

Preservation in the Future of Framing

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The preservation of a work of art begins with the consideration of its individual characteristics. Every drawing, print, painting, sculpture, or textile — in fact, any artifact — has physical and chemical attributes and a history which must be taken into account when it is framed for display or housed for storage.

This concept has far-reaching implications. It defines preservation as an object-driven enterprise which cannot mass produce housings for the automatic treatment of those artifacts that are to be preserved.

Framing, appropriately, is one of the last businesses in which products are designed to the customer's specifications. We seldom order custom-made clothing, shoes, or automobiles today, but custom framing is a term which maintains its meaning. Still, there are areas in framing which may soon be effectively automated, such as large scale production of decorative materials for hotels of other mass markets.

It is possible to envision an even more broad-reaching scenario. Imagine a shop in which the artwork to be framed is brought in and placed on a

scanning table. Once the framing components have been chosen, the work is measured as it is scanned, and its dimensions and framing requirements are coded and transmitted to a central production facility. The work is then placed in a bar coded transportation folder, and by the time it arrives at the central facility, the frame, the mat, and the glazing have been cut and are waiting. The work is mounted on an assembly line, and the frame components are fitted there too. The work is then given a bar coded label and transported back to the point of sale.

This sort of operation requires no technologies which do not exist today. If the work going into such a production scheme is readily replaceable and does not require preservation framing, it could provide a valuable service to the consumer.

But such an automated system will not work for preservation. It contains too many areas in which adequate safeguards cannot be provided, and it cannot give the necessary individualized attention to each piece of art.

For example, items in need of preservation framing cannot be simply scanned for their size; they must be measured with a sensitivity to their physical vulnerabilities. A cockled item,

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for instance, may lengthen when it is flattened by an overmat. In addition, all such critical measurements should be made by more than one person to eliminate errors.

The transportation of unique or valuable materials is perilous, and should only be undertaken by trained personnel when absolutely necessary.

Furthermore, the installation of the art in its mat or other housing cannot be turned into an assembly line procedure, but should be modeled on the studio practices of a conservator. Even the creation of the frame may require special backing or rabbeting to accommodate the needs of the art. All of these concerns would weaken the advantage of a highly mechanized system.

A smaller operation that focuses on object-driven treatment needs to support the time and attention that is given to each piece with the sale of more expensive materials. Preservation is extremely careful work which does not show. The customer cannot see hinges or sinks; even spacers are designed to be as unobtrusive as possible.

A well-toned karat gold frame or a well-executed mat design, on the other hand, have easily perceived value and are needed to support the preservation component financially and aesthetically. An older work may have some visible degradation, and in such situations a skilled framing professional can use the antiquing of the framing and matting to mitigate the visual impact of these problems.

Those who choose to remain in framing will be faced with a continuous challenge from businesses which have another primary focus, for whom framing is a sideline, or from businesses that have highly automated production facilities. Economies of scale will always favor the vast chain store or the high volume automated operation.

The future for the professional framer lies in a broad knowledge of preservation methods, framing aesthetics, and skills needed to create beautifully crafted, well-built framing packages.

