

Caring for Frames

Ford Conservation Center

2021

About Frames



Frames come in all shapes and sizes. Some are so large they must be disassembled to fit through doorways, while others are so small that they enclose tiny portrait miniatures. Frames can be highly decorative or inconspicuously plain. Some frames were even designed by the artists specifically for the artwork they enclose. No matter the size or adornment, frames add to and protect the works of art they surround and should be cared for accordingly. Frames can be made from just about anything. Common materials can include:

- Solid wood
- Wood veneer
- Metal
- Ceramic
- Glass
- Plastic

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Parts of a Frame

Decorative elements of frames may include:

Carved wood elements, which were most popular before the early 19th century.

Cast decorative elements, such as “compo”, or plaster. Compo (also known as composition) is a mixture consisting mainly of whiting, ani-

mal glue, oil, and rosin, which can be cast in molds to easily create elaborate decorative elements. It became widely used by the mid-nineteenth century. Cast plaster elements also became more popular in the late 19th century. Numerous other cast materials have been used on frames, ranging from paper mache to plastic. Cast orna-

Parts of a Frame Cont.

ments are typically adhered (and sometimes nailed) to the surface of the frame rails. On traditional frames, the cast ornaments were gessoed and prepared for gilding or painting.

Gilding, with gold leaf, silver leaf (called silver gilt), or aluminum leaf (so-called 'Dutch metal'). Gilding on frames is generally either water gilding, which is applied using an aqueous solution containing animal glue, or oil gilding, which is applied using an oil size. Both are often found on the same frame.

Paint, of any variety, applied either intentionally or as an attempt at restoration. This includes "bronze paint", which consists of bronze powder in a medium.

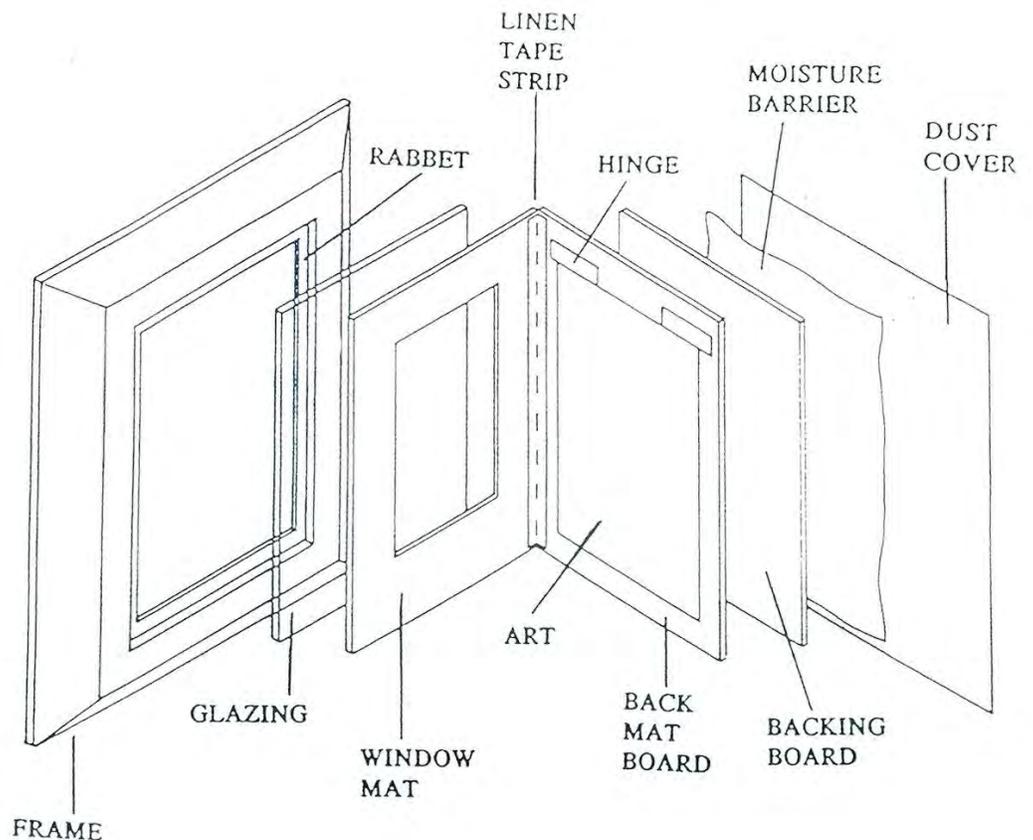
Varnish, such as shellac, used to seal and protect the surface of a frame, especially if there is delicate gilding present. Sometimes varnish is used to modify the color.

