Mix and Match Shadowbox

By Baer Charlton

How heavy and not so heavy items were assembled in a shadowbox

An old joke starts with, "So a bowling ball, a butterfly, and a running chainsaw go into a picture frame." While the odds of having to combine such a range of items in a shadowbox is unlikely, the idea of a widely mismatched inventory can still cause butterflies in your stomach, bowl you over, or have you slipping on a hockey mask.

Picture framers are brought many things to frame. Most are fairly common items, but occasionally there are things that are different, which means the framing is not so straightforward. Sometimes you get a shadowbox project that rivals the old joke, with a mash-up of odd items. Framing such collections is like eating a 200-pound turkey: you do it one bite at a time.

We recently faced such a project. There were old documents that were friable or falling apart from age, fabric that was light, a shaving mirror, a mug, and a razor, not to mention two heavy pairs of pliers. All of this had to be secured enough to withstand being shipped from Oregon to Florida.

Each item had to be attached in its own way to guarantee that it would make it safely through the journey, so all of the items had to be assessed as to how they would be attached, when they would be mounted, and where they would go in the frame package.

In designing the presentation, the concept was to use a frame as a period piece that could have been made by a young logger in Florida, whom this memorial commemorated. The frame is a custom closed-corner frame made from a wood similar to the southern yellow pine the subject was logging in 1915 at the time of his death. The chip-carved details were popular then and were used extensively in decorating furniture as well as frames. Inside the frame, the design is based on the box similar to the one where he kept the daily items of his life, much like a homemade medicine cabinet. This allowed the placement of items on the "bottom," such as the razor and shaving mug.

The newspaper article was the largest artifact along with the wool religious collar, and those dictated the

basic size of the project. The shaving mug determined the depth of the interior and extends from the backing face to ¼" shy of the glazing. The shipping dictated the use of acrylic, and the uncertainty of where it would eventually hang led to the use of Tru Vue's Optium acrylic.

The objects had no intrinsic value and were less-than-delicate mementos of the period. So strict adherence to preservation mounting and framing could be bent slightly for some items to accommodate the needs of the objects and to mount them securely for shipping.

The project started with a box or tray mat made from CoreX, a polyflute board that is lightweight, tough, and easy to mount the inner boards to. The greatest advantage of a box or tray mat is that it can be built up into a package, even to the point where the glazing is attached with clear sealing tape. The entire package can then be slid into the frame as a unit. This makes fitting a dream—or in this case a double dream, as it was fit twice, once in Oregon to ship and again in Florida for final delivery.

Another advantage of a tray mat is that the objects can be attached to the smaller separate pieces before all is brought together in a box. Tying or sewing down an object on a 4"x18" board is a lot easier than sewing it to a wall of a box that is 18"x28" and already has two tools mounted on it weighing five pounds.

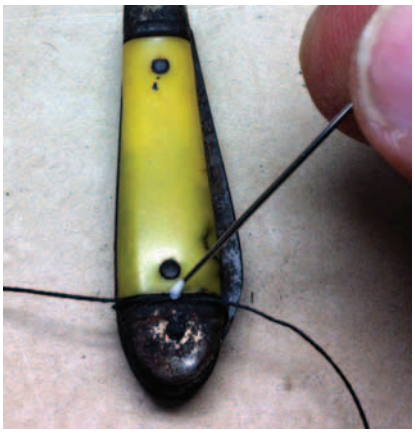
The most critical aspect of this project was protecting the integrity of the documents and the newspaper article. Rather than taking extraordinary steps to mount and protect the originals, they were carefully scanned and color copies printed. The newspaper article reproduction was then mounted on 2-ply rag, and the edges were trimmed to the aged outline. The land grant was printed on two pieces of satin photo paper that were bonded together to replicate the weight and look of the original. This also allowed the documents to be glued directly to the fabric-wrapped backing boards with Frank's Fabric adhesive, a buffered PVA, the same glue that was used to mount the fabric.

The backing board and left wall were hinged with the cloth collar, which was tagged to both. The end of the collar was left loose to be draped onto the floor, lending a more natural drape to the fabric.

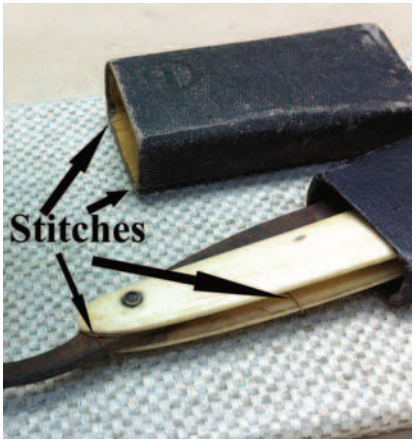
The real advantage of working with wall pieces separately is the ability to address the mounting from all sides. This made it more manageable to mount the straight razor and box parts first and then tie down the brush that sits behind them. The brush would be nearly impossible to get to if the wall had been pre-mounted in the box.

