The Flow of Preservation

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Needle Art

This is the third in our series of articles on client/framer communication in preservation framing designs. Needle art, for the purposes of this article, includes all kinds of thread or yarn designs sewn into a fabric background. Counted cross stitch may be the needle art we frame most often. However, all kinds of needle art are commonly framed, including but not limited to embroidery, needle point, crewel, lacework, crochet, quilt, tapestry, and sampler.

Needle art is unique among framing projects, not only because of the way it is made, but also because of the way it is perceived by those who make it and own it. To some clients needle art is not considered valuable because it does not have a recognizable market price. To others it is original artwork, and should be respected as such. In any case needle art has high sentimental value, so it is most often kept in the family or given as a special gift.

Design Step One: Establish Value of the Art

Early in the discussion about frame design, learn the client's perception of value for the art. Antique needle art usually has significant sentimental value. And if it is well-made and in good condition, it also has monetary value to collectors. Machine made needle art, a small quilt or tapestry for example, may be modestly priced and have only decorative value similar to a poster. Its owner may have little concern for its longevity. However, the needle art we most often frame was handmade with loving care by its owner, a close friend, or a relative.

In determining what preservation framing features should be recommended, handmade needle art may difficult to evaluate in terms of money. But sentimental value may be easily recognized, by the way a client responds emotionally to our questions about the piece, its history, and her intentions for its future.

Design Step Two: Discover Client's Knowledge Level

The best frame designs are borne of clear understanding between framer and client. The framer needs to know the client's level of knowledge about framing in general, and preservation in particular. Learning about the client's knowledge level enables the preservation framer to provide information about preserving the art at hand.

A helpful sample would be an old needle art, damaged over time by inappropriate framing. It could be used to show the client how deterioration is caused by ordinary framing methods and materials, and how damage could be prevented by specific preservation features.

Design Step Three: Discover Client's Preferences for this Project

Frame designers have expertise in decorative presentation, and customers value our opinions. But it is most important for clients to take home framing that reflects their own preferences, not ours. Since needle art often has personal significance, if the client has a story about the item, listen intently and suggest design features that enhance the memories. For example, if the piece was made by Great Aunt Tillie who was crazy about sky blue and worked that color into everything she made, then maybe the frame design should play into that.

Design Step Four: Focus on the Art

Now we're ready to talk about alternatives for preservation of the art. This is the technical part of design, where the framer's knowledge and expertise are most valuable. Every part and procedure within the frame has some positive or negative effect on preservation. The design combinations may be infinitely varied, and level of preservation may be, too.

Some clients ask us to frame their needle art without glazing. When we ask why, the reason given might be, "Glass crushes the texture," or, "The glare makes it hard to see the detail," or even, "That's how Grandma used to do it."

In any case we should do our best to persuade clients that glazing, properly installed, is important to the enjoyment of needle art regardless of its value. Glazing should always be separated from the art by

a generous air gap, provided by matting or glass spacers. The air gap not only keeps glazing from crushing the texture of needle art, but it also insulates against fast ambient changes and condensation.

Without glazing, the exposed textile would also quickly accumulate airborne soil. Textiles of all kinds are made of tiny fibers, many of which stick out like tiny fingers and make excellent dirt traps. Cleaning attempts after framing are inconvenient at best and catastrophic at worst.

Speaking of cleaning, new needle art should always be cleaned as soon as possible after completion; prior to framing. One reason is that needle art is hands-on work. No matter how thoroughly or often we wash our hands, skin oil (which is very acidic) resurfaces and transfers to the needle art. If left in the textile, skin oil residue might eventually cause spot-discoloration. Also, most projects are created in numerous work sessions; taken out and put away often. That may create "hoop marks" that should be removed as much as possible before framing.

Antique needle art is another matter. Cleaning may be more destructive than whatever soil is in an old, fragile needle art. Whether a textile should be washed, or dry cleaned, or framed "as is" depends on its age, its condition, and the materials used in making it. *Caution is suggested.*

Some preservation framers offer needle art cleaning as a service to clients. However, it may be also contracted to a preselected professional dry cleaner/launderer who knows how to handle such items. **Important:** Offering to take care of cleaning exposes the framer to liability if the needle art is damaged. Instead, clients may be referred directly to a reputable dry cleaner/launderer.

The mounting method is very important with needle art because that is the task that most affects the longevity of the piece. Flow charts on the following pages suggest preservation features suitable for three general levels of preservation: minimum, moderate, and maximum. These suggestions are adaptable in most cases, but every project may be unique.

Remember that preservation framing features can do no harm, but serve to extend the useful life of what may eventually become precious heirlooms. Clients will soon forget the extra price, but will always appreciate the added benefit of preservation. ■

Minimum Preservation — *Destructive methods and materials*

For needle art of decorative, temporary value only; no lasting monetary or sentimental value.

