

Mastering Mounting



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The Reframing of an Illuminated Manuscript Page

Hard to believe this is the month of hearts and Valentines already. So here it is February 2004 and we are embarking on the Chinese New Year of the Monkey. Sometimes a new year feels just like the old year. Then again, you never know when something will jump out and say, “Hey, look at me!” Well, that’s exactly what happened to me recently as I was visiting a calligraphy colleague, peer, and longtime friend of mine, Professor Mark Van Stone, the foremost Celtic illumination specialist in this country since the early 1970s. He has taught the finer points of layout and execution of the illuminated manuscript page and lettering of uncial, half uncial, and Carolingian

hands for as long as I have known him.

As a longtime professional calligrapher I have reveled in the framing of original fine illuminated manuscript pages. In fact, the “Book of Kells, Lindesfarne Gospels,” and in turn the Insular half uncial lettering as used in the execution of Mark’s featured manuscript page, was one of the first hands that inspired me to become a calligrapher.

In 1979, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston commissioned Mark as one of two artists to be featured in a 10-minute looped movie to be played during an Celtic exhibition at the museum called “Irish Half Uncial:

Two Artists.” The museum wanted to showcase the fine art and craftsmanship of the written word of the period, so Mark designed a two-page spread of Insular Half Uncial lettering using illuminated capitals in what is known as the “Lindesfarne style.”

Those are capitals patterned after the highly decorated caps and full page illumination found in the Lindesfarne Gospels of 700 A.D. In traditional period illumination the capitals are what take up the first full page of the beginning of the text, so since he wished to design a full carpet page (left side knot pattern) like a ceiling of a Roman bath house he selected Latin text from a letter Cicero had written to his friend Marcus rather than a more



Photo 1: *The Text of the Artwork—Cicero wrote, “If it is because you are ill that you missed the games the other night I am heartily sorry. But if you stayed away out of choice, you are to be congratulated because they were a dreadful bore.” (Artwork and story shared courtesy of Professor Mark Van Stone, Chula Vista, CA)*

traditional quotation from the gospels.

Once completed, the piece (see Photo 1) needed to be preserved both as the beautiful original it was, but also as a memoir from the commission. It was first framed in 1979. In a recent interview with my friend, I was told the original framing included the existing fillet, single rag mat, regular glass, and heavy gold frame.

Six years later in 1985, Mark needed to ship this piece to an exhibition and decided the heavy frame weighed too much and the glass might break during shipping. So, in true artist form he disassembled the profes-

sionally custom framed job and had it reframed with the original filleted mat and backing but replaced the glass with acrylic and simple Uniframe clips around the outer edges because it was simpler and made the piece lighter (see Photo 2). Though not in the tradition of period, even this very simple basic frame was able to showcase the illumination. The design had somewhat protected the piece over the years since then. Then on a recent visit, this piece caught my eye. Boy, did it need reframing!

The original calligraphy had suffered some edge damage and was showing some general aging and dirt accumulation (see Photo 3). So this framer could not stand leaving it as it was and offered to inspect, update, and correct all that could be without heroic measures and expense.

Inspection and Damage Report

Upon initial inspection, $\frac{1}{8}$ " overcuts were found running in both directions at all four corners of the window mat housing the fillet. Even with the overcuts Mark wished to maintain the gold filleted layer. Aside from the overcuts, the previous framer had done a nice job of chopping and finishing the fillet as well as attaching it firmly to the mat and filling in the space behind, though it had not been sealed.

Once I opened the frame, additional damage was quite obvious. There was a distinct $\frac{1}{2}$ " acid burn strip from the fillet surrounding the entire piece of art. There were also heavy, pressure-sensitive, linen tape hinges used at the top holding the art in position which were much too heavy and aggressive to allow for tearing if the piece had fallen (see Photo 4). Masking tape had been used to hinge the top mat to the backing mat as was often done at the time this was done, and since it was not in contact with the art may have been acceptable. Over time the tape had totally dried out and essentially fell off when the piece was opened (see Photo 5).

The Proposed (and Actual) Solutions

In a perfect world the entire piece should have been rematted, rehinged, and reframed. All mats

would have been recut and replaced, the fillet would have been either replaced or refit into the new window mat, and a wood moulding would be used to better suit the style and era. Then, the original art would have been treated by a conservator for the existing acid burn and to prevent further possible damage. It would have been hinged with Japanese starch and lightweight rice paper hinges, using preservation treatments including sealing the fillet and frame rabbet.

Instead, we needed to replace or repair existing layers and attempt to prevent further damage from occurring as best as possible using state-of-the-art materials. Since the existing fillet could not be easily removed and placed into a new mat window, we decided to keep the original mat, seal the fillet, and add additional top and liner mats to help protect from future damage. This should halt the deterioration and added a bit more design to the piece.

Since the client is a friend and fellow artist, I understood his thinking about framing in general. Artists are notorious for being passionate about their art but sometimes falling short of understanding the impact that framing, both good and bad, can have on the life and presentation of art. I needed to upgrade the piece without infringing on his design concepts nor going over budget.

I wanted to save his original art that I knew was being damaged, while he saw nothing wrong with it in the first place. According to Mark, it had lasted 25 years already and would continue to age like a book with a fine binding—the pages being yellow at the edges but there is nothing wrong with the book. I explained that as long as the binding of that book was intact, the book would survive. But if the binding began to break down, the yellowed pages would eventually disassemble and the book would fall apart. So he realized he needed a real frame to protect the outer edges; additional sealers as protection from the wood inside that frame; and UV glazing. Still, it appeared I was stuck keeping the linen hinges and the fillet.

