 2005, but his experience working in the arts began in his father, Marty Horowitz's, frame shop as an adolescent. Matt earned a BFA at the University of New Mexico and completed an apprenticeship with a renowned conservator in Santa Fe. He later went on to work as a paintings conservator at Julius Lowy Framing and Restoring Company in New York.

In 2010 Matt returned to Santa Fe, where he opened an art restoration department alongside his father at Goldleaf Framemakers. In 2016, Matt started his own conservation studio, Revive Art Restoration, and services many prominent galleries, museums, and collectors in Santa Fe and the Southwest region.

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