

Preservation Practices



by Hugh Phibbs

How to Avoid Human Error

Human error can be fatal to preservation framing. The essence of preservation is maintenance without change; errors, by their very nature, lead to accidents and change. It is essential to recognize the challenges (and potential for error) that the framing of a proposed item will entail. Errors in the design of matting and framing, mishaps in handling, miscalculations in measuring, miscommunications in ordering materials, and the acceptance of unrealistic deadlines: all are circumstances that can lead to preservation disasters.

What steps and procedures can be used to ensure that these situations are avoided? Preservation requires mistake-free work, and that cannot happen without careful planning, well thought-out procedures, and extensive training of the entire staff.

The elimination of mistakes begins with communication. Communication depends on mutual understanding, and that requires clear speaking. When the shop staff is speaking to the clientele, they must avoid over-promising. If the salesperson is not technically fluent, he or she should make it clear to the client that the things to which they are agreeing are provisional, depending on review by the head of production.

Clients who have unreasonable requests must be handled decisively. The fact that a client may have seen an item sandwiched between two sheets of glazing material, or may have seen a valuable print dry mounted, does not mean that a framer

should feel obliged to follow these dubious examples. The inclination to take on perilous assignments on behalf of even the most deserving client must be resisted.

Framing jobs that create problems are a threat to the reputation and profit of the business (which is the framer's first obligation and responsibility); they should be referred to other framers who may specialize in such work. The honesty such a referral entails is likely to keep that customer coming back for other jobs—hopefully, ones without problematical aspects.

In communication among staff members, one of the first things that should be encouraged is avoidance of opaque references. “Please, hand me the pliers that are on the shelf to the right of the door,” is a sentence that can be understood by anyone with a clear view of the room. “Give me that thing over there,” is not transparent in terms of which item is required or its location; it is opaque and unhelpful. Pronouns should be used sparingly and last names should be added to first names. Speaking transparently requires a bit of forethought, but it is well worth the effort.

Another major obstacle to clear communication is defensiveness. The aphorism, “fix the problem, not the blame” is one that has many uses in preservation projects. The manner in which ideas are phrased can either empower or poison communication. If a question is asked in a negative mode, “You didn't remember to do X, did you?” it sets the listener up to be defensive.

The same question can be made neutral: “What is the status of *X*?” or, “How is *X* coming along?”

The utility of judgment-free communication is hard to overstate. When staffers are not speaking defensively, they can offer suggestions that may add to the safety and success of the effort.

Yet an environment in which all can contribute freely need not be a democracy. Indeed, there should be a clear leader to make decisions and give direction, but if that leader is wise, all viewpoints will be heard.

When art is being handled, communication is again essential to the elimination of mistakes. If two staff members are lifting, turning, or carrying an item, one should lead the effort, but both must monitor their own efforts and the efforts of their partner. This kind of work can only be mistake-free if it is as well coordinated as an experienced dance team. Even when one is handling art solo, it is important to cultivate a sense of alert self-awareness. This is a state in which each move is evaluated before it is begun and is tracked throughout its duration. Before a movement is begun, its potential path must be checked to ensure that there will be no impediments to interrupt the flow of the action and its safe end.

Getting input from more than one person is invaluable in critical measuring situations. Another aphorism, “measure twice, cut once,” can be improved upon if the multiple measurements are made by independent observers. The results generated if two staff members read the numbers of the same tape, write them down, and then compare them, will have a significantly higher chance of being accurate than numbers that come from any single observer. Even the most seasoned workers can invert or misremember digits as they are being transcribed.

The same sort of thinking can be used when measurements are entered into work tickets. If it is not possible to have independent observations made, the person who is writing up the ticket can measure twice, then write one set on the front of the work sheet and the second set on the back. Later, these numbers can be compared for accuracy.

When the framing project is empowered with accurate figures and materials are ready in time without reordering or alteration, the schedule can accommodate unexpected complications. Then stress levels are kept lower, allowing the work to be completed with less chance of mishandling of the item.

Framing is generally a tightly scheduled enterprise, with a few weeks allowed for the completion of most jobs. Conservators work on a much more extended schedule. Their approach begins with the premise that each item must be carefully examined and its potential problems given extended consideration. This model is worth considering when out of the ordinary or high-value items come in for framing. Wisdom dictates that the client be informed that the importance of getting things right requires more time in such cases. This time can be used to search for information and insight (online or through phone calls) into how others have successfully handled such items. Inquiries can be directed to other framers, conservators in private practice, or museum personnel.

Consultation has other aspects that are also important to preservation framing. In undertaking large scale and groundbreaking projects, conservators tend to gather as many ideas as possible before winnowing them down to that which seems most practical. They know that the work that they do on an item will have an impact for decades to come. No one wants to be the author of a plan or technique that is open to legitimate questioning in the future.

The frames that we close up will be opened by someone else in the future, and we must be mindful of how we secure items in the frame to ensure that others will be able to open the frame easily and safely. One cannot be held to account for techniques or materials that may only be available in the future, but preservation framing requires a knowledge of the best practices and products, currently available.

The growth of mechanization and globalization paint a bleak picture for certain independent framers. Computer-guided machines cut better windows than any of us and will soon be joining frames better, too. All of this is done with scant labor costs; meanwhile, globally available labor is keeping a lid on compensation.

Preservation framing, however, will not fit into this picture. Its subjects have higher values and each mat and frame package must be designed to accommodate the needs of the individual item. Preservation must be as mistake-free as humanly possible. This is logically implicit in the term “preservation.” Some of the tools that empower this sort of work are careful listening and dispassionate evaluation, transparent communication, multiple and independent measurements, the self-aware handling of art, and scheduling that is generous enough

to allow for the inevitable occurrence of problems. Each of these tools adds to the professionalism of the framer and distinguishes preservation framers from the ordinary.

As the public comes to recognize the importance of such professionalism, they will understand the need to take valued material to shops who specialize in such work. Anyone who wants a meaningful and rewarding future in framing should find it here. ■

Hugh Phibbs, Preservation Editor, is the coordinator of graphics conservation services in the Department of Exhibitions and Loans, Conservation Division, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. He has taught workshops for the National Conference, the AIC, PPFA, the conservation programs at Winterthur/University of Delaware, and the Smithsonian Resident Associates Program. He also compiled the matting and framing section of *The Book and Paper Group Outline*.