The structural parts of the frame include:

Rail – The four individual sides of a frame.

Rabbet --the small space or lip in which the painting will rest. If the size of the frame is not exactly that of the painting or if the owner prefers a more elaborate setting for the artwork, a fillet is added.

Fillet --a very thin, simple inner frame that is slipped in to the rabbet of the larger frame. It makes the opening of the frame smaller



and adds an additional decorative element to the whole frame packet. The fillet provides the new inner rabbet in which the painting will rest. Simple fillets are often just gilt or silver gilt rims, but they can also be elaborate, even fabric-covered, elements of the frame. [Note: this is not shown in the accompanying diagram]

Glazing – the glass or acrylic used to cover and protect artwork in a picture frame.

Backing Board – Acid-free corrugated cardboard, acid-free foam core, or plastic that protects the artwork from impact, handling errors, dust and debris, temperature fluctuations, and adverse effects from labels and markings.

Hanging Hardware – the D-rings, hooks and screws needed to hang a framed work of art .

Handling a Frame

Much of the damage to frames occurs when they are being handled, moved, and hung. Frames are often large, bulky, and heavy. They can be awkward to move and hang. Before moving a framed item:

Examine the frame carefully. Look to see if protruding elements along the bottom of the frame allows for resting the frame on the floor. Specially-sized padded blocks may be needed to keep protruding decorative corner elements from being crushed.

Examine the mounting mechanisms to determine how to safely remove the piece from the wall. Clips or any other holding devices should be opened or removed before attempting to lift the piece.

Prepare a clean, empty location where the frame can be placed or leaned. Do this BEFORE the object is taken off the wall!

Handle frames with clean dry hands or with clean nitrile gloves. Handle smaller frames and frames made of metal while wearing clean cotton or

nitrile gloves. Remove all jewelry and sharp items to prevent scratches and punctures.

You should be able to comfortably grasp one side of the frame in each hand, about halfway up the side, with the front facing the handler. Remember if the frame includes glazing, it may be heavier than anticipated. If the frame is too large or heavy for one person to handle, enlist others to help.

Keep in mind that decorative elements on the frame may be fragile and are likely only adhered to the surface below. Grabbing decorative elements may damage them or cause them to break off.



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Cleaning

Materials needed:

- gloves (latex or nitrile)
- small soft natural bristle brush, such as a Hake brush
- variable speed HEPA vacuum
- vacuum screen
- rubber band

WARNING: Never spray any liquid directly on the glazing as it may run between the glazing and the frame, causing damage to the artwork below. Never attempt to clean the surface of the frame with water or any type of cleaning solution as you could easily remove the gilding or paint.

Frames that are in good condition can be dusted with a very soft natural bristle brush. White bristles are best so you can see when the brush has become soiled and needs to be washed. Japanese Haké brushes and Lord Sheraton® Butler's Brushes are both excellent choices. Do not use a feather duster or cloth as these can scratch the frame or snag loose compo or gesso. Do not wipe frames with a damp cloth as you may accidentally remove metallic gilding, paint, or other surface coatings.

To remove accumulated dirt and dust from a **stable** frame surface, use a broad, soft brush and a HEPA vacuum. Cover your vacuum nozzle with a nylon screen or cheesecloth to prevent any loose bits from getting sucked into the vacuum. Remove any loose dirt or dust by brushing lightly with a soft brush. If the brush has a metal ferule, cover it with tape to prevent scratching. Gently sweep the brush over the surface toward the vacuum nozzle. Do not attempt to clean the surface with cloth or feather dusters, as

these can catch or scratch the surface. If you are worried that the surface of the frame is not stable enough for dusting with a soft brush, contact a conservator. Never use any liquid cleaning agents, detergents, or solvents on a frame. These activities should only be carried out by an experienced conservator.

If the glazing needs to be cleaned, try using a soft, dry cloth to clean it. If a dry cloth will not work, apply a light spray of glass cleaner or Plexiglas cleaner to a soft cloth, then transfer it to the glazing. Rub the surface of the glazing slowly, being careful to avoid contact with the inner edges of the frame.



Hangng Frames

Proper hanging is one of the most important elements in the long-term care of works of art. While the method below requires some care to make sure the fixtures are level and measured appropriately, it will

ensure the safety of the frame and artwork:

- 1) Choose a location away from outside walls because they are prone to moisture and temperature fluctuations.

2) Avoid direct sunlight and other sources of ultraviolet light, such as fluorescent light bulbs.

3) Position the artwork away from water pipes and blowing air vents.

4) Do not place artwork above working fireplaces.

