

Preservation Practices



by Hugh Phibbs

Preservation Problem Solving: Historical Precedents

Solving problems in preservation framing begins, as we saw last month, with recognition of problematic materials and media. However, seeing that a problem exists and seeing a solution for that problem are quite separate phenomena. Handling non-problematic works of art and artifacts is challenging; but for those items, materials and techniques can be predictably prescribed. Where can one turn for insight into possible approaches for the preservation of problem items?

As with other preservation issues, the past is always a good place to begin. Looking back through human history we can find examples that illustrate the advantages of storing artifacts in cool, dark, dry, stable environments. Cave paintings, Egyptian tombs, and mountain and cliff top caves have served to protect delicate works for millennia. Those who used these settings understood the importance of the right conditions and of limiting the access of others to the materials they were saving. They understood these things not because they did research, as we might, but rather because they noticed which environments fostered the preservation of their materials and which environments destroyed them. Such practical empiricism can be found informing the choices of people all over the world throughout history.

Ancient cave painters may have placed their works deep in the inner recesses of the caves for religious or ceremonial reasons—not in a quest of their preservation. However, when the Egyptians placed mummies in pyramids and mastaba, when the Taoist Chinese placed the remains of monks in sealed chambers that were only opened on days when the exterior conditions were neither too wet nor too dry, when the Japanese Imperial staff only opens the sealed wooden treasury in Nara at one time of year; then in every instance these people were motivated by a desire to preserve treasured items. They demonstrated an acute understanding of the fundamentals of preservation.

The Pollonia wood boxes that have housed Oriental scrolls for centuries are made from a wood that has shown itself to be relatively less acidic and to be able to serve as a buffer in mediating the climate in which the scroll is held. When thinned animal skins were used for writing in Europe, before the introduction of paper, they were bound into volumes that had strong wooden boards in front and back, robust spines, and metal and leather clasps that kept the book tightly shut when it was not in use. It was clear to those who depended on vellum and parchment for storing their information and sacred texts that those sheets must be kept under restraint if they are to be kept flat.

As paper came into circulation in

Europe and was used for making early prints, some of those prints were stuck to walls with sealing wax and are only known to us because they may have been depicted in paintings. Other prints were pasted to the inside of wooden boxes and have survived to this day, despite the acidity of the wood of the box. Most of the early prints we enjoy today have survived because they were stored between the pages of books. In some instances, these pages later received the additional protection of a smooth outer or fore edge that had been gilded (and thus sealed from the entry of pollution along the grain of the paper).

Books that have stable spines can even maintain drawings in

friable media such as chalk. Some medium may transfer to the facing page, but as long as the pages are well bound and do not slide past one another, the design would not be blurred. In the 19th century, artists and collectors understood the problems that binder-poor media such as pastel and chalk represented. Mary Cassatte had some of her pastels run through a press with a clean sheet of paper on top of them. Since the sheets were well positioned and did not move past one another during passage through the press, the pastel of the original was pressed into the paper beneath, creating a more stable image, while the covering sheet received a fainter copy of the image.

Another 19th century method of dealing with the problem of pastel's friability relied on pressure. Here, cotton wadding, between the back of the drawing and the wooden backing, was used to hold the pastel against the glass. When such an item was finally unframed, one could count on seeing the image of the drawing in pastel, left on the glass, but if nothing was jostled, the original image should be in surprisingly good shape.

We have better methods for framing pastel today, but we must respect the forethought that went into such framing and the fact that such a fragile design could be maintained without blurring for such a long period. When faced with the problem of maintaining an item that was extremely fragile, the designers of such framing packages made a technical compromise that meant that some of the pigment would come off on the glass, but which would save the clarity of the drawing. Since pastels, characteristically, have more pigment than is needed for the design to be seen, this compromise means that we can now properly store such drawings without enjoyment of the artist's efforts undiminished.

Next month we shall continue to explore the techniques and structures that have been used to address problems in preservation. Some may be improved upon while others may serve as the basis for improvements to our own techniques. In every case, the past should be viewed as a test of the most critical issue in preservation—survival through time. ■