

# Preservation Practices

by Hugh Phibbs



## *An Alternative to Conservation*

**A**nyone working in framing today must be aware of the stunning speed with which chemical photography disappeared from the marketplace. A huge technical and commercial infrastructure of film manufacturers, printing paper makers, and film finishing outlets has been replaced by cameras in every phone and images that appear on screens but that may never find a long-term home on paper.

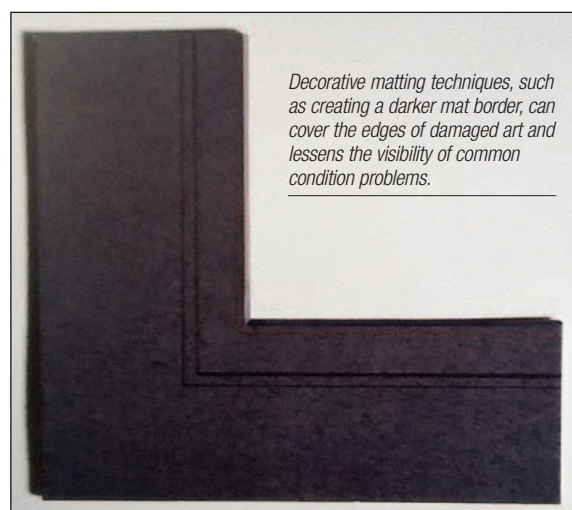
This shows how critical it is for everyone to plan for a changing technological landscape. An enterprise that focuses solely on framing may be vulnerable to shifting demographics and architectural trends. A business designed to help clients preserve

their collections has a much broader basis, since most people with disposable incomes collect items they prize.

How should one plan for this kind of work? Knowledge of the chemical and physical issues that are critical to preservation is a logical

beginning, as well as knowledge of art history, skill with art materials, and fabrication and logistics skills. These abilities will allow framers to assist their clients in identifying, tracking, housing, and enclosing their collections to enhance their preservation.

One area that is central to framing today is a



highly developed sense of aesthetic sensibilities. The same faculties that allow us to design mats and frames that enhance the appearance of works can be extended to use decorative matting techniques in a way that visually diminishes the appearance of disfigurements that might have once led to a visit to the paper conservator.

Often, clients may bring in paper items that are visually disfigured, often by oxidation. Oxidation damage comes in many forms, such as mat burn, tide lines, and foxing, which have traditionally been seen as requiring a work to be sent to a paper conservator. There is a problem with that option—beyond the time and expense. Using chemicals to lighten the oxidized material may provide temporary visual enhancement, but the oxidation may reappear later. When that occurs, clients tend to be justifiably upset. Instead, if a window mat that surrounds the damaged item is given an “antique” patina so that it is darker and visually stronger than the work, the viewer’s eye can be lead away from the

*From covering the edges of damaged art to distracting the eye, specialized decorative matting can offer a great alternative to sending a work of art to a conservator*

damage and the design on the work can be seen better—without the risks of chemical change.

The simple principle of visual relativity can be followed. If art is surrounded with a border that is darker, the art will appear lighter. A border that is visually striking will make the artwork next to it appear plainer. If you follow this principle when designing a border, the viewer's impression should be a clearer view of the design and a lessened impression of the condition problem.

Foxing is the most common problem and the simplest to address since it is not difficult to mimic. If a watercolor wash of reddish-brown was flecked onto the matboard, it might work. However, the surface tension in water would tend to keep the edges of the spots discrete, while

foxing spots bleed into the surrounding paper. Adding alcohol to the wash will break the surface tension of the water and will enable the bleeding. Inexpensive bristle paintbrushes, which can be found at any hardware store, are perfect tools for this. Their uneven bristles make them ideal for creating patination, since avoiding regular repetition is critical. They can be used to create spatter patterns, and their uneven bristles are invaluable in other patterning effects.

These brushes can be used to pounce a darker wash onto a wet background, to pick up paint from a surface to which a wash has been applied, or to even out a wash on a wetted surface similar to faux finishing. Experimentation on scrap board should show the techniques that produce the most elegant and

predictable surfaces to lessen the appearance of foxing and begrimed paper art.

