

Preservation Practices



by Hugh Phibbs

Who Will Practice Preservation?

Perhaps the most critical issue in the future of preservation is that of the personnel who will be responsible for practicing it. Who will do the housing of valued works of art in museums? Who will care for their collections and ensure their safe display? Who will work in shops that specialize in preservation framing? Who will consult art owners and private collectors as to appropriate storage and framing?

There is no undergraduate or postgraduate education for preservation as it is practiced in museums or in frame shops. Nor is there an established avenue of apprenticeships or other work-based learning situations for preservation. In general, museums find the preservation and collections care candidates from among those in entry level positions, and those candidates are trained by conservators. In shops that specialize in preservation framing, the situation may be similar, but it may include less institutional stability

for these positions.

On the other hand, conservation's future is assured, since conservators can receive professional education in post-graduate schools. There are also entry-

level technician jobs in museums that are tailored to prepare their holders for successful application to conservation grad schools. Once a conservation student finishes his or her class work, there is a broad range of internships and fellowships to pursue. Thus, there is a well-developed system in place to recruit and educate future conservators.

The workshops and seminars avail-

able to framers (similar to ones that I have taught) cover a very wide range of material, but do not offer the equivalent of a degree. The CPF exam and the study it requires cannot be expected to replace practical, hands-on experience that proper preservation framing requires. *(Editor's note: The FACTS Institute establishes voluntary standards in the industry, but does not offer a*

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formalized training program. The Fine Art Trade Guild in the UK offers certification that requires a test of hands-on applications.) The only way this can be gained is through work in a shop in which hinging, matting, and framing are done using the best materials and techniques. This training represents an expensive and time-consuming investment for the shop owner, which may be lost if that employee leaves.

It is worth asking what is characteristic of a preservation-orientated frame shop and, more importantly, where will those who will be qualified to work in these shops come from and how can they be convinced to stay?

Today, the framing profession seems to be dividing into two sectors: big box operations and smaller, owner operated shops. Since the appeal of the big boxes depends on a public perception of low prices, these businesses must rely on a large volume of work to maintain their profit. To achieve this, they need large staffs, dispersed responsibility, and may complete their actual framing in a central location away from the point of sale. All of this makes preservation framing difficult for them to undertake, successfully.

A shop with a smaller staff and workload can handle high value items with much greater confidence.

In such a shop, it is more likely that an order will be taken by someone who is well able to address the problems that each item poses. The chance that an item will be misfiled is much lower, since fewer staff members will have access to the storage system. Each member of a smaller staff is likely to have a broad range of experience and the skills needed to mat and frame. Volume shops can hire untrained staff and assign them simple tasks with little fear that they will harm anything of value. A shop that specializes in preservation framing does not enjoy such a luxury and it must find better trained more committed staff—but where?

Traditionally, potential staff for framing has been drawn from those who have backgrounds in fine art. This has been both useful and logical. Art education gives one an understanding of the materials and techniques that go into the making of works of art and artifacts. The best candidates have had art history as part of their education and have some training in safe handling of art. Not all art students fit the stereotype of the uncontrolled devotee of self-expression. Many are careful, thoughtful, and forward looking. Those of the latter type are the strongest candidates for work in preservation. Those with facility in sewing, carpentry,

and other forms of work that require planning and hand skill can also make excellent preservation framers.

Another source for preservation framing professionals is the second career group. Older workers who have completed successful careers in other fields are often found in leadership and ownership positions in businesses that specialize in preservation framing. This group brings business acumen, critically useful technical experience, and a sense of commitment, vital to the success of the enterprise. One of the most important attributes for a preservation framer, regardless of background, is a sense of selflessness. Someone who might work through lunch to finish framing something that is too large to fit in the storage unit; or someone who can let the phone ring if a large and delicate item is being transported through the shop; this is the sort of person who is likely to find satisfaction in doing something of value to the future, regardless of the fact that other lines of work may pay more.

Since preservation framing is labor intensive and it can not be mechanized, the rewards found in work done well and properly must be part of the compensation for those involved. If good employees are given the opportunity to hone their skills in workshops and seminars, their value and commitment to the shop will grow. It is important that they see that their work is different than work done in high volume, "low price" settings. To this end, they can be encouraged to study preservation further, attend meetings of local organizations and guilds, and to acquire skills such as gilding and mat decoration.

While gilding and mat decoration are not directly related to preservation, their use in creating elegantly antique settings for older work can lessen the visual distraction of condition problems that inhere in those works. Those who are exceptionally talented and responsible can be given further incentive to remain and grow with the business, through ownership sharing or transfer agreements. Since selling a shop may be problematic, owners can work with the most important staff members so that they can acquire a stake in the business, share risk, and establish an equity position for themselves so that they will be better situated to buy the owner out, over time.

Ultimately, preservation is, to some extent, a labor of love. Those engaged in it are more likely to be found attending museums than the general population is.

Preservation framers and other preservation specialists are a ready audience for "The Antiques Roadshow." To attract intelligent, committed, and dexterous newcomers to this field, it is critical that a sense of professional pride and respect in the larger population be enhanced. Such an identity can be further developed if those shops that specialize in preservation make that clear in their signage. Emphasis of issues such as "on premises" work, skilled staffing, and the use of a broad range of preservation matting and framing techniques that are tailored to the needs of each object, can help to heighten the public's awareness of the difference between preservation and volume framers.

In the middle of the Twentieth Century, a small group of thoughtful people took it upon themselves to create the profession of conservator. They had to distinguish themselves from restorers, some of whom did careful, skillful work, while others treated objects in ways that changed them forever and subtracted from their historic value. Early conservators could not pursue formal education in that field; rather they had to learn in museum apprenticeships and through working with like-minded colleagues how one could address the condition problems of an item without changing it for the worse.

As they developed the conservation profession, they were mindful of the need for clear speaking. They insisted on being classified as "conservators" and not as "restorers." They developed clear terminology for the technical aspects of their work; giving specific meaning to such terms as accretion, substrate, and cockling, which allow them to write condition reports that can be readily understood by others. Theirs is a useful model for framers and others who specialize in preservation to follow in the creation of a professional field which may not lead to quick riches, but which is vital to the maintenance of culture and history and should lead to financial stability and rich non-monetary rewards for those involved. ■

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