

Unframing Precautions

By Hugh Phibbs

Opening a frame is a perilous opportunity. It is a chance to learn the effects materials have had on one another and what problems may be caused by poor framing techniques, but it is fraught with the perils posed by flawed techniques and the degradation which materials may have suffered.

Most framing was done in the past with little thought to safe disassembly. Nails were buried in backing boards, making them very difficult to find; glues were too liberally applied to the edges of the frame, so that when they dried they formed a hazardous crust around the rabbit; art was attached to backing boards in numerous dangerous manners, or it was affixed to the window mat, creating still other hazards. Each old frame must be approached as if it were a bomb set to go off; utmost care must be given to the extraction of the art.

The first step is an examination of the frame from the front to see whether the art is in any way adhered to the glazing and whether it has slipped in its window mat becoming engaged with the edge of the window. Either of these conditions is extremely hazardous and may require the assistance of a trained conservator.

This examination should be carried out with the art in a near vertical position so that the glazing will not rest on the art (as it would if the frame were face up on a table). If the art is stuck to the glazing, a conservator should be consulted. If the edge of the art has slipped out from underneath the opening of the window, the unframing can proceed,

but it is wise to bring in a second person who can act as a “spotter” to ensure that undue stress to the artwork is avoided.

Once the frame has been checked from the front, it can be turned over and the hanging hardware removed. Leaving any of the hardware in place during the unframing can make handling awkward. If it is to be reused, the hardware can be labeled for later reinstallation.

Old backing papers may be messy enough to become a hazard. If the paper is sufficiently degraded, it can fall to a powder when it is pulled off the back. This dust can contaminate the contents of the frame and such paper is best removed with the frame in a near upright position. The bottom of the frame should rest on the work table and its back should be held so that it overhangs the edge of the table. This permits the paper scrap to fall freely into a waste basket placed at the edge of the table. If the paper is in better shape, it can be removed with the frame face down on the work table, but any old labels should be carefully removed so they can be secured to the back of the new frame. These old labels may help to establish the history or provenance of the art in the future.

Once the paper has been cleared from the back of the frame, the edges of the rabbit should be checked for residue of dried glue which may present a sharp edge to threaten the art as it is removed. Any such glue must be scraped clean, with care taken to ensure that the particulate dried glue does not fall into the frame.

The nails in old frames may be hidden



in the backing board, having been “stitched” into its surface by the framer initially. These hidden nails are quite frustrating to remove since they have to be excavated out of the board: if the board has degraded, they can be difficult to spot.

The best tool for removing old nails or glazing points is a pair of diagonal pliers ordinarily used for cutting wire. These pliers can be held in one hand so that the jaws point in the opposite direction from the users thumb and one handle is held between the thumb and palm of the hand while the fore finger is on one side of the other handle and the remaining fingers are on the other side. This allows the pliers to be used as an inverted set of chop sticks so that the nails can be quickly and safely levered out of the side of the frame.

As the nails are removed, no pressure should be placed on the back of the package which contains the art. To ensure that all nails are in fact gone, a dull blade can be gently run around the edge where the mat package meets the frame, with care taken to avoid scraping the mat package.

Another method of closing a frame uses screws in the side of the frame. If the screws have been over tightened or over used, they may not come out when turned, but may only spin in the wood of the strainer. When this occurs, a dull blade should be inserted between the inside of the frame and the outside of the strainer so that the blade can be worked in to engage the threads of the screw. Pressure on the blade against the side of the screw can be used to give it purchase enough to be come removable.

A problem which may be encountered with screws that have small heads is the loss of the slot or phillips slot on the head of the screw. Here, the frame may be carefully pried away

from the strainer so that the head is the screw is partially exposed. The screw head can then be bitten into with diagonal pliers and gently turned to unscrew it.

The actual removal of the mat package from the frame should be done in a nearly vertical position so that any irregularities in the process can be observed and the unframing can be instantly stopped. If the frame is face down on the table during this step, the mat package may be most of the way out before problems appear and it may be difficult to stop.

