

Mastering Mounting



by
Chris A. Paschke,
CPF, GCF

Surveying Canvas: Part I

As an art major in college I learned about canvases, their differences, preparation, and how to stretch them... for painting. Then, by the late 1980s, canvas took on a new look for me. I discovered an adhesive-covered, heat-activated (HA) canvas that was being sold into the photographic market because, as the manufacturer stated, "...picture framers would never want it." I wrote my first article about the transferring of photographs to this canvas product in 1991 in an attempt to prove them wrong; the rest is history. While canvas transferring had existed for decades, I found this canvas developed for the photo industry also worked for our industry.

In 2004, canvas of all properties remain all the rage. The consumer's desire for art on canvas, or the illusion of an original, has kept canvas viable as a wide variety of images including: in-house transfers, commercially produced transfers, lithographic open edition paper-based canvas look-a-likes, and limited edition canvas runs from publishers. In today's digital age, the trend has evolved into the production of canvases printed with wide format digital printers using an assortment of ink technologies.

Even though these images are all considered canvas art they are all different species of

canvas, making them very different animals. So how does mounting of these various canvases vary?

In this first installment of a two-part article, I will examine more traditional canvases. Next month, I will concentrate on the mounting of canvases from today's contemporary reproduction market. Traditional



Photo 1: Canvas Textures, Weights, and Colors— There are numerous raw canvas textures available from coarse to fine weave, knobby uneven threads to even refined threads all determined by the thickness and tightness of the thread patterns in the fabric. Being comprised of assorted fibers, their colors vary.

methods of preservation stretching original oil canvases will always be practiced. (I will leave the details of handling and fitting originals to Paul MacFarland, an industry canvas specialist.) As a mounting and laminating specialist, my focus here is on open edition and printed canvas reproduction

in the 21st century. So, let us begin at the beginning by going back to the basics and examining supports, substrates and mounting options.

Canvas Textures, Weights, and Colors

There are numerous raw canvas textures available on the market from coarse to fine weave, knobby uneven threads to even refined threads all determined by the thickness and tightness of the thread patterns in the fabric (see Photo 1). Unlike the visual textures of printed canvas reproductions these are tactile textures with real canvas that have a distinct variance in the surface,

detectable to the eye and the touch. Selection of a weave pattern is a matter of individual taste whether by the artist for original oil, or the framer when transferring. Colors of canvas range from bleached white to shades of natural beige.

Canvases are available in various weights. Generally 10 oz. or 12 oz. are the most popular, but stiffness of a raw canvas is determined by the sizing or gesso coating added to natural soft fibers to prepare the surface for paint. Next month, I will discuss a different type of coating applied to raw canvases in preparation for use with inkjet and wide format digital printing. In any event, it only stands to reason that the more a naturally soft fiber is bleached, sized, and treated, the stiffer it may become making them more difficult to stretch.

Painted Canvases

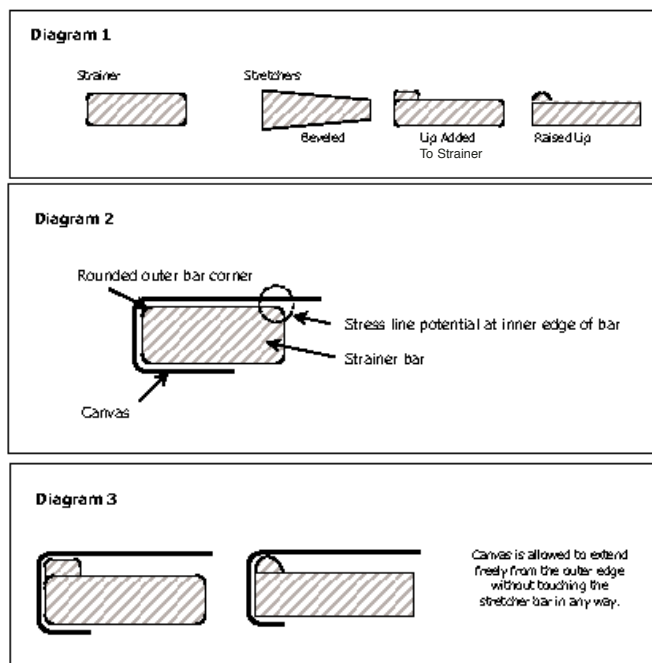
Like any wet media, oil paints are soft when wet and require a solid surface to be applied to—fabric historically being that substrate. Canvas has come to be the somewhat generic term for all painting fabrics regardless of their actual origin. While canvas, linen, and cotton are all fibers derived from natural plants used to make the primary support for the painting of oils and acrylics, they remain different materials. Other wet mediums may also be applied to canvas including gouache, casein, tempera, and even house paint as seen with artist Jackson Pollack in the 1950s.

