

Preservation Practices



by Hugh Phibbs

Business Investments and Advantages in Preservation

Those who are serious about framing must, at some point, consider how deeply to involve themselves in preservation. There are other areas in framing in which to specialize: for example, selling mounted posters in metal frames or marketing mass-produced reproductions in ready-made wood frames. But each of these paths is bound to run into fierce competition with large-scale or foreign concerns. A focus on preservation framing entails numerous advantages for the committed framer, but it also entails a serious investment in education and practical training.

The first principle that a preservation framer must grasp is that of the suitability of differing items for long-term framing; and that placing an item in a frame may be inimical to its preservation. Frames keep their contents in a vertical position and this may place undue stress on the threads of an antique article of clothing, for instance. The light transmitted through the glazing of a frame is energy, and energy causes changes in many of the materials that comprise valuable works of art and artifacts. Framers must understand which items and materials are too vulnerable to be framed. Such knowledge begins with an understanding of the physical and chemical conditions that are found in frames and how differing items can be expected to respond to them.

Since so much of what is framed is paper-based, one must know that paper is a felt-like structure that moves moisture laterally through its fibrous mass. This knowl-

edge allows the framer to envision the dangers that an infusion of pollution from the edges of the sheet represents for the longevity of the paper. Understanding that paper expands across the grain direction of its fibers enables the framer to grasp that wetting one side of a sheet will deform that sheet, since the dampened fibers expand and the drier ones do not.

Realization of the fact that lignin in paper darkens in the presence of ultraviolet light, while the cellulose in the paper will bleach in the blue portion of the visible spectrum, explains why UV filtration is so important, since many papers contain some lignin. It also explains why such filtration will not answer all of the problems one encounters when exposing a sheet of paper to light for long periods. The role of oxidizing gases in the acid hydrolysis of poorer papers and the role of oxygen, in compounds or alone, in the photo-oxidization that causes colors to go transparent, are facts that empower the well-informed framer's judgments. The possession of such knowledge increases the value of the advice a framer can provide and is critical in establishing trust between framer and client.

The preservation framer is also well served by an up-to-date understanding of techniques. This should include a familiarity with various forms of hinging, from micro-dot paste application for the lightest items to reinforced hinges for the heaviest ones. The preservation framer should know how to use desiccated blotters for hinge

drying, to ensure that the item can be secured in the mat package with minimal change and predictably steady support.

Such a framer should understand that over-matting the edges of the sheet is preferable to hinging. Over-matting keeps the sheet's edges flatter and, in combination with well-designed paper edge supports, will allow the item to be secured in the frame without any adhesive.

Knowledge of these facts enables the framer to recommend this to the client as a safer option. Similarly, an understanding of the wide variety of spacing materials and techniques ensures that the framer can maintain the item in its frame with little or no contact between it and the glazing. Comprehension of the design and execution of sealed packaging enables the creation of frames that can resist extremes of climate, infusion of pollution, and infestation with pests. An understanding of support materials, such as strainers and backing materials, rounds out the well-informed framer's technical vocabulary.

Yet as important as such knowledge is in creating trust between framer and client and protecting the framer from legal liability, it is not likely to represent a source of profit. Most clients are less than enthusiastic for paying a premium for invisible features. Instead, it allows the preservation framer to frame high value items with confidence, and it is exactly these items that justify the expense of decorated mats and gilt frames,

which are quite profitable.

Too often, framers who are best versed in preservation techniques may be diffident when it comes to sales of high end frames. Frames gilded with karat gold, or those made of domestic hardwood, represent a serious value for clients. This owes to the fact that such frames can be easily restored if they are slightly damaged and wear and tear can be translated into enhanced patination. Frames made of lesser materials will be visually degraded as they are damaged and are all but impossible to restore.

Perhaps the greatest aid in selling up is an understanding that selling is best approached as a form of theater. When the preservation framer steps into the role of salesperson, it is useful to look on it as an advisory role. Knowing which items will be visually enhanced with a decorated window mat is critically important—this one feature may be the most useful addition in changing a frame from ordinary to extraordinary.

A successful actor does not try to deceive the audience; rather he or she shares an authentic comprehension of the personage being portrayed. So the role of framing advisor is best accomplished through an honest communication of the means that will enhance the visual qualities of the work being framed, using materials that are both preservationally sound and able to hold their value.

A shop that frames with good materials and techniques has the advantage of establishing a loyal

customer base. The profitability that selling high quality frames and matting brings provides a financial foundation for improvements in the climate control of the shop and upgrades in its security systems. The best advertising in those fields in which trust between business and client is important is word of mouth; therefore, the reputation of the shop is likely to grow with the success of its efforts.

Preservation framing is a path that requires extensive knowledge and skills on the part of the staff and ownership, a clean and unstressful working environment, and adequate storage and working facilities. Such a business cannot be assembled overnight; it must be developed. Once established, the greatest advantage it represents is its ability to weather economic downturns and bring financial security to its owners. A corollary benefit comes from the satisfaction of knowing that these efforts have created products that have value for their clients and will further the preservation of valued works. ■

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