

Conservation and Restoration for Picture Framers

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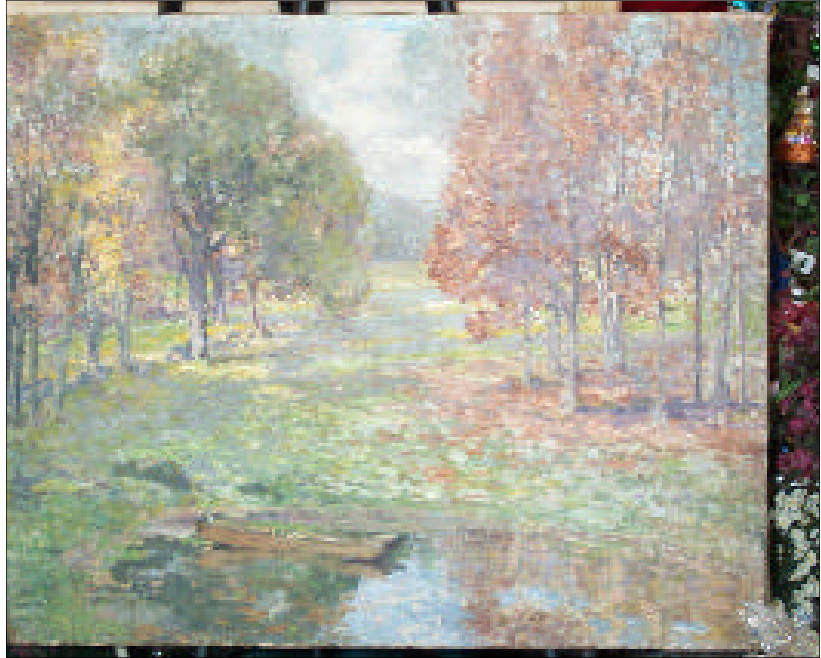
The other day, a client came in with a watercolor that was badly damaged. “I really want to get this framed,” she said. When I suggested repair or restoration first, she was startled. Even though she had owned this piece for some time, she hadn’t realized its deteriorated condition.

The same day, someone brought in an original oil painting that was over 100 years old. They were looking for someone who could clean and revive the painting. Yet another client (in this case a good customer for years) had a piece of sculpture that she wanted gilt. How do you find help for all these projects?

I took advantage of the PPFA e-mail list to pose three questions to that assembled body. The answers, given by people with diverse backgrounds and clientele, are quite informative. My questions were: 1.) How do you deal with restoration situations when they arise? 2.) If you act as a representative for your client, how do you charge for this service? 3.) How often do clients bring objects that are in need of restoration, but are unwilling to restore the piece and just want you to frame as is? How do you deal with those issues?

Not only was the response to my questions enthusiastic, but word got out to others that I was writing this article. I have had a number of people call to discuss these important issues. I know of at least two PPFA chapters that are now planning programs on this topic.

Why are framers concerned with restoration and conservation? Many consumers have no idea where to turn when they have something of value that needs repair. Custom



At first glance, this painting seems to be in fine shape...



...but upon closer inspection, it's clear that this piece is in need of restoration. This restoration is beyond the means of a framer and should be referred to a conservator.

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framers regularly have clients come to them for advice and answers to questions that are only tangentially related to their work. I am sure that my shop and clients are representative of most established framers. Since we are custom framers, people assume that we have all the answers.

Unfortunately, I didn't know the answers to even the most basic questions. As a matter of fact, Paul Storch, an objects conservator working out of the Twin Cities area, corrected my terminology. He suggests that we refer to this as conservation rather than restoration. "Restoration denotes a much less scientific and professional approach to the repair and preservation of objects and materials, and almost never takes a long-term, preventative approach to preservation."

Advising the Client

As small independent business people, most framers are in search of every dollar available, so it is difficult to pass up these repair opportunities. Motives other than money might include: not wanting to say no to the customer, false confidence that the repair will be an easy one to make, or simply a lack of knowledge of who else to send the work to. Unfortunately, this leads to framers accepting jobs that they should pass on to other qualified professionals. Taking on this type of project without the proper background and training will undoubtedly lead to another "Nightmare on Frame Street."

Still, there are opportunities to make a small fee for referral. This is a more prudent course of action that often leads to future business when the conservator to whom you have referred sends business to you in return.

Finally, there is one situation where the framer can do something in the shop. Paul Knoop, a CPF in Washington state, says, "About the only restoration we undertake in-house is more appropriately called repair, and that is on frames which need some help. I have done some compo casting, painting, patination, and other processes on a number of older frames. Charges are usually based on how long we feel it will take to complete the work, and usually these repairs are in conjunction with a framing job."

So what should you do when a client comes in with something that needs restoration? Jim Miller, a CPF from central Ohio, says "We keep a list of conservators for various specialties and refer customers to them as needed."

Storch suggests that framers contact local conservators who are at least professional associates in the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) to establish a referral list. (See sidebar on page 50). He believes "that it is incumbent upon the conservation profession to inform and train all allied professionals who deal with antiques and cultural/art objects in evaluation, assessment, and first aid treatments. Giving framers tools for assessment and the vocabulary to ask to right questions of a conservator will go a long way in bridging the gaps between the fields (which are more virtual than real) and encourage framers and others to respect and rely on conservators more."