Hinges... The Right Thing

As previously mentioned, the original hinges from 1979 were of



Photo 2: Van Stone Original Framing—This upper right corner detail shows the basic single mat with inner window fillet. Outer edge detail shows Uniframe clips holding the frame of acrylic, center mat, and backing 4-ply together.



Photo 3: Dirt and Other Soil—The lower right corner has a 3" line of some kind of brown unknown substance at the edge. The mat boasted $\frac{1}{8}$ " overcuts in both directions at all four corners and the fillet sits directly on the original.

heavy-duty linen. These are perhaps neutral pH but not truly reversible at this point. Upon initial testing, the hinges were not releasing with distilled water and remained very aggressively attached. Linen hinges are actually designed for flange hinging of the window mat to the backing and not for attaching of fine original artwork to the backing board. In this way, it is rather aggressive.

The right thing to do would have been to simply cut the existing hinges at the hinge line releasing the art, then reapply preservation-quality, Japanese kozo (mulberry) paper hinges using a cooked rice starch paste or pre-packaged Nori Paste. Japanese hinges should be lighter in weight than the weight of the artwork (in this case the 90# Arches paper) but alas I succumbed to the desires of the client to non-heroic measures in this reframing and left the original linen hinges.

What Was Done

The original mat was a 3" wide, white museum board, so a Bainbridge White Alphasag was selected to match the original filleted white mat color and cut at 2½" to allow for ¼" of the fillet and the ¼" of exposed middle mat liner. The color chosen for the new bottom liner mat was Antique White Alphasag. This was a softer antique white color to better work with the off-white, aged Arches HP Watercolor Paper of the original calligraphy. This off-white mat helped to create a smoother visual transition from the stark top white mat into the art while still working with the warm gold, antiqued fillet.

Since the middle mat was not able to be used as a pattern for the top and liner mats I was in extreme hopes my properly aligned mat cutter was the same as the originally used cutter. The new boards were sized and the openings cut as calculated, and fortunately the alignment, though not perfect, was very good.

This is not the first time I have been forced to cut additional mats for an existing piece of art where the actual window mat surrounding the art could not be replaced. This can occur for number of reasons, including the issue of the fillet in this project or an artist's signature placed on an inner mat edging that needs to be saved. (This was the case in a re-framed fine art photograph by Gwen Walker-Strahan that I wrote about in a past article: *PFM*, August 1994, "The Design Process: Proportion.")

In order to stop future damage the filleted mat needed to either be sealed with a brush-on coating, or an aluminum barrier. It was fully backed with Lineco Mylar barrier tape layered between the fillet and the new bottom liner mat that lay fitted against the art. It has been long established that 4-ply matboards are not barriers to acids, as seen with the acid burned strip in photo 4. The art was then backed with multiple layers of rag mat board as filler. The new simple gold leafed frame is an older style discontinued swan profile that fit the look and depth required for the art and pleased Mark with both the look and the price (see Photo 6).

The new frame was fitted with TruVue UV Conservation glass which allowed the colors of the illumination to shine through. The old acrylic sheet had not only been scratched with years of being moved from pillar to post, but also just from bad handling. Plus the materials from 20 years ago are a far cry less efficient than we have now. (With today's acrylic technological advancements we even have AR sheets that are totally abrasive resistant, allowing for routine cleaning with out scratching.)

Thinking Like an Artist

Mark also shared a few other details with me about the piece. Seems something had been spilled on the original paper back in 1979.



Photo 4: Acid Burn and Linen Hinges—There is a distinct acid burn strip from the fillet surrounding the art. There are also heavy, pressure-sensitive, linen tape hinges used at the top to hold it in position.



Photo 5: Dried Masking Tape—The masking tape hinge between the rag mat backing and the mat board filler extensions for the fillet was very dried out and essentially fell off. Also notice the raw wood fillet on the top mat that has been removed from the art.



Photo 6: Refreshed Design—The new frame design reflected the beauty of the artwork.

Between the original framing in 1979 and the reframing in 1985, the mopped up spill had turned brown and needed additional treatment and removal prior to the 1985 framing. As the artist, Mark removed the brown stain through a technique of using a thin, double-edged razor blade and essentially slicing off the top layer. We calligraphers learn this technique (affectionately known as “Hoefering”) of curving the blade and removing the thin top layer of paint to remove lettering mistakes on handmade papers and vellum. (Framers: This *is not* something you should attempt on any artwork. It is highly unorthodox and a dangerous procedure that can easily cut through the art.)

This brown stain had been a chemical reaction between the pig-

ment residue, paper, and environment which created a gradual build-up. Interestingly enough Mark did not want to take blame for the stain, but rather said it “could have been something the framer spilled or did during framing,” when he knew it had been his error. I set him straight on that detail, but wanted to share the story with you as there are times we as framers may be held responsible for damage and corrosion that are not the result of anything we have done wrong. But it is nearly impossible to prove.

I am not suggesting anything more with this comment than that we cannot always anticipate what will happen to any piece of art over time. Oil from aged fingerprints begin to catch dirt and brown stains may appear from a spill. That is why we need to continue to encour-

age the “every five year” inspection of all fine art. That is precisely what Mark had done without even knowing it in 1985 when he reframed his original. Unfortunately it took another 18 years for it to be reopened, checked, and reframed again. Fortunately, he and I were able to help restore this original memoir which he plans to give to his daughter. ■

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