

by Hugh Phibbs



## Recognizing Damage: Works On Canvas

When a damaged item comes into the shop, the framer is faced with a number of choices. Should this piece be conserved? Should it be set aside in a safe storage setting, and something else be framed in its place? Can it be safely framed without any further damage?

Answering these questions is not easy. The cost of conservation makes it impractical for items that have modest monetary or historic value. Retiring an item to storage may not satisfy some customers. Framing something which is in less than perfect condition may be risky. The decision as to which option is best can begin with an assessment of what the item is, and to what degree it is damaged.

Before anything else can be done, however, the condition of such works should be recorded as extensively as possible. While customers are not likely to forget that the item was in less than perfect shape, they may not accurately recall the extent to which the item was damaged when they brought it in. An instant or digital camera can be very useful here. When that is not available, careful notes made on the work ticket with a sketch to illustrate the damage is called for.

Paintings on canvas are some of the most physically robust items brought in for framing and represent a simple place to start a discussion of this issue. The paintings which framers are likely to see will probably have been created in the 19th or 20th centuries.

### Varnish

The varnish on old paintings may be discolored or covered with grime. The removal of the grime and old varnish, and the addition of a new coat of varnish, can be one of the most cost-effective conservation treatments. In some cases, old, dark varnish can obscure the painting to the point of illegibility.

This process requires an extensive knowledge of solubility of differing materials, since paintings which have been either conserved previously or varnished more than once may have regions of different coverings. Some painters used paints with varying solubilities, and in some areas the varnish may not be fully removable due to the sensitivity of the paint below. These hazards make this work unwise for framers to undertake and may limit the ability of the conservator to produce exactly the result an owner has in mind.

### Tears

Tears in paintings may be indicative of weakness in the fabric layer behind the paint film and ground. When a repair is effected by a conservator, care must be taken to ensure that the patch does not cause cockling or distortion of the surrounding area of the painting. Linen tape applied behind the tear will likely cause the paint film to distort over time.

The tearing of the painting is usually accompanied by the loss of some of the paint. This can be inpainted by a conservator with materials that will match the

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# Preservation Practices

surrounding paint in color, texture, and surface reflectance, and which will not fade. These paints are formulated to be highly soluble in solvents different from those which will affect the original paint. Any use of artist paints in this role may result in an ultimate color change which will disfigure the repaired area, and may produce a film in which the polymers will crosslink, becoming bonded to their neighbors and, ultimately, insoluble.

## **Disbonding**

Another sort of damage which occurs with paintings on canvas is the disbonding of the ground layer from the fabric support. This is commonly found among older paintings which have an animal glue layer under their oil ground, after they have been exposed to desiccating conditions. The reattachment of flaking paint may require painstaking application of adhesives that can be fed in under the flakes and that will not cause distortion of the painting or be visible on the surface.

## **Framing Options**

These treatments require the extensive training of a conservator, but paintings on canvas are unique and often have some value attached to them, so the conservation option may be easy to recommend here. If the customer cannot afford the hundreds of dollars which conservation requires, protective framing may be somewhat helpful.

The use of anti-reflective glazing can, in some cases, allow a viewer to see a work which has matte and gloss passages in its surface more clearly. Glazing can also protect torn areas from further damage, but it cannot hide the tear itself. A backing board, which should be part of the framing of any canvas, is especially important in the protection of weakened ones.

Paintings which have desiccated ground layers should be kept from drying environments. If the owner can not provide proper environmental control, this can only be done with highly sealed packaging that employs glass. Acrylic sheet lacks the vapor barrier potential of glass and, over time, a package made with it will become dry through the acrylic if it is kept in a constantly dry environment. A method for creating sealed packages which can serve in this capacity was presented in the seventh annual *PFM* Preservation Supplement (February 1999).

When a conservator treats an object, that object is changed. In the future, before and after photographs and extensive documentation will be needed so that the changes in the item and the materials used can be understood. This is required for successful future care of that item. This, added to the labor-intensive process of studying the object and treating it, requires the substantial expense conservation entails. Most frequently, this will discourage owners from electing the conservation option and the framer should be ready with safe framing or storage solutions which can preserve the item without changing it. Next we will look at the issues which damaged works on paper pose and the options available there. ■