

To Needleart and Beyond...

by Kaye Evans, CPF

What do alligators, raccoons, Navajo rugs, and zebra skins have in common with needlework? Let me explain. There is a method of custom framing that is called needlework or needleart framing that is concerned with framing pieces of handwork created by needle artists. These are no less works of art than oils on canvas.

The custom framer is often contracted to mount this “work of art” onto an attractive background, while making sure to preserve the value of the needleart itself. While this task has been a challenge in the past, we professionals have found methods to meet this challenge. But just when we thought this mission was accomplished someone “moved the cheese.”

Today, the challenge for the professional framer is not simply to preservationally frame needleart, but to have the expertise to do so for many other textile items (a zebra skin for instance). Yes, professional framers are no longer simply asked to frame traditional needleart and for this reason it is time to compile steps to make the task easier.

Paper Art vs. Textile Art

Certainly not all techniques for mounting paper art are alike. The professional framer must first iden-



A tapestry purse becomes a work of art when framed elegantly. The depth and beauty of the object are enhanced by the gold fillet and black velvet mat. (Courtesy of Brian Barnett)

tify the type of paper or canvas art to be framed in order to determine the proper technique to apply.

The same holds true for any type of textile art. Paper is a flat medium and therefore the rules and guidelines that apply to paper preservation framing cannot be considered the desired methods for framing textiles.

Furthermore, even though it may be somewhat similar to textiles, canvas art should not be framed the same way as textile art. There is a great difference between stretching an oil canvas and a Navajo Rug. Can textiles be grouped into categories as watercolors, poster art, and offset prints are?

Yes, but the divisions may be wider and more complex. For this reason, it can be easier to categorize a textile by referring to the mounting method used to frame it.

I have been an educator in the industry for many years and during that time I have found that framers mount needlework and other textiles with many methods, some acceptable and others not-so-acceptable. With the increasingly unusual items that are brought to framers (a raccoon skin, for instance), it has become necessary to determine not only how to “stick it down,” but how to do it correctly! Of course, “stick it down” is just a joke. No profes-

sional framer out there is actually sticking stuff down, right?

Methods of Textile Framing

It is essential to establish specific and detailed techniques for framing works of art consisting of fibers.

Lacing Technique: This method is used when, in order for the finished design to be aesthetically pleasing, the textile edges must be covered or rolled to the reverse side. An example of this is a piece of counted cross-stitch, a type of needleart that falls under the larger umbrella of textile framing. In a counted cross-stitch, colorful cotton and/or metallic threads are stitched into an evenweave fiber by threading small x's in and out of the intersections of the fabric until the threads are united and the small x's have created a finely detailed picture.

To the eye of the beholder cross-stitch is as valuable as any original work of art and the professional framer should accept this and reject the "just stick it down" techniques. More modern day textiles include batik, a fiber design created using a wax resist and dyes to create a global textile that traditionally comes from exotic places like Africa.

Typically the edges of these types of textile are not attractive and most people prefer that the edges be hidden. So, we lace them. The technique of lacing has been used for centuries to safely attach a fibered work of art to a mount

board. It is accomplished by pulling the excess fabric to the reverse side, tying off the corners, and then the sides using lacing technique.

(Details on this technique can be found in "Lacing Needleart," *PFM*, December 1999.)

Couching Technique: This technique is used when the art would be best served with the edges show-



The rich fabric used in this shadowbox highlights the detail of the couched gloves and beaded bag. The gold fillet adds richness to the final creation.

ing. This technique is more commonly used in mounting most types of textile art other than needleart. Examples are a crocheted doily, an alligator skin, a Navajo rug, or a zebra skin. Typically the edges of these types of art are interesting and hiding them would take away from the beauty of the piece.

The art must be first carefully pinned to a substrate (consisting of a finished fiber) or board that will lend support as well as be an attractive background for the tex-

tile. One by one, the pins are replaced by small stitches of thread that is as close to the fiber of the art as possible.

The majority of the thread travels underneath the substrate with only a small stitch coming to the surface to capture the textile and safely hold it onto the substrate or mounting board. The distance

between these tiny stitches will be determined by the weight of the textile being held. Close the distance with heavier textiles and widen the distance with light, delicate textiles. (Details on this technique can be found in "The Couching Technique for Needleart Framing," *PFM*, December 1995.)

Choosing the Correct Tools

Threads: The threads used for textile framing are as important as the stitching itself. Try to use a thread as close to the fiber of the textile as possible. Take the example of a football jersey, typically made of polyester. The longevity of the preservation mounting will be maximized if polyester thread is used to secure the artwork to the mounting board.

Remember the invisible thread used to sew cotton clothing? Then you also remember that the seams began to come loose over time. The thread was actually stronger than the fiber itself and therefore wore out the fiber. Remember the simple statement, "Like threads to like fibers."

A delicate christening gown should be mounted using the delicate French hand sewing thread, the heavy Navajo rug would need the support of a heavy cotton cov-

ered button and carpet thread, and that raccoon skin may just need the support achieved by sewing Velcro strips to the reverse of the artwork. Velcro is made to hold where it is attached and can be easily reversed by snipping of the threads used to secure it.

Needles: These come in all sizes and in blunt as well as sharp points. When possible, make the needle slide *between* the threads and not pierce the fiber itself, as this will cut the actual fiber and threaten the value of the needleart.

Tapestry needles provide the large eye and the blunt point needed for both lacing and couching techniques. Use of sharp needles will provide the small eye and the sharp point needed for attaching the Velcro to the reverse of heavier fibers such as a Navajo rug.

Note: Always remember the larger the number of the needle, the smaller it is.

Mounting Boards: Just as threads and needles are important to the preservation framing of textiles, the mounting board is also

critical. Most of the boards produced by manufacturers today enable framers to safely mount and frame these pieces in a preservationally sound package. These pieces can then be handed down from generation to generation.

Only boards that are



completely preservationally sound should be considered as mounting board. Preservation-quality foam boards, rag-boards, and alphacellulose boards are the best considerations. Preservation framing is not gauged by the acid-free qualities of the textile art, since fabrics, both artificial

Preservation framing is suggested for Tapa since it has qualities of both paper and textiles.

and natural, are not traditionally “acid-free.”

It may be a good choice to use a board that contains an “active protection” since this not

only keeps the materials themselves from harming the art, but affords technology which will keep the artwork safe from the effects of pollution, both internal and external. Technology such as this is important when framing textiles since the textiles themselves could be a source of “pollution.”

Trends Weave Together Textiles & Technology

Technology in textile framing will grow as knowledge of the technique grows. Today’s trends will continue to weave the demand for unusual textile framing, presenting the excitement of new technology to achieve preservation framing for the homes of today and tomorrow. As textiles continue to grow in popularity, we as professionals have to be ready for this profitable gift. ■

Kaye Evans, CPF, GCF, is a noted educator in the framing industry. She has worked with numerous suppliers and associations around the world, including the PPEA. As a consultant to manufacturers, Evans strives to bridge the gap between supplier and retailer.

