Preservation Practices

by Hugh Phibbs

Preservation Problem Solving: Step One is Recognition

When a photograph with white borders that can be overmatted comes in for framing, it can be secured with edge strips in a conservation-quality mat, glazed with UV-filtering material, and enclosed in a highly sealed package (if the conditions it will experience require that particular treatment.) This and countless other examples present straightforward preservation issues that can be readily and simply addressed.

But what is to be done with an oversized pastel? A collage that incorporates paper, fabric, and metal? An antique banner that has been brought in for framing? How does one solve these kinds of preservation problems? Certain principles may be modified and others must be maintained. Materials can be used in novel roles and certain techniques can safely be adapted to meet the challenges that such problems present. This issue is very complex and needs to be considered at some length.

Before a problematic preservation framing subject can be tackled, the material nature of the object, its physical and chemical stability, and the use for which it is intended must be ascertained. Basic precepts of preservation (such as the use of known and tested materials and methods; the use of pure, non-donor materials; the exclusion of pollution, harmful light, and humidity; and the minimization of stress and abrasion) must be maintained as a solution is sought to accommodate the challenges that each item presents.

The substance and structure of the materials to be used in the frame have to be considered in light of new roles they may be asked to play. For instance, a material ordinarily used as a buffer may have to scavenge pollutants in the new design. In any case, the goal of the framing will be the same: to keep the item from changing by minimizing handling, light, pollution, elevated and varying humidity, and biological activity.

Preparation is essential. Before such work is considered, those who talk to the clients must be trained to spot items that present preservation problems so that no misunderstandings develop later. The ability to spot a problem begins with experience. New workers should be shown examples of challenges that have been encountered and successfully met.
A digital camera can be invaluable in this effort, recording the item as it arrives and again upon completion.

The earlier image of each item can be used to record the condition of the piece when it arrived as well as to sensitize the eye of the student. Although Sherlock Holmes never existed, Dr. Charles Bell (for whom Bell's Palsy was named and after whom Holmes was modeled) did.
As Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's teacher, he demonstrated the powers of observation that later came to be identified with Holmes. Both Bell and Holmes spent hours studying evidence that could be used to diagnose disease or crime. The staff should be given a similar opportunity so that they can recognize the arrival of material that requires special handling and expertise. Their recognition can produce an early warning to the client and avoid

embarrassing phone calls or costly modifications made to the frame. Such modifications are often at the framer's expense because the client was not warned beforehand.

Perhaps the most obvious problem in preservation framing is size. Anything larger than an ordinary sheet of matboard should be given special attention. Friable media such as pastel, chalk, graphite, and heavily applied watercolor and gouache may pose problems even in small sizes. It is the relativity of size—the fact that a pastel may become a problem at a much smaller scale than a lithograph—that must be impressed on the staff. As the item grows in depth, its framing will also require modification.

Size is an easy problem to spot. Physical and chemical instability require more careful examination. Cracked paint layers can be spotted by anyone willing to look, but the strength of the adhesion can only be assessed by a conservator. The paint cannot be touched, as that might result in a loss, so if the paint is cracked, weakness should be assumed. This means that the paint film should not be flexed or exposed to static.

Old fabric is another subject in which loss of strength may not be evident to any but the most experienced observer. Since one can never truly assess the condition and strength of antique fabric, the framing of such material should be avoided. Old paper changes color as it degrades, usually indicating a loss of strength within the sheet and on its surface. Degraded papers and boards must be treated with utmost caution, since they can fracture even when handled with great care. Framing them is as unwise as framing antique fabric.

All plastics must be approached with caution, since most tend to change as they age. Acetates, nitrates, and other acid-modified plastics will regenerate the modifying acid in time. They may also exude plasticizer onto their surfaces, making them oily to the touch and difficult to house. The surface and internal strength of objects made of metal, glass, and ceramic is a bit easier to assess visually. These materials tend to maintain their internal integrity even when their surfaces have begun to degrade.

Composite objects are another class of potential problems. They may be made of materials that have differing optimal storage requirements, such as metal and wood, or they may have components whose support requirements are not the same, as in the case of a sheet of paper with a heavy piece of wax attached to it. Here, one may have to compromise so that the needs of the various components can be accommodated. In other instances, one part (such as the silk on an antique military decoration) may make it unsuitable for long-term display in a frame. Again, if the staff has been alerted to look for such complications, problems can be avoided from the start.

Finally, there are what one might call curatorial or usage issues: questions of the wisdom of framing things like historic documents or antique photographs. If the owner is advised that a facsimile might be framed, while the original is stored safely in the dark, the future may benefit. The original can be stored in a separate container or in a compartment built into the back frame so it faces the wall.

In the coming months, we will explore the precepts used to make preservation decisions, materials now in use and others that may be adapted for use in preservation, and techniques and designs that can be modified to meet new challenges that preservation problems present. ■