Once all the objects were properly secured on their separate backing boards, the five pieces in the flute/board box were dry fitted. Once this seemed to work and nothing became loose when the box was shaken as much as we could bring ourselves to do, we were sure it would all work. The boards were then removed and re-inserted with ATG and glue dots. The last step was to stand the

The friable historical documents were first color photocopied and then sealed away for preservation. The copies were used to allow for the use of regular fabric adhesive. The same procedure was used with the antique photo. The image was scanned, lightly cleaned up in Photoshop, and reprinted to imitate the original.



Pocketknives are double stitched with polyester nylon threads fed through between the body and shell. Getting a tight knot to stay tight when you need to tie the second half of the knot or sew the ends through the backing (as in this case), a very tiny dot of glue on the crossed threads will hold it until you've finished whatever else you have to do.



Sometimes you get lucky. In this case, the straight razor's case was worn through in the corners. The razor itself was stitched down in two places, then a Mylar strip was fed through the body of the handle. The box was slid on, with stitches running its length and out through the worn corners—the four points where we wanted to sew. Sewing the case down at the four corners assured that it wouldn't move.

box up and mount the tin shaving mug with Frank's Fabric adhesive. The mug was then weighted and allowed to dry overnight.

Working with a friendly picture framer (Deb Derbonne) at the receiving end accomplished three things. First, it strengthened the industry community by networking among independent framers, which builds a wider base for servicing customers. Second, having a commercial destination to ship to saved the customer's money that they could spend on other framing projects. And third, the fact that the commercial receiver was another professional picture framer provided the security of knowing that any damage that might occur could be repaired before the customer received it.

Because of the two heavy tools, the inside of the frame needed to be packed as well as the outside. A snug-fitting pillow filled the entire shadowbox and stopped any movement. The protective sheets on the Optium acrylic glazing were left on when it was slipped into the frame and everything was secured with framing points.

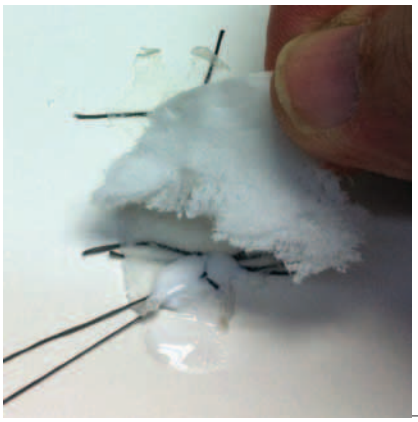
The framing package was shipped in a wooden crate made from 1"x8" pine and 1/8" plywood faces. The padding was medium density foam, 1-1/4" thick on all sides. A snug fit and a wood crate usually minimizes general damage. Another trick is to follow the adage, "If there's a handle, it will be used." So an inexpensive gate pull was screwed to the middle of the top so the box would usually remain standing up during shipping. And even though this was the toughest acrylic I've ever seen, I still affixed "Glass" stickers on all sides of the crate. I would rather be accused of too much customer service than not enough.

The original documents were secured in a rag-paper envelope, inserted into a black envelope, and secured to the back of the shadowbox in a Mylar pocket. This kept all the items together, which is the real purpose of a memory box. And you thought it was just supposed to look pretty. ■

Baer Charlton is an internationally recognized picture framer, teacher, mentor, and writer who has been in the industry for more than 40 years. His recently released novel, *The Very Littlest Dragon*, about the coming of age of a young dragon who works in a picture frame shop, had a successful debut in 2012 at the West Coast Art & Frame Show in Las Vegas. Copies of the book can be obtained through the www.theverylittlestdragon.com, www.tinylightbulbs.com, or www.Amazon.com.

The brush was stitched first through 1/3, then 1/2, and then a whole wrap at the base of the bristles. The advantage of sewing to a wall that isn't in place are numerous, including the ease of getting at all sides and seeing what a stitch looks like from many angles. The many thread colors on handy rings of bobbins from Attach-EZ are resistant to UV light and are soft on whatever you sew down.

Tools are glued at points, double stitched with polyester nylon threads, as well as bound with Mylar strips. The two U's, when combined between the two halves of the pliers, trap the bolt and then are sewn down in the four reaches, holding the weight and restricting movement. Wrapping Mylar on the handles and passing it through slits to the back keeps the handles from moving.



Once everything is securely sewn down and tied off, you can put a "lock" on the knots and threads on the back by holding the threads out tight and putting a dot of adhesive on the knot, then placing a piece of tissue on it and pressing the glue to wet the whole tissue. You can place a piece of tape temporarily on the pulled threads to hold them while the glue dries, which doesn't take long.

After everything was secure and dry, it was time to install the backer and walls into the fluteboard box/tray mat. This made it very easy to fit and (when it got to Florida) unfit and re-fit.