Preservation Practices

by Hugh Phibbs

Three Preservation Tips to Share

At meetings and conventions in the conservation community, some of the most useful and well-attended sessions are the "tips" and "posters" sessions. The tips comprise brief presentations that describe some innovative use of materials or a new technique. Posters are used to illustrate the same sort of material and are displayed on easels in a common space, where their authors can explain them to viewers. The popularity of these presentations derives from the utility of the information they present. While longer lectures on scientific topics can inform the efforts of the audience, the data presented in them is less likely to affect their daily work.

Framing conventions and trade shows focus on the exhibition hall and on educational workshops. The framing competitions provide one forum in which framers can display their expertise, but there are few other opportunities for them to share innovative ideas. Since most framers at such gatherings are not direct competitors, exchanging such ideas would not affect their competitive standing. The current forums for presentation of useful innovations are the answers that are offered to questioners on the Hitchhikers e-mail list and The Grumble bulletin board. As helpful as these answers are, their authors do not get any formal recognition or credit for their contributions.

PPFA chapter meetings and events are an ideal venue for sharing tips, especially tips that involve preservation topics, since preservation information should be as widely disseminated as possible. Another advantage that such exchanges can highlight are shops that excel in specific areas of framing and are the best local candidates for referral of such work when it might not fit into the space, staffing, or specialty of the shop to which it was presented.

What sort of topics might be presented in such a tip? The simplest way to answer this question is to present examples.

Tip #1: One of the least inviting jobs in any shop is enlargement of the interior dimensions of an assembled frame, or "rabbeting" it out. When the frame is made of a soft wood, such as a bass wood or tulip "poplar," the job can be done with a utility knife. The knife is used to make a first cut into the inside wall or rabbet depth of the frame, where that wall meets the other facet of the inside of the frame, the lip or rabbet width. This first cut establishes the limit for the removal of wood.

The knife is then used to make diagonal cuts across the rabbet wall in opposing directions, so that a set of diamond-shaped cuts on the rabbet is created. These diamond-shaped bits can

then be removed with a sharp chisel. As simple as this task is with a soft wood, doing it to a frame made of cherry, maple, walnut, oak, or ash would be as tedious as it would be difficult. A power tool that removes wood in a controlled manner is needed and every shop has one that is quite safe to use—a power drill.

The drill can be fitted with a bit wide enough to remove the amount of wood that the job requires. A stop can be fitted onto the drill so that it will not go too far into the frame. These are circular collars that are tightened with a set screw, so that they remain in place on the bit at the desired point. With the stop in place, a series of holes can be drilled along the rabbet of the frame, as close to the edge of the rabbet as possible. If part of the hole opens out through the rabbet wall, the wood, which is being removed by the bit, can come out and frictional heating of the bit will be significantly relieved. When the series of holes is complete, the wood between them can be removed with a sharp chisel and, if necessary, a mallet. Then, the side of the frame can be smoothed with a small hand plane.

Tip #2: An "L-shaped," unfinished wood moulding is one of the most useful supplies that a shop can have. Such mouldings can be found in a variety of woods within the catalogs of a number of industry suppliers. One can also contact local mill working shops to see what they would charge to produce such material. Its utility is threefold: It can be used to make frames; to make strainers for reinforcing frames; and to make ordinary frames into deep, shadowbox mouldings.

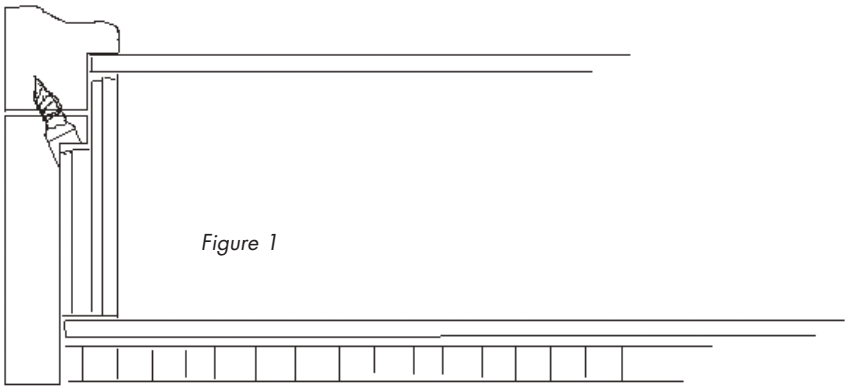

Figure 1

The frames made from an L-shaped profile are generally used on contemporary works. Once the frame has been joined and sanded, it can be finished according to the characteristics of the wood from which it is made. Maple and cherry can be burnished smooth on the front face of the frame with a bone folder and can be given a light-colored wax. Walnut can be treated the same way, but its wax should be dark to avoid over-lightened grain. Both walnut and ash can be painted black, to set off their distinct grain pattern. And all of these woods can be given a black over red oxide finish to make them more suitable for use with older, or Asian subjects. In every case, the frame will require the addition of a strainer to enhance its strength.

Another use for such moulding (as mentioned above) is deepening standard mouldings into shadowbox depth. The face moulding is first cut and joined, as per usual, and then a backing frame made of the L-shaped moulding is cut so that its outer dimensions match those of the face frame. Holes are drilled through the face of the backing frame so that screws can be run through it into the back of the face frame. If part of the lip of the backing frame extends into the rabbet dimensions of the face frame, it can be planed flush with a small hand plane. The hollow portion of the backing and face frames can be filled with board, with the rearmost portion is left unfilled to create the rabbet space into which the back mat and backing board will fit (see Figure 1). The gap between the back edge of the facing frame and the front edge of the backing frame can be spackled. Then the sides of the frame can be painted with matte acrylic paint to produce a traditional side finish.

Tip #3: Since works of art on paper should not, routinely, be manipulated with gloved hands (owning the loss of dexterity that this creates), clean hands are an essential part of a well-run shop. The variety of tasks required of those working in a small shop, and the sometimes chaotic scheduling, can make frequent hand washing difficult. A plastic box filled with paper towels, such as one finds in institutional restrooms, can help. These towels can be wetted with water and isopropyl alcohol so that they will clean one's hands, thoroughly, without so much wetting that a separate drying step is

needed. The alcohol will keep the towels free from mold and mildew.

In preservation framing, as in conservation, small techniques and tricks can be invaluable. Sharing them with other concerned framers advances the professionalism of framing and preservation in general.

(Editor's Note: Also visit PFM's online discussion group, the Framer to Framer forum at www.picture-framingmagazine.com.) ■

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