

The Importance of Condition Reports

by Hugh Phibbs

Anyone who is entrusted with valued works of art or artifacts should take note of their condition as soon as they are delivered. Only if a creditable record of the condition of the art (as it is handed over) exists can misunderstandings be avoided later. Since framers are expected to make good any damage which occurs to works in their care, they owe themselves the protection of recording those flaws which are already present when the work is brought in.

This process need not create any antagonism between framer and customer. If the subject is tactfully addressed while the art is on the order table, the customer can be assured that the framer is taking a professional interest in the preservation of his artwork. If, for instance, there are stains which can not be matted over, that fact should be raised in the discussion of the choice of mat. Once the subject has been opened, other condition problems can be noted.

This can be built into the process of order taking without disparagement of the art to be framed. A condition report form can simply be made part of the order ticket. This will not need to be used if the work is not of significant value or is in pristine condition, but for older, more valuable works it should be part of the



routine. Filling this out in the presence of the owner allows for agreement on the validity of the report. There can also be a spot for the owner to initial to indicate acceptance of the conditions as reported. So, what conditions should be included in such a report? Tears are one of the most obvious condition problems found on works on paper. Old prints and drawings are so often found with small tears in their edges that the term "edge tear" is widely used by conservators to denote this lesser condition problem. These tears can usually be matted over and will only cause a problem which needs immediate redress if the tear is on the top and will hinder the hinging of the work or if the tear is a result of stress which will cause greater rending of the paper in the future.

Tears in the central portion of the paper are an acute problem. These will have aesthetic consequences which may require the services of a conservator. Even if one is familiar with and fluent in the practice of applying Japanese tissue hinges with vegetable starch paste, the repair of tears in works of art on paper should be avoided. If the edges of the tear have become soiled, they may show as a gray line when brought back together. No amount of skill can make such a repair truly invisible, but a trained

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conservator will know what the best outcome will look like and can explain that to the customer in advance.

Abrasions are another form of physical insult to the paper. These can take the form of areas in which either the medium or the paper surface has been removed by contact with something sharp or abrasive. The age of the abrasion can usually be determined by the amount of grime which has accumulated on its surface. This more open part of the paper will have a greater tendency to collect and hold dirt. Beyond noting this problem

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on the form, there is noting that the framer can do to restore the condition. The openness of the paper or the medium in the abraded area will cause it to wick any wet colorant into the paper with disastrous consequences. Dry colorants will also set in the fibers of the paper and will look different as the angle from which the repair is viewed changes.

Cockles or cockling should be familiar to anyone who has handled old works on paper. These undulations in the surface of the paper may result from improper storage conditions, poor framing, or stresses which were set up in the paper when the image on it was created. This condition is most obvious when a raking light is shined on the paper and warrants the inclusion of a raking light as part of the set up of the design counter or order table. If an overall light, such as florescent light, is used in the shop, the need for an incandescent raking light is especially acute. The use of this light to demonstrate the extent of any cockling which may exist when the art is brought in and will alleviate misunderstandings about what may show up when the art is on the owner's wall later. It must be remembered that older works are often brought to the framer in old frames or old wrapping materials and may look more degraded when installed in a new frame.

Stains, like cockles, are a result of the action of some fluid on the paper. In many cases these can be treated by a conservator's bathing of the sheet. Recent research into the phenomenon of tidelines and their persistent creation by local wetting of paper has decreased the use of local treatment by conservators. Framers are not equipped to bathe art on paper and should understand that any attempt to remove a stain with a local application of a fluid will create a latent tideline in the area at which evaporation stops. This tideline will become visible with the passage of time and will be more permanent than the stain which was removed.

Accretions are additions of foreign material to the surface of the paper. Food stuffs, nonoriginal paints and inks, and sundry adhesive materials may be found on the surface of older works of art. These are usually stuck tight enough to the surface that they have survived contact with the surface of a folder and thus can not

be simply brushed off. If more force is applied to remove them, there will probably be a loss of paper or medium. They are best left in place unless a conservator can be found who can use his or her knowledge of the proper technique to diminish their presence.

Grime can be considered to be any soiling which the art has received which does not have an adhesive component to give it bulk (as an accretion does). Older works may have been stored or framed so poorly that their surfaces have had dust and other particulates deposited on them. This can be removed by a conservator who is familiar both with the problems which may be encountered (such as loose paper fibers, loose media) and the techniques to ensure that the cleaned surface does not come out looking uneven. The framer may need to remove grime from the back of a work of art when there is no clean place to secure a hinge, since pasting the hinge to the begrimed area would set the dirt in the paper. This removal should be undertaken very cautiously using a white vinyl eraser. A tiny test should be made first to ensure that the paper surface can withstand the erasure. Only the area to which the hinges will be attached should be cleaned.

Discoloration is another condition which is worthy of inclusion on a condition form. This usually results from long term causes such as exposure to light or oxidizing materials, and should not be misattributed to the framer. If there is a later examination of the art in which this is noticed, it will be useful for the framer to be able to show that it predated his handling.

Having these terms listed on the report portion of the work ticket will serve as a reminder to the sales staff as to the things for which they should look. It will also help them to develop technical vocabularies which enhance communication with conservators. These terms are not chosen randomly but have been in constant use in institutions for decades and have served to facilitate understanding about the condition of priceless works of art as they have been loaned from one collection to another.