Many years ago, I would take a piece to a conservator on behalf of a client. This often saved the customer the hassle of packing and shipping the piece, since I would deliver it in person. As I became more involved in the process for clients, I felt the need for some modest compensation. Most of the shops I queried for this article stated that they charged anywhere from 20% to 25% of the conservator's fee, plus expenses. However, be warned that once you are part of the transaction you bear a responsibility for the work done. This is not necessarily a drawback when you are working with reputable and insured professionals who stand behind their work. Alternatively, many framers may wish to merely have a printed list of conservators with a disclaimer at the bottom stating that the list is for information purposes only and is in no way to be construed as an endorsement of the quality of the conservator's work.

Frequently, clients will come in with something to be framed and not want to spend additional dollars on conservation. In extreme cases, they will not even want to spring for conservation framing. Many shops will frame the piece but have the client sign a release form that absolves the framer from responsibility for damage and deterioration due to improper framing. In my shop, I will respectfully decline to frame any item of value where the client is unwilling to use preservation methods. In other cases, the value of the piece does not justify the (often) high costs of a conservator.

I agree with Miller who adopts a fair stance, "If the item is stable and we are able to frame it without further damaging it, then we will do that. If the item is unstable

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and we are not able to frame it without further potential damage, then we decline the job.” Taking on a job where the possibility of damage to the artwork is likely to occur during the framing process is certainly risky and should be avoided, despite the awkward situation that you as a retailer face when declining work. One option to soften the rejection is to give the client a quick note (on your letterhead) briefly describing the problems with the piece and the recommended steps of action (i.e. type of conservator required to begin the restoration process).

Pursuing Conservation

When the client decides to go ahead with conservation work, what is the process like? The process of restoration encompasses four distinct phases. The first phase is evaluation. Typically, this is something that is started by the recognition that a problem exists. When you open up an old frame and find that the print is brittle, has yellowed with age, and there are brown stains on the edges of the piece, you have begun the process of evaluation.

Even before you can deal with the conservator you must have additional information from the client. The conservator will ask about the justification and goals of the restoration. By this, he means how will the piece be used and why is the client spending any money on conservation in the first place? A legitimate goal for a private individual might be to preserve an heirloom for future family generations. This information helps the conservator suggest alternative approaches, when applicable, to restoration.

In your first dealings with the conservator you will describe what you have found. The examination of the piece continues when brought to the professional conservator. The conservator will determine the extent of the damage and submit a treatment proposal—the next phase of the process.

The treatment proposal will restate the objectives and justification given by the client, and provide a clearly documented assessment of the condition of the piece. It will suggest materials and methods that would be used to restore the piece, as well as the costs associated each choice. The treatment will also spell out alternative approaches (if available) and any potential risks. Present this to your client and help explain to them, if necessary, their options.

WHERE TO GO FOR INFORMATION

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) is the resource in this area. They can provide you with technical information, definitions and explanations, and a listing of local conservators in the specialty you require. The AIC also has brochures that you may wish to make available to your clients on several topics including “Guidelines for Selecting a Conservator.”

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The AIC is the national membership organization of conservation professionals dedicated to preserving the art and historic artifacts of our cultural heritage for future generations.

Providing a forum for the exchange of ideas on conservation, AIC advances the practice and promotes the importance of the preservation of cultural property by coordinating the exchange of knowledge, research, and publications. AIC's Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice defines appropriate conduct for the field.

AIC conservation professionals combine unique skills in the arts and sciences gained through study and training in art history, chemistry, studio art, and related disciplines. They are experts in the conservation of paintings, paper, books, photographs, textiles, decorative arts, sculpture, and wooden artifacts, as well as architectural, archaeological, natural science, and ethnographic materials.

AIC members are practicing conservators, conservation scientists, educators, administrators, collections care professionals, technicians, and students; archivists, curators, and other museum and library professionals; and architects and art historians. AIC also welcomes members from other disciplines who are interested in conservation.

Source: The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works

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The third phase of the process is the actual work itself. This may take quite some time as most professionals are very busy and may have to schedule the work for some time months in the future. When you act on behalf of your client, it is important to be clear with both the client and the conservator as to the time frame of the work. Conservation cannot be rushed, and clients are notoriously impatient.

The final phase is follow up. Some time after the work has been done and successfully framed and returned to the client, I think it is important to follow up. Call the client and ask how the piece is, now that it has returned home. Advise the client on the proper care of the piece for both exhibition and storage. And, finally, ask for a photograph of the piece in its setting so that you may add it to your resumé.

So what happened to the three pieces that I mentioned at the outset of this article? In the first case, the client didn't like the watercolor enough to spend the money framing it, let alone any conservation. Instead, she bought a nice floral reproduction for less than \$200 and was quite happy. We were able to reframe the oil without doing any damage and have agreed that we will remove and reinstall the frame when it is sent out for conservation late this spring at no additional charge to the client.

The sculpted piece was the most interesting. After an exhaustive search, I found a conservator specializing in architectural conservation. The treatment proposal that he delivered was very enlightening. His examination revealed several structural defects requiring time consuming and costly work that the client chose not to do. Nevertheless, she was not at all upset at the fee she paid for the treatment proposal. She felt that it gave her the information she needed to make a decision about the right course of action.

As you gain a reputation for being able to assist people in these difficult situations, your reputation as a picture framer will continue to grow and you will reap the rewards. ■