

Conservation Framing Basics

Paintings on Canvas

By April Hann Lanford

There are a number of simple techniques that can be used when framing canvas paintings to help prevent long-term damage

Painted works on canvas can vary widely in size, shape, and texture, and their framing requirements vary almost as much. Luckily, the measures required to ensure the safety and longevity of these pieces are relatively simple. Here are some of the most straightforward and easiest of techniques that should be considered for every canvas painting.

Proper Fitting

Fitting a painting into a frame that is too small can cause significant, damaging stress to both the stretcher bar and the canvas. This often causes a slackening of the stretcher and, in turn, may lead to wrinkling of the canvas.

Typically, there should be at least 1/8" allowance or spacing between the artwork and the outside edge of the rabbet. This will make fitting the piece easier, and it will leave space for the painting to be re-tensioned if necessary. If an existing rabbet is too small for a painting and the frame is solid and stable, a router can be used to enlarge the rabbet to create adequate clearance.

Abrasion

When a painted canvas comes in contact with the lip of a frame, over time the painted surface can be abraded to the point of causing significant loss of paint. This is most commonly referred to as frame abrasion.

If a painting is ever removed from an existing frame or



Commonly seen frame abrasions caused from wear by the lip of the frame.

reframed in a new frame that has a smaller lip, the damage caused by this abrasion can be very distracting to the overall aesthetic and value of the artwork. A painting conservator can stabilize the affected paint layer and in-paint it to make the damage less apparent and more integrated with the piece as a whole. If the art is being reframed, there are other, options, though they are less desirable. These include ensuring that the lip of the replacement frame is wide enough or adding a fillet to the lip of the frame to hide the damaged areas of the painting.

A simple way to prevent frame abrasion is to line a rabbet with a narrow piece of felt. Not only is this a good preventive measure to help prevent damage to the piece, but it is also an easy way to upgrade your frame order.

Stretcher vs. Strainer

The two main types of support structure for a painting on canvas are stretchers and strainers. Paintings should always be stretched to a stretcher and not a strainer. A strainer is a rigid frame built to specific dimensions, meaning it cannot be altered if a canvas needs adjustment. Stretchers, by comparison, are constructed with close fitting joints that can be enlarged slightly, which allows the tensioning of the canvas to be readjusted as needed using wooden “keys.” Re-tensioning is recommended when a canvas slackens or becomes loosely wrinkled. If wrinkles or slack areas do not respond, consult a conservator, as the canvas may need additional humidification and specific flattening techniques to allow it to relax and return to its proper state.

If an existing canvas is mounted to a strainer, re-tensioning would require the canvas to be removed and then restretched. This can cause additional damage, including additional tack holes, stress on the edge of the canvas, and possibly loosening of the paint.

Regardless of the type of support structure, it is very important to note how stable the canvas and media is. If either show signs of brittleness, if the edges of the canvas have any evidence of tears or damage, or if there is any flaking paint or losses on the canvas, do not attempt to stretch or re-tension the art. Instead, contact a conservator to determine how the damage should be addressed.

Backing Boards

Typically, a backing board is not visible from the front. However, this doesn't mean it can be neglected when



Detail of a severe frame abrasion shows the loss of the paint layer and exposure of the canvas support. When a painting exhibits condition issues such as this, it is recommended that a conservator be consulted to stabilize the paint layer prior to installing it within a frame.

framing a painting on canvas. Low quality, poorly installed, or missing backing boards can lead to degradation of a painting. When the back of a canvas is exposed, dust and debris can collect on the rear of the canvas and then fall between the stretcher and the canvas. This can lead to canvas distortion and damage along the bottom of the painting. A conservator will then need to be contacted to remove the debris and flatten the lower edge of the painting.

Backing boards can also prevent physical damage to the back of a work. Accidental punctures and gouges during handling or storage are sometimes costly problems that can be easily avoided. Backing boards also act as a buffer to environmental changes, such as moisture or water infiltration,

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Offset clips come in standard depths and can be easily used to secure canvases in frames without nails.

As mending plates are made of brass, they can be easily altered to accommodate various depths of canvas. They can also be used flat to secure the work flush to the back edge of the frame.



which can take place when a painting is installed on an exterior wall.