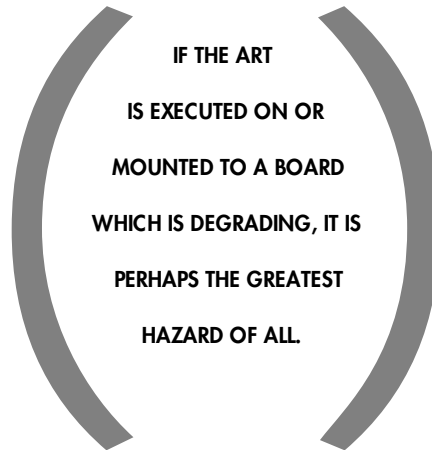
If the edge of the art is caught in the edge of the window, the mat package must be very

carefully lifted away from the glazing and supported while the mat is gently pulled away from the art. In some cases, the mat may need to be torn to remove the pressure on the art. Unless the mat has art historical significance, it should always be sacrificed before the art is bent .

This as also true of another frustrating

and dangerous condition, the window mat which has been adhered to the back mat. Whether an old hide glue or a modern double sided pressure sensitive has been used, the result is the same: a very difficult unmatting. In either case, the window should be gently lifted at the bevel of the opening to ensure that there is no adhesion of the art. Once this is established, the window should be torn away piece by piece from the back mat, starting at the opening and working out to the outer edge of the mat. Any attempt to open such a mat from the outer edge may tear the back mat and that may in turn tear the art.

Frames which were assembled in the earlier part of this century may contain art which has been aggressively attached to the back mat



preservation practices

or even the backing board. Wet or dry mounting was quite common and resulted in the total adhesion of the art to its support. If the support is not degraded, this can be handled fairly easily.

Drum mounting was the practice of gluing the perimeter of the art to a board so that the paper of the art would become as tight as the head of a drum. This taught paper is at great risk of splitting if the mounting board is flexed and such prints or drawings should be taken to a conservator. Old wet or dry mounts may need to be dismantled by a conservator, but the mounting tissue may provide some protection for the art. If the board is not degrading, it may in some cases be better left alone. The framer should never attempt to remove art which has been mounted, as it is extremely difficult and the art may not remain flat once it comes off the mount.

If the art is executed on or mounted to a board which is degrading, it is perhaps the greatest hazard of all. Such boards may be near the end of their lives and may have been held together by the frame for some years. The tell-tale orange coloration of such boards and the ease with which they give up fibers when touched must be watched for as the frame is opened.

If a badly degraded board is encountered, it must never be lifted or moved by itself. It must always be supported by an adequately stiff board during removal and storage. These old boards may crack during even the most gentle handling. It is usually unwise to reinstall such a piece of art in a frame since the light which falls on the board will hasten its ultimate collapse. If the art can be secured in an archival box or tray it can be photographed and the photo can be displayed (instead of the art) on the wall. These old boards are perhaps the most difficult problem which can be encountered in unframing.

One final problem worth mentioning is the situation in which a frame may be too tight for the mat which it holds. If such a frame is made of wood, it may be possible to gently work the corners open to create more space in the frame before an attempt is made to lift out the mat package. Any forcing of the mat package could cause the art or the window to shift and become engaged.

Eventhough it presents many perils, unframing can be quite satisfying. This is because there is so much we can learn from the mistakes and the good ideas of the past. Each old frame represents an experiment which has been aging in real time, whose results are ours to observe and learn from.

Which material burned adjacent materials? What created barriers to shield delicate materials from harm? What has accumulated on the glazing and how have the backing materials aged? The alert framer can observe and discuss these observations with others to gain a deeper understanding of the workings of the frames components. Science can give us definitive answers to quite specific questions, but the issues involved in choosing appropriate materials and methods in conservation framing are complex and may require subtle judgement on the part of the framer. That judgement can be informed and enhanced by careful observation during the process of unframing. □

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