Mat burns—oxidation lines from ligneous bevels—are harder to mask through competing patterns. They should be matted over with the edges of a window, keeping them out of the light and away from further oxidation.

Art that arrives with a tear that cannot be covered by a mat presents another problem. If the tear has overlapping edges, it may be tempting to think about adhering the edges. However, the adhesive may discolor over time. If the sides of the tear can be pressed together to mask the tear, the sheet can be fitted behind acrylic sheet or Vivak (PETG) and pressed closed from behind with needle punch polyester batting, eliminating the need for the

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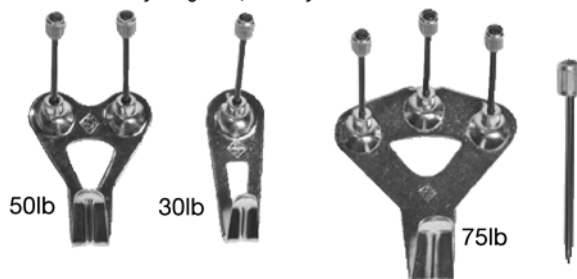
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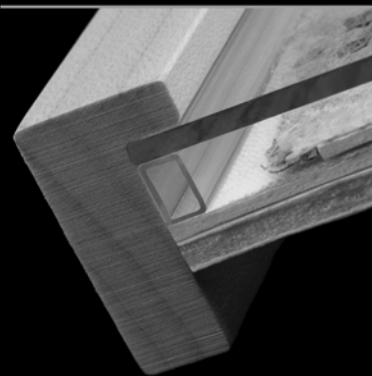
chemical intervention of an adhesive; if a print arrives with part of the design torn out, it may be given a similar treatment. If a photocopy of the entire design can be made on a paper comparable to that in the print, then the missing portion can be carefully cut from the copy and inserted in the loss. Since it is a copy, it can be adhered to the back mat so that, when the print is pressed onto it with an acrylic or Vivak glazing sheet, the edges will close.

These techniques entail modification of the pristine surface of the board to relieve the visual impact of the distressed condition of the art.

Other techniques, including enhanced mats, can be used to add order and elegance to frame designs while furthering the goal of preservation. Ultimately, well-informed framers can turn their talents into vital tools to provide safe and profitable care of the collections entrusted to them. **PFM**

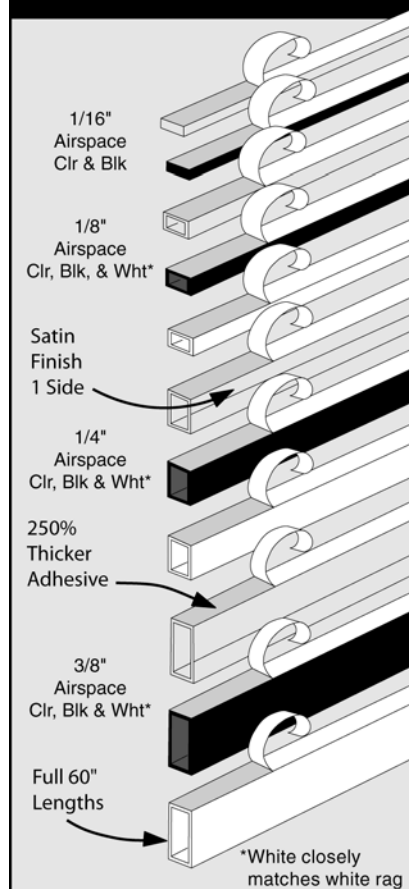
**Hugh Phibbs**, preservation editor, recently retired as the coordinator of preservation services in the Department of Exhibitions and Loans, Conservation Division, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. He has given workshops for The National Conference, the AIC, and the PPFA as well as for staffs of the Louvre, The Hermitage, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Getty Museum, MoMA, and the Smithsonian Museums of Art. He is currently working on innovations in the field and consults for Tru Vue.

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