Canvas is a lightweight and relatively economical substrate for any painting medium regardless of overall size, but as a soft fabric it requires additional support prior to painting, viewing, and framing. Hence the practice of stretching raw or primed canvas around the edges of a stiff wooden support became necessary. This secondary support is referred to as a stretcher frame.

Wooden Supports

There are two basic types of wooden supports: strainers and stretcher bars (see Diagram 1). Strainers are wooden frames that are solidly affixed by glue and nails at the corners with no corner key mechanisms allowing for the adjustment of canvas tension. Designed to strengthen and support weak frames, they have a full rectangular profile that leaves the inner edges in contact with the stretched canvas when used for the purpose of stretching. This does not allow for the stretched canvas to be suspended away from the inner corner creating the potential for image indentation and damage at the stress point (see Diagram 2).

Stretcher frames, also called stretcher bars, have small wooden keys at the corners for fine tune expansion adjustments as a canvas expands with time, humidity, and envi-



ronment. Bars come in a variety of basic shapes and sizes to accommodate the size and weight of the canvas to be stretched and have a lip at the outer top edge for free extension of the canvas with no contact to the wood frame beneath (see Diagram 3).

Images on Canvas

Open edition offset lithography has been reproducing visual oil paintings on smooth paper for a very long time. Then, with the popularity and demand for oil reproductions to look like oil paintings, manufacturers answered the call and the practice of printing oil paintings to textured canvas or canvas textured paper flourished.

Other than an original painting, there are several types of images in the canvas category. First, there are the art images printed onto smooth paper. They have the appearance of a canvas weave, but there is no tactile feature. Then, there are images printed right onto a canvas.

There are also those pieces comprised of an art image, a laminating film, and a texture applied to the film, which are placed in a heated dry mount press. Along these lines, a canvas look can also be achieved with the art image and a textured surface laminate put in a press. It's important to know which you are working with. Then there are canvas transfers.

Canvas Transfers

Canvas transfers are copyright-free prints that have been coated or surface laminated, soaked, peeled, then applied to canvas. These may be created commercially often using chemicals, or the surface laminated ones are easily done in-house by the framer. Once transferred, they may be

stretched to bars or dry mounted to a solid substrate like a thick foamboard, then textured with acrylic brush strokes for realistic effects. A canvas that has been stretched onto bars must be fitted into a frame deep enough to accommodate the added wood supports (see Photo 2). Note that transferring is not a preservation application as it permanently alters the image from its original state.

If stretched and textured they have the look and feel of an original oil painting, but do not react like the real thing. They are tougher to stretch because of the added layer of

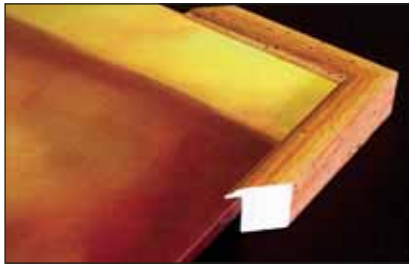


Photo 2: Standard Edge Staples—The open edition print is edge stapled onto bars for fitting into a deep moulding. Note this is not a preservation application. (print courtesy Wild Apple Graphics; moulding from Larson-Juhl.)

vinyl or liquid coating that has been applied to the surface, plus they react more to the highs and lows of temperature and humidity. Small images are the toughest to stretch but have fewer issues with sagging while larger transfers may never seem to feel taut.