Coroplast or an archival corrugated board are light and pH neutral and are the best choices for protecting the back of a canvas without adding much weight. A sheet of Conservation Clear acrylic can also be used as a backing to provide protection while allowing visibility of a signature or an inscription on the back of a canvas. A backing board is a simple preventive measure that is easily added behind a painting and secured with the same mending plate/offset clips used for the piece itself.

Mending Plate/Offset Clips

Never nail a canvas into a frame. This may seem obvious,

but it is commonly done. Nails installed through a stretcher and into a frame can be difficult to remove. Removing nails also causes damage as the removed nail leaves a small hole and may even cause a split if the removal does not go well. While you want a piece to be securely mounted within a frame, conservation framing means you also need to be able to remove a canvas without damage.

Using offsets or brass mending plates is an ideal way to secure a painting in a frame without having to nail it. Mending plates or offsets are screwed directly to the back of the frame and overhang the stretcher so that it can be secured without damage. The painting can simply be removed by loosening the screws affixing the hardware to the frame, swiveling the offset/plates away from the painting.

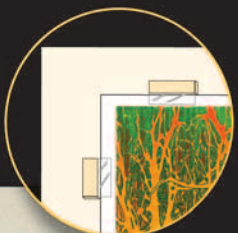
Protective glazing

Any time a painting will be hung in a place where people will be in close proximity or where it may be exposed to splashes, spills, or food products, covering the piece with a protective glazing should be considered. Anti-reflective glazing, such as Museum Glass or Optium Acrylic, can provide protection while not compromising the viewing. If a painting is protected with glazing, a customer will not have to worry about someone leaning against the

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piece during a party, someone scratching the painting while walking by, or even an incidental mustache mysteriously appearing on the painting.

It is quite common for food or beverages to be splashed on paintings in restaurants and even homes. When paintings are in an active environment, you would be surprised at what food accretions can appear on them over the years, even with the best of intentions. If a piece is glazed, the glazing can be cleaned easily without needing a conservator to treat the painting.

When framing a painting with glazing, you should also always ensure that you use spacers deep enough to accommodate the thickness of the brush strokes in the paint. A painting should never touch the interior of the glazing.

Avoiding these common issues can be easily accomplished and can

help ensure the safety and longevity of paintings that come through your shop. ■

Interested in learning more? April will be an instructor at the National Conference in Las Vegas in January, where she will be teaching how framers can benefit by working with a conservator, including works damaged by fire and water.

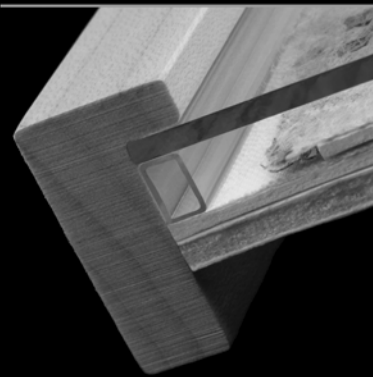


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is vice president of The Conservation Center based in Chicago, IL, where she oversees and coordinates nation-

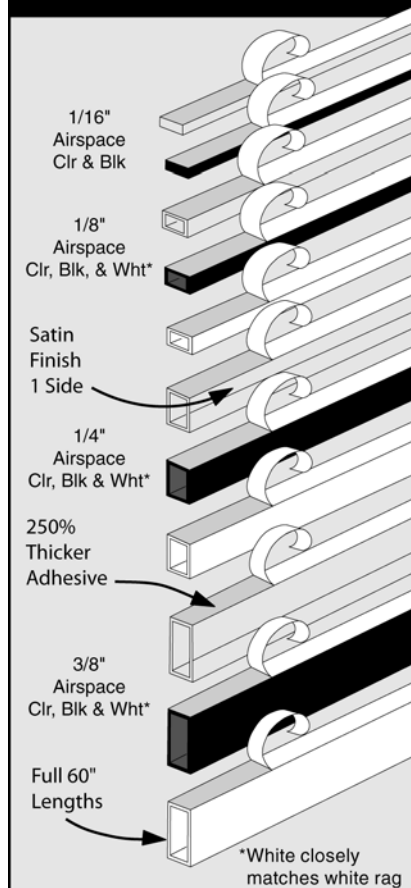
wide fine art disaster response, conservation operations, and client services. April has over 15 years of experience in custom framing and fine art conservation, and she holds a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In addition, she has been featured in numerous publications regularly and speaks at conferences across the country.

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