



CCI Notes

11/6

Removing Paper Artifacts from Their Frames

Introduction

It is often necessary to remove paper artifacts from their frames to carry out such procedures as inspection, preparation for exhibition, reframing, or conservation. Because framing methods vary, close examination of the framed artifact is strongly recommended before removing it from the frame. A careless approach to examination and removal from a frame may result in damage to the artifact.

Handling

Large or heavy frames should, where possible, be transported on a trolley. If several framed pictures are handled at one time, they should not come in direct contact with each other. A sheet of cardboard placed between each frame will protect the moulding from abrasion. However, if a framed work is carried by hand, a number of principles should be observed:

- Always carry a frame with both hands, and with the glass side facing you.
- Never carry a frame by one edge; the joints, if weak, could fall apart.
- Make sure that no parts of the frame are loose, or else picking it up may cause the glass to fall out.
- Never carry a framed work by the picture wire or cord, which may have become weak or frayed.

When placing a frame on the floor, use padded blocks to protect the moulding (see CCI Notes 10/2, *Making Padded Blocks*).

Examination

Assess the condition of the artifact and the type of frame it is in.

This examination procedure will alert museum staff to conditions that may require special procedures to prevent further damage when the work is taken out of its frame, and will provide useful information to conservators.

The Artifact

Is the artifact loose? Has it slipped in its mat?

Has the image faded?

Are there colour losses or flaking pigment? If it is a pastel, chalk, or charcoal drawing, has any of the material transferred onto the glass or Plexiglas?

Is there moisture or condensation on the glass? Does the artifact appear to be sticking to the glazing? If so, is the paper cockled? Are mould spores present?

Is the artifact protruding from the mat?

Has the mat become discoloured?

The Frame

Is there evidence of insect infestation: frass, carcasses, exit holes (see CCI Notes 3/1, *Examining for Insect Infestation*)?

Is the moulding chipped? Are sections missing?

Has the gilding tarnished or has bronze or gold paint been used to "touch up" the frame?

Are there cracks or splits in the wood?

Are the joints loose?

Does the frame support the artifact adequately?

Does the artifact fit snugly, but not tightly, in the frame? Is the rabbet deep enough?

Is the glass dirty, chipped, broken, old, or flawed? If the glazing is Plexiglas, is it scratched? Has it bowed?

What type of backing board has been used (e.g., wood, cardboard)?

How is the artifact held in the frame (e.g., with nails, with glazer's points, etc.)?

Are screw eyes or hooks present?

Has the wire or cord become frayed, rusty, or broken?

Are there any framer's labels, accession numbers, or inscriptions? If so, these should be recorded.

It may not be possible to turn an artifact with loose or flaking pigment (e.g., gouache, pastel) upside down without causing further loss. Similarly, an artifact that has adhered to the glazing may require alternative procedures. If problems are encountered, do not attempt to deal with them yourself. Contact a conservator for advice or assistance.

If, at this point, no problems have been encountered, proceed to remove the artifact from its frame.

Procedure for Removal

Prior to removal, ensure that the glass is intact. Remove any loose shards about to fall out; use pliers carefully, taking care not to damage the artifact.

Next, place the frame face down on a clean, cushioned surface. If the frame is ornate, padded blocks should be used under the four corners.

Remove all dust and cobwebs with a soft brush. For heavy dirt, use a vacuum cleaner with a flexible hose; cover the nozzle with screening or cheesecloth.

Remove all screw eyes, wire, or cord.

Remove and preserve all labels attached to the backing. However, if these labels are attached to the artifact, or if the backing board forms part of the artifact, their removal should be left to a conservator.

If the frame is sealed with a sheet of brown paper or tape, cut around the edges, being careful not to penetrate the backing board or the paper artifact itself with the cutting instrument. Remove the tape.

Remove nails or glazer's points exposed in the above step with a pair of needle-nosed pliers. It is important to remove all nails or points because they may damage the artifact when it is removed.

From this point on, one of the following methods may be followed.

1. Remove the backing board, first ensuring that the artifact is not attached to it in any way. If the glass is of a size that can be handled easily, and if it is not taped to the frame, place your thumbs on opposite sides of the back of the frame and your fingers under the glass. Gently push up all the contents of the frame with your fingers. Once the glass, mat, and artifact are disengaged from the frame, gently remove them from the frame. When handling glass,

support it from below. Picture glass is thin and may be brittle and easily broken, especially if it is old.

OR

2. Turn the framed picture face up, ensuring that frame, mat, backing board, and glass are held together securely as they are turned over. Lift off the frame, then the glass. This method is preferable if the artifact is particularly fragile.

It is quite common to find that the artifact has been attached to the reverse of the window portion of the mat, either by all four edges (a procedure known as *drumming*) or by tape or hinges along the upper edge. Support the artifact underneath with an additional piece of board to prevent handling problems when it is removed from the frame. Only a qualified conservator should remove tape or adhesive deposits.

To remove paper artifacts from metal frames, simply unfasten the screws at two adjacent corners and remove one side. Take out any spacers that may have been pushed in under the moulding from the back. Slide out the glazing material and the artifact together.

When a matted artifact is returned to a metal frame, the choice of backing board will depend on the depth of the frame.

When reframing large works, avoid metal frames, which may not be sturdy enough; wooden mouldings may be more appropriate. Similarly, large sheets of Plexiglas tend to bow, sometimes enough to touch the artifact itself. Therefore, provide adequate space between the surface of the artifact and the inner surface of the Plexiglas. For more information, consult CCI Notes 11/3, *Glazing Materials for Framing Works on Paper*.

Attach a tie-on label to the frame (if it is to be separated from the artifact) that records the title or description of the artifact. Place a piece of cardboard or backing board in the frame to protect the glass.

Further Reading

Canadian Conservation Institute.
Examining for Insect Infestation.
CCI Notes 3/1. Ottawa: Canadian
Conservation Institute, 1986.

Canadian Conservation Institute.
*Glazing Materials for Framing Works
on Paper.* CCI Notes 11/3. Ottawa:
Canadian Conservation Institute,
1986.

Canadian Conservation Institute.
Making Padded Blocks. CCI Notes
10/2. Ottawa: Canadian Conserva-
tion Institute, 1986.

Clapp, Anne F. *Curatorial Care of
Works of Art on Paper.* New York:
Nick Lyons Books, 1987.

Ellis, Margaret Holben. *The Care
of Prints and Drawings.* Nashville:
AASLH Press (American Association
for State and Local History), 1987.

Smithsonian Institution. *Curatorial
Examination of Paper Objects.* Conserva-
tion Slide Series. Washington, DC:
Office of Museum Programs, July
1976.

by David Tremain
Works on Paper Laboratory

Copies are also available in French.

Texte également publié en version
française.

© Government of Canada, 1993
Cat. No. NM 95-57/11-6-1993E
ISSN 0714-6221