

## Floating Decisions

by Hugh Phibbs

When works of art or other materials are being framed, the question of whether or not they should be float mounted often arises. Because floating exposes the entire object, the issue may be viewed primarily as an aesthetic one, to be determined by the nature of the outer margins of the work. It is, however, a far more complicated issue with profound implications for the preservation of the work.



Overmatting the margins of the item being framed allows for the use of a range of non-hinge supports which are not available if it is floated. The coverage which an overmat provides also protects parts of the work from fading and will allow the future to see at least some of the original coloration. In addition to these preservation concerns, factors of art history, the specific history of the object, and the object's physical make-up should all be considered.

Before paper was available in Europe, documents and paintings were executed on animal hides or wooden panels. The parchments used in manuscripts were bound into volumes. These early books had covers made of wood wrapped in leather that were lashed together with cords at the spine and

had leather and metal clasps at the fore edge, or opening side, to keep pressure on when the book was not in use, keeping the pages flat. This system recognized the powerful tendency of such hides to cockle if left unrestrained. Wooden panels were built into framing structures which had the expansion of the wood across its grain factored into their design. The advent of paper, however, introduced new possibilities and problems.

Some of the earliest designs on paper in Europe are early wood block prints which depict religious subjects. These were often purchased at cathedrals as souvenirs. Some were affixed to the owner's wall with sealing wax or paste, while others were pasted to the inside of a wooden box or into books. Those which were attached to the wall are gone, and some which were pasted into boxes can be seen in museums today. Those which were placed or pasted into books are in the best state of preservation.

The same is true for our earliest surviving drawings. These drawings were plans or designs for paintings which were to be carried out in media which did not allow for spontaneity. They were done on any bit of paper which was available and when Giorgio Vasari first collected them, he pasted them onto sheets whose borders he

embellished with architectonic designs.

The drawings and prints which were pasted onto larger pages look as if they are floated, since their entire surface is shown. However, it must be remembered that the paste which holds them restrains all their edges and that they were not placed in frames which allowed in light and changes in temperature and relative humidity. Rather, they were bound into books which provided gentle overall restraint and minimized exposure to light and changing environmental conditions.

When improvements in glass-making increased the availability of panes of glass, framing of works on paper, as we know it, began. The practice of “close cropping” a print (cutting it just outside the plate mark so that it mirrored the aesthetics of paintings) was common. This necessitated floating the print in a book or in a frame. The advent of border designs and legends which were incorporated into the print increased the importance of the margins of the paper.

The nineteenth century saw the spread of machine-made paper and the introduction of window matting. When artists were aware that a window could be used to cover the margins of their work, they no longer had to consider the margins carefully, and would sometimes use them

for testing color. The decision as to whether nineteenth and twentieth century works on paper need to be floated should consider the artists’ use of the borders of the work.

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on this issue. When works of art were created in which the ink or paint did not depict or represent anything, but rather was used to present its own color and shape, then the material on which it was applied began to have a different role. If we are to see the paint as paint, then the paper is seen as paper—as an object whose edges are integral to its full appreciation. (This insight, true for nonrepresentational or abstract work, does not apply to representational works in which the paint is seen as something as other than

paint and the paper becomes the space which accommodates the objects depicted.)

This Modernist aesthetic may have been applied to works which were not truly part of that aesthetic. This may ignore some of the history of the art or the intention of the artist. Thus, if works are considered in the light of the aesthetics of the period in which they were created, or under the intention of the artist who created them, there may be reason to overmat rather than to adhere to the Modernist predilection for showing the whole sheet.

The collections in museums are used both for study and for occasional display. Since overmatting makes the study of the entire sheet more difficult, there is an advantage to floating works in a museum. This need not affect the decisions made by private owners since they may prefer to enjoy their art rather than study it. The overmatting of an old watercolor to cover marginalia or old overmatted areas may violate the concept that whatever is done to part of the sheet should be done to the whole, but the advantage of saving some of the original color for the future takes precedent.

It is ironic that we have such an appreciation of deckled margins on contemporary papers, many of which are machine-made, when those which resulted from hand

manufacture in the past were often cut off. The presence of a deckled edge on a sheet does not mean that it must be floated. The artist may have created the work without regard for the edges and may not have intended that they be shown.

Works which are painted or printed to their edges, those which have been laid out with the aesthetics of the sheet in mind, or works which are part of the Modernist aesthetic must be floated to be properly appreciated. This need not be regarded as an aesthetically superior approach and when it can be avoided the advantages of overmatting should recommend it.

These advantages include the elimination of the need for hinging (in many cases), the gentle, overall support of the edges by the window mat, and the maintenance of old paint under the window. The proper use of overmatting will not only recognize the aesthetics of the past, but will also preserve works for the future. ■

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