

Preservation Practices

by Hugh Phibbs



An Evolution of Preservation

Last month we considered works from ancient history and the conditions which enabled their preservation, focusing on Europe and the Middle East. As we move ahead in time, we can find examples of successful preservation in many parts of the globe.

In Asia, monasteries were often built on hill tops. While this protected them from attack, it also promoted the preservation of their libraries and other valued materials. Such sites were safe from flood and rising water tables. This also allowed the use of earth and masonry walls for their construction, which have a potential for drawn up ground water and for causing conditions of elevated humidity. These walls, in turn, reduced the threat of fire and helped maintain a steady temperature and relative humidity.

In some sects, certain members who had died were kept in closed chambers below the monasteries in which the climate was carefully maintained. Such chambers would not be opened on damp days so that high humidity could not degrade the preservation of the bodies.

In some parts of the Philippines, the remains of deceased relatives were kept in niches at the top of cliffs, which protected them from animals and the tropical climate. We have seen this strategy used at Qumran, but it is doubtful that the Filipinos knew of that precedent; rather, they (like many people around the world) learned from experience. Although they did not use the scientific method, they were no less empirical than their European contemporaries.

Across the top of North Central Asia there are diverse examples which illustrate the use of lowered temperature in preservation. Graves of Central Asians have been found which were dug deep enough that the bodies were preserved in the permafrost layer. Their bodies, like those which have remained above the snow line on mountains, are desiccated but otherwise extremely well preserved.

The same is true of woolly mammoths which were trapped in the frozen soil. Some have been so well preserved that their flesh was consumed by those who found them; the latest mammoth to be found led to speculation that its cellular structures may have survived in a state which would allow cloning or insemination of a female elephant to be attempted.

Lowered temperature is not a strategy which has much use in framing; yet some of the examples which can be seen in Europe do. Before paper came to Europe, writing was done on vellums and parchments created from the drying of hides under tension. Once used, they were bound into manuscripts which had strong spines, wood and leather covers, and metal clasps which kept the books tightly closed. Those who lived with this material understood that it would not stay flat unless it was kept under restraint. In the volume it enjoyed steady, over-all pressure which maintained its shape. When these materials are framed, they should be overmatted to afford them some restraint at their edges since they can not be restrained across their center portions, and mounting with heat

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or moisture has a potential for disaster. The pressure which the clasps maintained on the outside edges of the books allowed them to be safely stored standing or flat. The book has played a pivotal role in the preservation of prints and drawings since the Renaissance.

The tradition of storing paper born art in books may have begun when Georgio Vasari and his contemporaries were faced with the question of where these fragile pieces could be safely kept. Boxes in those days were made of wood and though early prints pasted to the inside lids of some such boxes are in good shape today, a casual observer would likely notice the degradation which contact with wood will cause to paper. As time passed, a major improvement in the book as a preservation vessel, the application of gold leaf to the edges of the pages, created a vapor barrier which kept pollution from entering.

The practice of keeping works on paper in frames was not common until the Eighteenth Century when sheet glass was widely available. Here the materials did not work well for the preservation of paper. Sandwiching the paper between glass and thin slabs of wood led to the serious degradation of most of these works. There were also practices which revealed an understanding of the materials used. Some drawings in pastel were framed with a layer of cotton fiber between the paper and the wooden backing board. This served to protect the paper somewhat from the wood and kept the pastel surface from moving. While a good amount of the pastel transferred to the glass, the fact that the paper surface did not move meant that the design was not defaced by smudging. The difficulty of maintaining pastels was acknowledged by a Nineteenth Century practice, counterproofing. A sheet of clean paper was laid on top of a pastel drawing, and the two were run through a press. The top layer of the pastel would transfer to the clean sheet, while the lower layers would be somewhat consolidated by the pressure. A second image was created on the top sheet of paper, while the pastel drawing showed little change if the operation was done successfully.

Today we have better methods for maintaining pastel and other difficult media, but we should respect the attempts of our predecessors to preserve them. As the Nineteenth Century turned into the Twentieth Century, a new materials became available and with them, many of the problems we witness today began. ■