Inkjet images that have been printed to canvas are very different from paper reproductions as they are on a treated canvas fabric. Ink coated paper or will not stretch like a textile, and will often sag or buckle after stretching. Printed canvases may tolerate heat depending upon the printing technology and some may be dry mounted to a rigid substrate such as 8-ply, foamboard, or reasonable mounting board with a porous permanent adhesive.

My suggestion for canvas transfers is to sacrifice the soft surface of a stretched canvas and mount them a rigid substrate. It will look like a canvas yet be mounted as a paper print (see Photo 3). If surface laminated, it does not require glazing as the vinyl is considered a glass substitute.

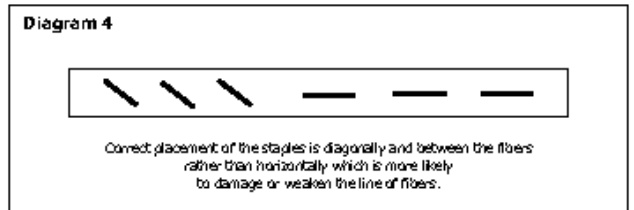


Photo 3: Carousel Horse Transfer—This 7"x10" photo canvas transfer was mounted to HA canvas, textured, and dry mounted into a shallow depth frame. It was double matted with paper wrapped foamboard mats as a substitute for linen liners and has no glazing because of the surface lamination. (Photo courtesy of Designs Ink.)

By mounting to a substrate rather than stretching to bars the completed transfer is much thinner and may be fitted into a shallower moulding than the one shown in Photo 2.

Canvas Stretching

Traditional canvases (as opposed to transfers) are pulled tightly around the edges of bars and stapled to the sides for presentation. Stainless steel staples should be diagonally aligned rather than horizontal and parallel to the plane of the painting. Since the act of stretching is rather invasive, a diagonal placement of the staples ensures least amount of fiber damage during stretching (see Diagram 4).



As I mentioned earlier, when stretching canvas transfers and wide format digitals on canvas, the issue of sagging is foremost. Even using a canvas puller it is often difficult to achieve taut fabric. And it is nearly impossible to prevent sagging because of the additional layers of material applied for a canvas transfer or digital on canvas. Vinyl (a material used on these items) expands and stretches when warm and retracts when cool making it nearly impossible to ensure a constant, well-stretched image.

The additional thickness of a transfer also makes it very tough to successfully stretch and the corners become quite bulky. As a result, placing the stretched images in a free float canvas frame that allows for visible corners would not be the best choice for a moulding. A regular canvas depth frame is best. More on this in April. After reviewing oils, prints and transfers... I am afraid this is still only the beginning of canvases. Next month I'll conclude this discussion with gicleés, open edition digitals and deep wrapped unframed canvases. ■

To read more about image transferring, visit the PFM website for past articles by Chris Paschke: "The Textures and Colors of Canvas Transferring," May 1998; "Laminate Transfers to Watercolor Papers," June 1998; and "In-House Canvas Transfers," March 2002.

Chris A. Paschke, CPF, GCF, Mounting Editor, owns Designs Ink in Tehachapi, CA, featuring commercial custom framing, fine art/graphic design, and industry consulting. Specializing in mounting, matting, design creativity, and fine art, she works with industry leaders and has taught for the National Conference. She has written two books on mounting: *The Mounting and Laminating Handbook* (now in its second edition) and *Creative Mounting, Wrapping, and Laminating*. She can be contacted at www.designsinkart.com.