

## About Paintings



For the purposes of this document, easel paintings are considered paintings done on canvas, panel, wood, cardboard, or metal. For specific questions related to paintings on walls, either painted directly on plaster or on canvas adhered to the wall, contact the Ford Center.

Wood panels: panels can be made from various types and cuts of wood, and they may be fashioned from a single piece of wood or composed of several sections joined together. Wood panels may be prone to sea-

Inside this issue:

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| About Paintings      | 1 |
| Handling             | 2 |
| Cleaning             | 3 |
| Framing              | 3 |
| Hanging              | 4 |
| Storage              | 5 |
| In Case of Emergency | 6 |

sonal changes in relative humidity and will have varying amounts of warping and may develop cracks. Often there are attached reinforcements on the reverse of a panel.

Canvas paintings: Most often, canvas is tacked or stapled to a wood frame. The frame can be adjustable in the corners to allow for slight overall dimensional changes.

These adjustable corners allow for adjustment of the canvas tension. This is called a “stretcher”. When a canvas is mounted to a non-adjustable wood frame with glued or nailed corners, it is called a



“strainer”. Stretchers are always preferred because canvases frequently become slack on strainers, resulting in buckling distortions; this eventually weakens the support and can cause

NOTE: The original support materials – canvas, panels, stretchers, and strainers – often bear valuable inscriptions, signatures, old labels, numerical information, or addresses which help document the painting's history. This information should be retained.

flaking of the paint layers. It is sometimes necessary for an old strainer to be replaced by a newly-made stretcher.

Cardboard: Although cardboard is also considered in the realm of paper conservation, paintings have commonly been made either directly on cardboard or on canvas which is pre-adhered commercially

to cardboard panels (called “canvas board”). Like wood panels, these panels may develop a convex warp on the painted side. The edges can be easily damaged from handling over time. In general, cardboard supports can become extremely weak and brittle over time; special care must be taken to avoid any handling which can result in the support rupturing altogether.

### Handling

Careful and correct handling can be crucial to preserving paintings. When handling a painting, keep the following in mind:

- 1) It is important to keep handling to a minimum; only handle one painting at a time.
- 2) Unless instructed by a conservator to do otherwise, always move and store paintings vertically.
- 3) If framed, make sure the painting is secure within its frame.
- 4) Always use two hands to carry a painting. Place one hand underneath and one hand on the side of the frame or stretcher/strainer.
- 5) Do not touch or put pressure on the front or back of a painting or allow any object to rest against the surface.
- 6) Do not insert your fingers between the canvas and the stretcher/strainer.
- 7) If you need to carry a painting through a door, make sure the



doors are propped open or someone is with you to hold the door.

8) Large or heavy paintings must be handled by two or more people. Very large or heavy paintings should be moved with a dolly or cart.

9) If a painting must stand temporarily on the floor, place it on skid pads or padded two-by-fours.



## Cleaning

Periodic dusting will help to keep dust, dirt, and debris from accumulating on the painting's surface. Cleaning procedures should not be undertaken on any paintings exhibiting:

- Loose or friable media
- Delicate or fragile supports
- Structural damages like tears or losses
- Extensive repairs

## Procedure

- 1) Use a broad, soft brush and a HEPA vacuum.
- 2) Remove any loose dirt or dust by brushing lightly with a soft brush. If the brush has a metal ferule, cover it with cloth tape to prevent scratching.
- 3) Gently sweep the brush over the surface toward the vacuum nozzle.
- 4) Do not attempt to clean the surface with cloth or feather dusters as these can catch or scratch the surface.

If you are concerned that the sur-

face of the painting is not stable enough for dusting with a soft brush, contact a conservator. Liquid cleaning with water, detergents or solvents should only be carried out by a conservator.



### Materials Needed:

- Gloves (latex or nitrile)
- Small soft natural bristle brush, such as a Hake brush
- Variable speed HEPA vacuum

## Framing

Frames are not only decorative elements; they also protect the paintings they surround. The correct dimensions must be obtained so the frame can be constructed or adjusted properly.

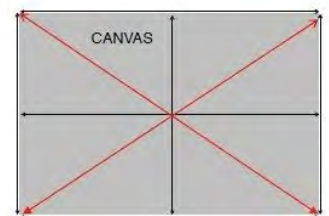
- 1) Measure along each edge as well as across the horizontal and vertical centers.
- 2) Measure both diagonals. If the painting is square, the diagonals will be the same.

3) The thickness of the support should also be measured so the rabbet depth can be determined.

4) The frame should accommodate the largest measurement of the painting and the smaller dimensions can be filled to prevent lateral movement.

5) The rabbet should allow a few millimeters of space on all sides of the painting.

6) Use felt tape to line the rabbet to



“Attaching a backing board protects canvas paintings from impact, handling errors, dust and debris, temperature fluctuations, and adverse effects from labels and markings.”

provide protection to the front edges of the painting.

7) Thin strips of cork, balsa wood, or museum rag board can be used to fill out large gaps along the sides to prevent lateral movement.

8) Attaching a backing board protects canvas paintings from impact, handling errors, dust and debris, temperature fluctuations, and adverse effects from labels and markings. It is not necessary to perforate the backing board with ventilation holes.

9) For framed paintings, the backing board should be held in positions with offset clips to secure the painting in its frame.

10) For unframed paintings, the backing board should be cut a couple centimeters smaller than the edge of the strainer/stretcher so it isn't visible when viewed from the front. The backing board can then

be attached with counter sunk washers and flat head screws to the strainer or stretcher.