By the very nature of needle art, minimum preservation framing should seldom be ordered. This category should include only machine made, inexpensively purchased needle art that is being framed for decorative purposes only.

Minimum preservation is not suitable for any handmade needle art, because its intrinsic value begs framing for longevity. Even if the stitcher herself claims it has no value, others may wish it to be around a long time. Antique needle art, regardless of its condition, deserves better than this.

Any client who requests minimum preservation framing of needle art should be thoroughly questioned about sentimental value as well as monetary value. Responsible framers should inform clients about the destructive effects of minimum preservation framing items that could become more valuable over time.

Glazing

A. Ordinary glass or acrylic is okay. When using acrylic, there can be con cern about static electricity pulling the item towards it. However, textiles do not pose this problem as much as paper borne items can. Still, it is another reason to create space between the glazing and the needle art.

B. Mats or spacers prevent flattening of the needle art's surface texture, and provide an insulating air gap between glazing and the needle art.

Fitting

Ordinary fitting methods and materials are okay for minimum preservation.

Mounting needle art of fine-woven, supple fabric such as cross stitch, crewel, or embroidery:

A. **Lace or pin to foam center board.** The needle art may be damaged over time by chemical reactions due to off-gassing of the expanded polystyrene core. *[Editor's note: Many assert that the thread used should be lighter than the textile being framed. Also, ballpoint needles are often recommended to avoid tearing individual threads on the fabric.]*

B. **Sink mount in foam center board.** The art is retained at its edges by the close fit of the mount board when it is placed back into the outer board from which it was cut. This mount is quick and easy, but some wrinkling may occur, especially after several expansion/contraction cycles. A mat is required to cover the outer board.

C. **Sink mount into the frame.** Similar to B above, but with no outer board; the needle art is simply stretched over a slightly undersized board and stuffed into the frame. Contact with raw rabbet will cause acid burn.

Mounting needle art of coarse-woven fabric such as tapestry or needlepoint (after blocking):

A. **Lace to wooden strainer.** Less invasive than stapling, this method allows careful positioning. Contact with raw wood will cause acid burn.

B. **Staple to wooden strainer.** Depending on size, plain stock 1/2" square up to 1" x 4" may be suitable. Cut mitered corners and join it like a frame. Contact with raw wood will cause acid burn.

C. **Mount to wooden board with fabric glue.** This overall mount is most invasive, but easy, and may be okay for severely wrinkled or creased textiles.

Mounting needle art with finished edges such as lace, or a quilt — edges to show:

A. **Stitch to background fabric; stretch to foam center board.** Attractive and longer lasting, this mount is the most labor intensive of these alternatives. Lace or pin background fabric to foam center board.

B. **Stitch to matboard.** Similar to above, but fabric background is omitted. Stitching through matboard is harder, but stretching of fabric to board is eliminated, too.

C. **Spray adhesive to matboard.** Spray the adhesive on the back of the needle art and press it onto the mat board. It will eventually fall off, but this is minimum preservation, after all.

Moderate Preservation — *Methods and materials limit deterioration*

For needle art of some monetary or sentimental value.

Moderate preservation framing is suitable for needle art that is expected to endure for more than a few years, but not more than a few decades. The methods and materials used will not severely damage the textile. This category might be considered for needle art made only as a hobby. Machine made, inexpensively purchased needle art of no significant value may also be in this category, to keep it looking good longer.

Moderate preservation features are not adequate for needle art of high sentimental or monetary value, regardless of its condition.

Clients who request minimum preservation framing may be persuaded to upgrade to this level, as it is only slightly more costly than minimum preservation framing, but offers significantly better longevity for the art.

Glazing

A. Ordinary glass or acrylic is okay.

B. Mats or spacers are required to provide an air gap, which insulates and prevents flattening of the needle art's surface texture.

Fitting

Frame should be deep enough to accommodate at least one layer of buffered board between the back of the mounted needle art and the dust-cover. This layer serves as a filter for airborne contaminants, and insulates the back of the frame.

Mounting needle art of fine-woven, supple fabric such as cross stitch, crewel, or embroidery:

A. **Lace or pin to preservation-quality buffered, zeolite-equipped foam-center board.** A secure mount, and the least invasive of these alterna tives. Sink the mounted needle art into a larger support, to be covered by mats. This keeps the art away from the moulding.

B. **Sink mount in preservation-quality foam center board.** The art is retained at its edges by the close fit of the mount board when it is placed back into the outer board from which it was cut. No need to pin or lace it. This mount is quick and easy, but some wrinkling may occur, especially after several expansion/contraction cycles. A mat is required to cover the outer board.

