Where Customization and Standardization Meet

by Hugh Phibbs

In today's marketplace, very few goods are made to the customer's specifications. While clothing, homes or computers may be made to order, picture framing, more than any other business, can be properly described by the term "custom." This fact is important to preservation: since framers are used to tailoring their work to the aesthetic needs of the material being framed, they are ready to accommodate its physical and chemical requirements. As important as the concept of customization is, it should be considered in concert with another, quite different notion, "standardization."

Institutions which house large collections usually use standard mat sizes and colors. This allows their materials to be stored and displayed in a relatively small number of boxes and frames. This sort of standardization is of little interest to consumers except for those with large collections of works on paper. Yet there are other ways in which the concept of standardization can be useful to preservation framing. If mats and frames are designed so that they can be disassembled in a predictable manner, potential accidents can be avoided in the future.

Which parts of the mat and frame package should be customized to fit the work, and which should be standardized to rationalize its future handling? The aesthetics of the mat and frame should be custom designed to reflect the period,style, and chroma of the work. They can also be used to ameliorate visible problems with the artwork's condition. Darkened paper can benefit from darker mat shades, while foxed works can be helped by the addition of flecked or variegated matting surfaces. Other areas in which customization of a frame is preservationally sound are: spacing, physical support of the work, accommodation of its chemical and physical needs, and in some cases, hinge placement.

Works cannot be given spacing in their frames in a standard manner. Pastels and other friable media require sufficient space in front of their designs so that they will not come in contact with their glazing. Nonfriable prints should be given as much space as possible, but incidental contact with the glazing here may be unavoidable. No amount of hinging can stop a large print from moving forward in its center, and the more it is spaced away from its glazing, the more it can be drawn forward by static if that glazing is acrylic. Thicker works will require sinks in their back mats and severely cockled items may need a back mat which has been shaped to fit their back surfaces.

At times it may also be wise to tailor the chemistry of the housing to the

needs of the material being framed. Textiles such as wool and metal plates may benefit from enclosure in pure cellulose boards which have no alkaline reserve. Materials which are self-destructive may be helped by the inclusion of scavenging materials in their housing.

Ideally, all glazing would filter ultraviolet light so that the radiation reaching the material in the frame would be limited. Since that may not be economically possible, the use of such filters should be directed to those works which are most vulnerable to UV.

Hinging is an area in which customization and standardization both apply, depending on the condition of the sheet of paper. If it is cockled, the hinges must be placed on those spots at which the sheet makes contact with the back mat when it is lying face up. This usually means that the hinges will not be arranged in a regular pattern. When the sheet is flat, the hinge placement should be standardized. When a group of works of the same size is being hinged, a template strip of matboard can be used to aid in this. The standardization of hinge positions will allow anyone working on the piece to locate them in the future. This is especially important if the hinges are folded, but even pendant hinges may be hard to locate if someone subsequently seals the window mat shut.

Similarly, the placement of the nails or screws used to hold the frame together should be standardized to assist in the future. Even if the nails were evident under the dust cover when the frame left the shop, someone else might use tape over them at a future date if the dust cover were to give way. Once the nails have been obscured, they can be very hard to locate. Regular placement will allow someone taking the frame apart to know that they have all been removed.

Screws that are countersunk through the strainer into the frame can allow the sides of the frame to remain unsullied. They should be placed in a standardized pattern, since labels and hinging hardware such as D-rings can hide their position.

The linen tape spine must always be placed on the long side of the mat and oriented so that the window opens like an Occidental book. Allowances used in sizing frames should give the mat package ⅛" clearance to allow for changes in RH, but some more standardizing may help here. Old frames are difficult to measure for new matting. They may have expanded across their centers, gone off square, or their corners may have slipped in joining. Frames which have been designed with standard allowances and which have been sized to avoid small fractional measurements will be much more useful in the future.

Any means used to seal the mat package or the frame should also as consistent as possible. Any taping should be done so that each sides receives only one strip. If small tabs are used to stabilize the components, they should be removed before final taping so that they are not missed in the future and result in mishandling of the package.

The customization or standardization of any part of a frame should be determined by the needs of the work being framed and the needs of the future. It is impossible to anticipate the conditions or handling a frame will encounter, but a thoughtful examination of work which comes in for reframing and an extension to the future of the sort of frame one would prefer to encounter can be a useful guide. ■

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