

Border Patrol

The long-term health of pictures depends on careful selection of frames and proper lighting

BY MICHELLE FALKENSTEIN

Joan Irving, the senior paper conservator at the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts in Philadelphia, has seen patterns of wood grain and corrugated cardboard coming right through drawings. She has found prints nibbled by tenacious silverfish, which crave humidity and organic material. She has witnessed hand-colored pictures drastically faded by sun exposure.

In short, Irving has seen the worst of what lighting and framing can do to art when applied improperly. These two basic components of displaying art can harm or help, embellish or detract from the pieces themselves. The trick is to strike a balance between how something looks and the conservation requirements that permit you and your art to live in harmony for many years, before you pass it on to future generations.

Of primary concern in framing are matting, glazing—the glass or Plexiglas that covers the work—and, of course, esthetics. According to the Thaw Conservation Center at the Morgan Library in New York, prints and drawings should be matted on rag board, buffered rag board, or conservation board, all of which have an alkaline pH. The last two are buffered, which means they have been treated with alkaline reserves that neutralize the acid in their surroundings. If the work is to be attached inside the frame, as opposed to being matted, Japanese rice- or wheat hinges and vegetable-starch paste should be used. The key is to create a system that can easily be undone without damaging the work. Photographs should always be mounted on unbuffered rag board that has passed a photographic activity test. Glazing should always screen out harmful ultraviolet rays.

Frames are important for paintings as well as drawings, says Leane Coppola DelGaizo, collection-care specialist at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. “They protect the edges, provide a means of safe handling and storage, and stabilize the work,” she comments. Conservators also recommend a solid archival backing board on the reverse of the painting, screwed into the frame, to protect the work from dust, pollutants, and blows from behind. A new type of paperboard containing molecular traps for pollutants has recently been developed. Manufactured by Nielsen & Bainbridge, it is marketed under the name Artcare.

But there’s more to framing art than protection, and framing choices can have historical significance—whether in terms of respecting the artist’s wishes or echoing styles in architecture and fashion from the period when the work was made. “It’s the framer’s job to educate the person who is the new custodian of an artwork,” says Larry Shar, president of Julius Lowy Frame and Restoring in New York, a firm that specializes in 16th- to 20th-century frames. “Then, we can help them choose an esthetically pleasing frame that best presents the work.”

The framer for Kenneth and David Thomson, the media magnates who recently purchased Peter Paul Rubens’s 1609–11 *Masacre of the Innocents* for \$76.7 million, recently said that the



Gustav Klimt sometimes designed his own frames, such as this one for *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, 1901.

painting will be reframed. The buyer judged the current frame not up to the standards of one of the most expensive works of art ever sold. Notes Jared Bark, an owner of Bark Frameworks in New York, “It’s very interesting to an informed eye to look at a painting and recognize that its frame is not an off-the-shelf, formulaic version of a 17th-century French frame but a frame that was conceived and designed specifically for this work. That kind of awareness adds a certain meaning to the frame.”

For example, Bark notes, Degas collector Louisine Havemeyer held the artist’s intentions in high regard and tried to select frames that were consistent with Degas’s personal framing designs. “The legacy of her frame choices is still evident at the Met,” says Bark, since Havemeyer donated many of her works to the museum.

Next month a new book, *Defining Edges: A New Look at Picture Frames* (Harry N. Abrams), by framing consultant W. H. Bailey, is being released. By examining the frames of 56 paintings from different eras, Bailey explores the frame as

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content, altarpiece, window, and decoration.

"We're psychologically conditioned to see the world in rectangles with things on the other side, like landscapes or reflections," he says. "It's a very odd sensation when a frame is empty. That's when you realize the psychological power of what the frame does." Frames can be so valuable that LeConte Moore, managing director of the cultural institution practice at Marsh & McLennan Companies, an insurance broker in New York, reminds collectors that if they purchase an expensive frame for a painting, they should include it in their coverage.

When it comes to lighting, paper has very restrictive requirements, says Margaret Holben Ellis, director of the Morgan's Thaw Conservation Center. "All light damage is cumulative," she says. "And all works of art that use organic materials will be affected by light." Even inorganic earth pigments like yellow ochre, when placed on canvas, paper, or wooden board, will be affected.

Ellis also suggests that UV-filtering glazing be changed every 10 to 15 years because its ability to screen out harmful rays declines. She also recommends lowering the blinds and turning art to the wall when you're not home, as well as rotating your drawings so that nothing is on display for more than three months a year. In general, drawings and paintings should not be displayed across from windows.

Although people may think paintings are more durable than works on paper, works on canvas can also be damaged by light. "Light is a form of energy," says DelGaizo. "An organic object will absorb light and induce chemical changes. You'll see a yellowing of varnishes and layers of paint interacting and degrading, and the damage is irreversible. If you have exposed canvas in a contemporary painting, it's even worse—it's a textile and will weaken and degrade."

Another serious danger for paintings is picture lights. Experts say that putting a local light source close to a painting creates a hot spot at the top of the canvas, which leads to accelerated aging. "They're beautiful, but you shouldn't have them," says DelGaizo. "You don't want to drill into the frame, and if a picture light falls off, it can tear the canvas on



Claude Monet's *The Ducal Palace in Venice, 1908*, in its former frame (above) and as it was reframed last fall by Bark Frameworks for the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The fluted white-gold frame was hand carved and laid on blue clay to harmonize with the painting's color palette.



the way down."

How much light should your art be exposed to? "The party line is 5 to 15 foot-candles, or 50 to 150 lux units in the European system, for works on paper," says Philadelphia's Irving. This quantity can be measured by a lighting professional. In addition, neither works on paper nor paintings should be kept near radiators or over fireplaces. Current museum standards suggest an ideal environment of 50 percent humidity and 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

Day-Glo, the ultimate color representation of urban alienation, is a special case. Chemically, no matter which measures are taken, these colors eventually disappear. "The only way to avoid it is to keep them in total darkness, and no one's ready to do that quite yet," Ellis says. "If you look at them the way they're meant to be seen, you shorten their lifetimes." While some in the art world believe that the only way to view Day-Glo work is in ways that are dangerous to it, Ellis suggests a less nihilistic approach: change the light source. "The trick is to get it to look like more light is on these things than really is," she says. The same problems apply to Japanese prints and Polaroids, two of the other most delicate objects around.

An artwork's framing and lighting can play a big role in the way an insurance claim is handled. Moore notes that few policies will pay a claim unless damage is "sudden and accidental." He explains: "If you put a drawing in the window for three years and you knew it was fading and didn't take any action, the claim would be denied," he says. "Insurance is supposed to be for unpredictable and unforeseen circumstances." He notes, however, that if the work was in a storage warehouse under proper conditions and the air-conditioning system broke down, heating your work rapidly and causing damage, it would be easier to make your case.

"A museum is very different from a collector's house," DelGaizo says. "In a museum, there's a team working every day to insure that optimal environmental standards are met for the different media." Basically, art collectors should think of themselves as heads of conservation teams for their own collections—a team that includes the proper framers, lighting experts, and conservators. ■