11) Large paintings may require several boards to cover the back surface. Sheets can be joined at the braces with counter sunk washers and flat head screws.

12) Nails and staples should not be used to attach backing boards, or to hold paintings in frames.



## Hanging

Proper hanging and placement of a painting is one of the most important elements in the long-term care of paintings. While the method below requires some care to make sure the fixtures are level and measured appropriately, it helps to ensure the safety of the painting and frame.

1) First, choose a location away from outside walls because they are prone to moisture and temperature fluctuations.

2) Avoid direct sunlight and ultraviolet light.

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

4) Do not place paintings 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 a fillet, may be closer to the wall, but they may not be structurally sound enough



to carry the combined weight of the frame and painting.

6) If a painting is unframed and determined to be strong enough to bear its own weight, the hardware can be attached to the stretcher or strainer.

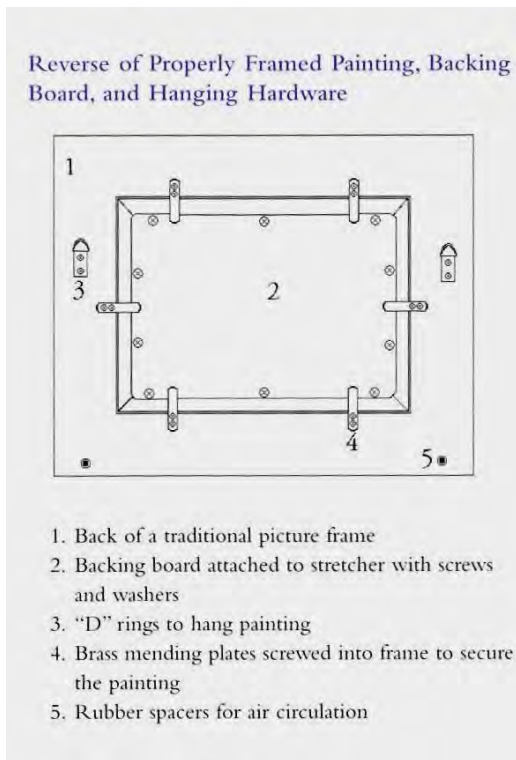
7) Avoid wire or string as these can break. If wire must be used, use cable wire.

8) Use at least two D-rings with the appropriate weight rating for the painting. By using more than one, if one should fail, the other may prevent the painting from falling.

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

10) For exceptionally large or heavy

paintings, ledges or brackets placed below the frame can be used to distribute the weight securely.



From the guide "Caring for Your Treasures: Paintings", American Institute of Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works, [www.conservation-us.org](http://www.conservation-us.org)

## Storage

When not on display, paintings should be stored safely and securely. They should not be stored in basements or attics, which are prone to greater fluctuations in temperature and humidity.

- If stored on the floor, paintings should be placed on padded blocks at least 4" high to pre-

vent possible water damage.

- Paintings should be stored upright (vertically) whenever possible.
- If stored with other paintings, remove all hanging hardware to prevent scratches or puncture damage.

- Place cardboard sheets between each painting to prevent abrasion to surfaces.
- Cover storage areas with plastic sheeting to prevent water damage from leaks or fire suppression systems.
- Ideal environmental conditions for paintings is 68 - 72° F (20 - 21 ° C) and about 50% relative humidity. Although paintings are often stable in conditions outside these specific parameters, it is most important for conditions to remain consistent.



## In Case of Emergency

If a painting has been damaged in any way, contact a conservator for advice as quickly as possible.

- Paintings that have become wet during an emergency should be moved away from moisture and air-dried slowly.
  - If torn, do not use tape to try to mend the tear.
  - Save any pieces and/or paint flakes.
  - In general, discoloration of varnish is not an emergency and does not pose a threat to the painting itself.
- When bringing a painting to a conservator, do not wrap it in a blanket or sheet as this may catch on the paint and cause more damage. Instead, protect the front and back with sheets of cardboard.



## Consulting a Conservator

If your painting is unstable, damaged, or exhibits a surface that you think may be damaged by cleaning, it is safest to consult a conservator before trying to clean it yourself. 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, remove old discolored varnish, apply new varnish, and provide proper storage materials and recommendations.

## Additional Resources

American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works. *Caring for Your Treasures<sup>7</sup>Paintings*—Retrieved from [www.conservation-us.org/docs/default-source/resource-center/paintings.pdf](http://www.conservation-us.org/docs/default-source/resource-center/paintings.pdf).

Cleveland Museum of Art. (1976). *Guidelines for the Care and Handling of Works of Art<sup>3</sup>*Cleveland Museum of Art, Conservation Department.

National Parks Service. (2000). "Curatorial Care of Easel Paintings. Museum Handbook, Part 1, Museum Collections", <https://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/MHI/AppendL.pdf>

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](http://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](http://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](http://www.hollingermetaledge.com)  
Archival housing/storage supplies

### Light Impressions

100 Carlson Road  
Rochester, NY 14610  
Toll Free: (888) 222-2054  
[www.lightimpressionsdirect.com](http://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](http://www.universityproducts.com)  
General conservation supplies, housing and matting supplies

### Talas

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



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**Ford Conservation Center**  
1326 S 32 Street Omaha, NE 68105 402-595-1180  
[hn.fordcenter@nebraska.gov](mailto:hn.fordcenter@nebraska.gov) [history.nebraska.gov/conservation-center](http://history.nebraska.gov/conservation-center)