

by Hugh Phibbs



Making It “Flat”

Anyone who works with framers will come to understand that they are a very accommodating group. Framers tend to be both creative and inventive, which makes them natural problem solvers, eager to satisfy their clients' requests.

Few other professionals are asked to flatten or float items which their customers value. Floating, previously discussed in this column, is a term which makes a difficult and sometimes perilous task—suspending an item in a frame with all its edges exposed—sound safe and simple. The use of proper hinging and mat design can frequently ensure success here, but any time an item can be framed with a window mat covering its edges, it will benefit from the gentle, steady support provided.

Flattening is a term which should raise caution in a preservation framer. Planar materials such as papers, boards, and animal skins which have been dried under tension, may be flat when they are first produced. However, without constant, steady pressure, they can be expected to change shape.

When these materials experience conditions in which one of their sides is exposed to more or less humidity than the other side, their shape can be expected to change as the damper side swells and elongates. Any of these mate-

rials which are mishandled will show dents, creases, or undulations caused by the mishandling. Framing customers who have items that were once flat, but have suffered, are understandably interested in seeing them flat again.

If such an item were sent to a conservator, it might be relaxed through exposure to elevated humidity followed by drying between blotters and moderate weight. The determination of which items can be flattened requires a profound understanding of paper, animal skins, and the media used on them. The possibilities that some media may be water soluble, that oxidized parts of the support material may react unpredictably, or that the item might not relax make this quite complicated.

Program-trained conservators finish two or more years of coursework, then internships and fellowships are used to expose him or her to more wide ranging approaches to the field. Before most would enter private practice, they are likely to seek institutional employment to further expand their experiences. By the time they may undertake this sort of treatment, they are likely to have a healthy respect for its pitfalls.

Framers may have experience with handling and dry mounting paper but they can not be expected to have learned about the multitude of materials which

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have been used to make art in the past, or the manner in which they may degrade over time. Anyone who has contemplated the use of moisture in an effort to flatten a sheet of paper should be concerned that improper drying may create tide lines which will not become visible until long after the paper has dried.

Moisture can cause problems for both the binders which hold the media together and the col-

orants. The flattening of paper and hides in a heat press is an uncertain proposition at best and may lead to disaster.

Both heat and elevated humidity are used to simulate accelerated aging when materials are tested, and they are not recommended for the preservation of valuable materials. Heat alone reduces the moisture content and can make the material more brittle and likely to fracture.

Paper which has been cockled by inappropriate exposure to moisture should be only sent to a conservator if it must be flattened. Items such as inexpensive posters that come in rolled may be made somewhat flatter through prolonged storage in a folder under the sort of weight found in most map drawers.

Often framers might attempt to flatten an item for a customer without even charging for the service, perhaps fearing that this and future jobs might be lost. If the item is not the sort which requires preservation, it might be suitable for mounting in a press, which would keep it flat in the frame. In that case, the customer will pay for the service and the framer will incur little risk.

If the item should be preserved and the customer wants it flattened, a conservator should be consulted. If that is not possible and storage in a folder does not ameliorate the problem, another item should be sought to fill the spot on the wall.

Thoughtful customers will appreciate advice which protects their valuables. Those who insist that the framer should undertake risky treatments may be the same customers who forget the framer's counsel against that treatment if the results are not satisfactory and may seek legal redress.

The greatest accommodation a framer can provide to a customer is advice and framing which preserve the value of the customer's work. In delivering that, the framer will minimize the risks for both parties and establish the basis for enduring client relationships. ■