5) Hanging hardware should be secured to the part of the **outer** frame closest to the wall if possible. Inner frames parts, such as the fillet, may be closer to the wall, but they may not be structurally sound enough to carry the combined weight of the frame and artwork.

6) Standard museum practice avoids using eye hooks and picture wire, especially for large or heavy frames. Suspending the frame with picture wire causes stress on frame parts, and picture wire has been known to snap over time.

7) Use at least two D-rings with the appropriate weight rating for the painting. If one should fail, the other D-ring may prevent the painting from falling.

8) The D-rings should be used with hooks that are either nailed or screwed into the wall.

9) For exceptionally large or heavy paintings, ledges or brackets placed below the frame can be used to distribute the weight securely.



“Standard museum practice avoids using eye hooks and picture wire, especially for large or heavy frames.”

Storage of Frames and Framed Objects

A frame should be the proper size for the object placed within it. The rabbet of the frame should be lined with felt to protect the edges of the object from abrasion, and an acid-free, lignin-free backing board should be fitted to the back of the work of art. The object in the frame and its accompanying backboard should be held in the frame with either offset clips or fixing plates that have been bent and sized to fit securely. The clips or fixing plates should be screwed into the back of the frame so that the work of art can easily be removed from the frame. No screws should

connect the plates to the painting stretchers or panels. The stretcher or panel should only be pressure-fit to the back of the frame.

Frames can be stored in carpet-lined bins, on metal racks, or on the floor on padded blocks. If frames are stored in bins or on blocks, there should be a piece of acid-free cardboard or acid-free foam-board placed between each frame, larger than the outside dimension of the frame. The frames should be stored in secure spaces with stable environmental

conditions, ideally between 68 - 72° F (20 - 21 ° C) and 40-50% relative humidity. The surface of the frames should be covered with clear polyethylene plastic, which acts as a dust cover and protects the frames from ceiling leaks.

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Emergency Procedures

If your frame gets wet from a flood, leak, or other emergency, do not panic. There are simple steps to follow to minimize damage to the frame:

Remove the frame from the source of water as soon as possible.

Do not try to dry the frame by towel-drying. Compo may have softened from water exposure and could have the consistency of paste. Gilding and

other surface decoration may come off on your hands.

Place the frame face up on a flat surface to dry.

If there is an object in the frame, such as a painting, lean the frame against a wall, face out, and allow it to air dry.

If the frame or the painting is flaking, lay it flat and face up. Save any pieces that may have fallen off.

If the frame or painting begins to bow or warp, remove the painting from the frame and allow the two parts (painting and frame) to air-dry separately. Contact a conservator as soon as possible for ad-



Consulting a Conservator

It is common for old frames to exhibit some minor surface cracks and small losses due to age, handling, and being kept in unstable environments. If your frame is structurally unsound, damaged, or exhibits continuing loss of the surface or decorative elements, it is a good idea to have it looked at by a conservator. A conservator will be able to assess issues relating to its care, and determine an appropriate treatment that does not diminish its value. Conservators can provide basic structural repairs, create of missing components, and carry out aesthetic compensation.

Additional Resources

Library of Congress. "Preservation Guidelines for Matting and Framing". <https://www.loc.gov/preservation/care/mat.html>

Cleveland Museum of Art, Conservation Department. (1976). *Guidelines for the Care and Handling of Works of Art*.

Shelley, Marjorie. (1987). *The Care and Handling of Art Object: Practices in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. Metropolitan Museum of Art– New York City.

Conservation Suppliers

Conservation Resources International

7350-A Lockport Place
Lorton, Virginia 22079
Toll free: (800) 634-6932
www.conservationresources.com
Archival housing/storage supplies, photographic supplies, general

Gaylord Archival

P. O. Box 4901
Syracuse, NY 13221-4901
Toll Free: (800) 448-6160
www.gaylord.com
General conservation supplies, housing supplies

Hollinger Metal Edge, Inc.

9401 Northeast Drive
Fredericksburg, VA 22408
Toll Free: (800) 634-0491
www.hollingermetaledge.com
Archival housing/storage supplies

Light Impressions

100 Carlson Road
Rochester, NY 14610
Toll Free: (888) 222-2054
www.lightimpressionsdirect.com
Photographic supplies, housing, matting and framing supplies

University Products

517 Main Street
P. O. Box 101
Holyoke, MA 01041
Toll Free: (800) 628-1912
www.universityproducts.com
General conservation supplies, housing and matting supplies

Talas

330 Morgan Ave
Brooklyn, NY 11211
Telephone: (212) 219-0770
www.talasonline.com
Conservation supplies, photographic supplies, general



This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services grant LG-43-12-0463-12. www.imls.gov

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