C. **Sink mount into lined frame.** Similar to B above, but with no outer board. The needle art is simply stretched over a slightly undersized board and stuffed into the frame. The frame's rabbet is lined with a gas-impermeable barrier, such as metallized tape, to prevent acid burn.

Mounting needle art of coarse-woven fabric such as tapestry or needlepoint (after blocking):

A. **Lace or staple to lined or painted stretcher.** Recommended for medium-to-large pieces. Stretcher may be expanded later, in case textile relaxes over time. Covering the stretcher rails with paint, varnish, fabric, plastic, or paper slows down acid migration for some time. None of these materials offers permanent protection, however.

B. **Lace or staple to lined or painted wooden strainer.** Recommended for small-to-medium sized needle art not likely to relax over time; strainer has no provision for later expansion. Cut mitered corners and join the stretcher like a frame, and then add paint or lining as in A above.

Mounting needle art with finished edges such as lace, or a quilt — edges to show:

A. **Stitch to background fabric; stretch to preservation-quality foam-center board.** An attractive and long lasting mount. Lace or pin background fabric to buffered, zeolite-equipped foam center board.

B. **Stitch to matboard.** Similar to above, but fabric background is omitted. Stitching through matboard is harder, but stretching of fabric to board is eliminated, too.

C. **Clear Film overlay mount.** Small, thin needle artwork may be sandwiched between a sheet of clear film and a matboard background. A mat is required to cover edges of the mount. Good overall support is provided for thin, fragile textiles.

Maximum Preservation — *Best quality methods and materials to protect the item*

For needle art of some monetary or sentimental value.

Maximum preservation framing is suitable for needle art that is expected to endure indefinitely, or certainly for more than a few decades. This category includes treasured family heirlooms, antiques, and needle art received as a valued gift. Needle art hand made by a hobbyist may also be in this category, especially if it is intended as an heirloom to be enjoyed by future generations.

For all needle art of high sentimental or monetary value, maximum preservation features offer the least invasive and most protective display package. The methods and materials used will provide the best possible protection from environmental hazards, as well.

Glazing

A. UV-filtering glass or acrylic is required. Coated, anti-reflective glass provides the clearest view of needle art's texture and detail.

B. Mats or spacers are required to provide an air gap, which insulates and prevents flattening of the needle art's texture.

Fitting

Frame should be deep enough to accommodate several layers of pH-neutral filler between the back of the mounted needle art and the dustcover, for best protection from insects, dirt, moisture and environmental changes. The dustcover should be tightly fitted, acid free paper.

Matting

Maximum preservation frame designs for needle art should include a generous width and thickness of matting, to keep needle art isolated from the frame and glazing.

Mounting needle art of fine-woven, supple fabric such as cross stitch, crewel, or embroidery:

Lace to pH neutral, lignin free mount board. Use 8-ply board for small-to-medium size, and 12-ply or reinforced board for larger needle art. Reinforced mount board of adequate stiffness may be assembled from any combination of acrylic sheet, polyflute, and rag/alphacellulose boards. Acrylic sheet is also suitable. Edges of mount board should be sanded smooth or lined to prevent cutting or shredding of the needle art. Frame design should include generous width and thickness of matting to keep needle art away from the moulding and the glazing. Lace with 100% cotton thread, and pull laces no tighter than necessary to smooth out wrinkles and provide good support. While the weight of the thread is a concern to come, minimizing the tension on the lacing can be even more important. More laces distribute stresses more evenly and provide better support, especially for old, fragile needle art.

Mounting needle art of coarse-woven fabric such as tapestry or needlepoint (after blocking):

Lace to stretcher covered with a gas-impermeable barrier. Stretcher may be expanded later, in case textile relaxes over time. Covering the stretcher rails with a gas-impermeable barrier such as metallized tape stops chemical migration. Use 100% cotton thread/cord;

Note: When practical, lace even coarse-woven needle art to a board as described for fine-woven, supple needle art. If wooden stretchers can be replaced with a more inert mount board, then the possibility of chemical contamination is reduced.

Mounting needle art with finished edges such as lace, or a quilt — edges to show:

A. **Stitch to background fabric; stretch to pH neutral, lignin free mount board.** Carefully stitch the needle art to an inert, washed fabric back ground. Use 100% cotton thread and make plenty of stitches, placed to provide the best possible support. Then stretch the background fabric over a board as described for fine-woven, supple needle art (above). When adhering textile to textile in this process, it is still important to minimize tension of the stitches.

B. **Tulle Overlay**. Overlay the pH neutral mount board with an inert, washed background fabric. Position the needle art on it. Then stretch tulle over that assembly, lacing it across the back of the mount board. This is a gentle and supportive mount for fragile, delicate needle art. Again, minimizing the tension is a primary concern here.