

Preservation Practices



by Hugh Phibbs

Working with Parchment

Parchment is a material that gives even experienced framers pause. That is proper. True parchments and vellums are animal skins that have been dried under tension. They have not been tanned and are extremely reactive to changes in relative humidity. When these skins were originally used, they were kept flat in books with strong wooden covers and clasps to keep them under pressure.

The task of keeping parchment flat in a frame is daunting. Framing lore is replete with reports of disasters that befell framers who put such materials in a dry mount press, only to see them shrink.

A well-designed overmat can hold the edges of the sheet, but the center of the sheet will still be free to move. A solution invented by a noted book conservator, Christopher Clarkson, employs frayed threads that are glued to the edges of the skin with parchment size and stretched out onto a strong backmat. This can be used to hold the skin under tension, following the example of traditional parchment manufacture. However, the strings can be visually distracting if the edges of the skin are exposed.

When framers are presented with parchment for framing, the best preservation option would be the creation and framing of a facsimile while the parchment is stored in a volume with conservation-quality pages. When clients reject this advice and insist on framing the parchment, one of the best aids available to the framer may be the pass through hinge, especially if the edges of the item are to be exposed.

Overmatting Options

If the client agrees to overmatting the edges of the skin, the string hinges or ordinary hinges can be added and pulled onto an eight-ply backmat where they can be held under gentle tension with cross pieces of linen tape. Here the hinges would hold the edges out and the window would hold them back. If traditional Japanese tissue hinges are used, they should be adhered with freshly cooked vegetable starch paste for maximum hold.

The hinges can be applied to all four edges of the parchment. This varies from the dictum that no hinges be placed on the bottom edge of a sheet. Ordinarily, hinges should not be applied to the bottom of a sheet or paper since they may pull part of the paper if the frame housing the paper receives a blow on its bottom side and is driven downward.

Parchment has a much more dense surface than paper and any such accident is likely to see the hinges fall cleanly off the parchment without pulling anything off of its surface. The bottom hinges can be used to oppose the hinges on the top of the sheet to maintain even tension.

Float Mounting Options

If the client insists on the edges of the parchment being exposed, the hinges may be passed through the backmat. Passed through hinges must always be adhered so that their attachment to the item ends roughly about $\frac{1}{16}$ " before the item's edges. This ensures that the slits made for the hinges will be underneath the edges of the item and cannot become



Figure 1: When the hinges are dry and secure, they can be pulled through the slits and secured on the back of the backmat with strips of linen tape.

engaged with them if the item moves. Another advantage to this strategy is that it makes the pass through slits invisible.

The fact that these hinges will be pulled outward gently to keep some tension on the parchment necessitates three further requirements. First, the backmat must be stronger than usual; either eight-ply, conservation-quality board, or four-ply with a layer of acid-free, corrugated board laminated to its reverse side). This will enable the backmat to support the tension of the hinges without bending.

Second, the slits made for the hinges should be wider than a single cut through the backmat so that the hinges can be adjusted after they have been passed through. The slits should begin as usual, as a set of slits cut in the backmat that are bevelled so that they slant out so that the rectangle they outline on

the back side is larger than the one they make of the front. A second set of cuts can then be made so that each of these slits will form a “V” with its wider part appearing on the back of the backmat and the small part on the front. The final change that helps here is reinforcing part of the hinges.

And the third requirement is that the portion of the hinge attached to the parchment will not be laminated, while the part that passes through the backmat will be. This will ensure that the hinge will have the least tendency to cockle the parchment, and will be strong enough to provide the gentle tension needed. This hinge can be made with Japanese tissue of the appropriate weight, wet cut into strips, whose length is perpendicular to the chain lines of the sheet of tissue.

Strips of the same paper can be

cut with straight edges so that the chain lines run down their length. One of these straight-cut strips can be pasted along the length of each wet-cut strip so that it covers all but an area $\frac{1}{4}$ " wide, running down one side of the wet cut strip.

The hinges can be torn from the strip and paste can be applied to their non-laminated portion so that it can be attached to the parchment. When the hinges are dry and secure, they can be pulled through the slits and secured on the back of the backmat with strips of linen tape (see Figure 1).

Measures like this cannot be expected to keep a material as reactive as parchment in its original shape. Clients must be warned that some changes in the surface configuration of the skin should be anticipated. The expectations of clients should not drive framers into undertaking risky procedures. ■