

## FRAMING AND UNFRAMING

Items believed to be in their original frames should be extensively documented for future reference regarding historic framing techniques. The information below describes the materials and procedures for unframing and framing works on paper.

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### Work Space

A. Table Space: two tables or a surface space twice the maximum size of the item should be used to provide two separate work areas.

1. One table area should be reserved for preliminary cleaning of the frame and removal of backing materials used to seal the frame. It should be covered with a resilient material such as scrap carpeting or synthetic rubber matting. Thick foam padding should be available to cushion especially ornate frames.
2. A second table area should provide a clean surface on which to examine the item as necessary. It should be covered overall with changeable brown paper or similar material. It should be topped with a clean white blotter, where the item will be placed.

B. Storage Space:

1. Frames should be stored in vertical racks or standing on edge on padded blocks leaning against a support and interleaved with corrugated board to protect the frames.
2. Unframed paper artifacts should be stored in horizontal map drawers, properly identified in appropriate housing.
3. Never store a framed item where it can be exposed to light, particularly if the glass has been taped over to protect against breakage, since differential discoloration can occur.

C. Environmental Controls

1. Lighting should be good enough for close observation, but the light source should never be so close to the item as to exert any heat on it.
2. Temperature and relative humidity should be controlled and comparable to that of the rest of the environment. If the framed item has come from a much different environment, it should be allowed some way of acclimatizing and stabilizing.

D. Transportation

1. Frames should be transported either vertically in a slotted movable cart, or horizontally on a padded, rolling table protected by interleaving. If it must be carried without support, the sides of the frame should be grasped firmly with the front facing the carrier. Do not use the wire across the back as this is liable to break or come loose when old.

2. Unframed paper artifacts should be carried, after properly rehoused for storage, supported either by a movable cart or sandwiched between two rigid supports.
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#### Documentation materials

- A. Forms: work authorization forms; registration forms; loan specification forms; and examination forms to record condition and notations.
  - B. Camera to provide photographs of condition at the time of unframing.
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#### Unframing Tools and Materials

- A. Large table(s) with padding.
  - B. Storage space for frames and unframed pictures.
  - C. Good light source (preferably cold light source).
  - D. Appropriate documentation forms.
  - E. Unframing tools: needle-nose pliers and screw drivers for removal of old retaining and hanging devices and a microspatula or palette knife to remove labels from the frame back or lift window mats or check for points of adhesion.
  - F. Container for holding or storing removed nails, etc.
  - G. Acid-free corrugated board about the size of the frame for support while removing contents from the frame and also to support the unframed item during transfer into a folder, etc.
  - H. Storage materials for the unframed item such as a variety of standard sized folders of acid-free paper and/or polyester film, acid-free interleaving tissue or supportive matboard, or boxes (get corrugated or white or phase boxes, etc.).
  - I. Trash can for disposal of irrelevant framing material.
  - J. Soft bristle, clean drafting brush to clean off work surface frequently.
  - K. Clean, acid-free blotters for examination surface.
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## Unframing Procedure

- A. Photograph the front and back of the framed item to visually record the state of the item as received. Take detail shots of any interesting or peculiar observations. Continue to photograph significant observations discovered during the process of unframing.
- B. Fill out all the necessary forms. Carefully examine the framed item and record all observations about the frame and paper item on the examination form. Elaborate on these observations as unframing continues. Try to anticipate potential problems which would require the advice of a conservator before unframing. These could include any of the following:
1. Item stuck to glass: this is indicated by a glossiness or intensification of the ink or colors of the item, and could result in skinning during normal unframing.
  2. Item loose from mat: this may be the case if the item appears askew or is overlapping the window mat edge and could result in tearing of the item during unframing.
  3. Item buckled: may indicate that the item is loosely sandwiched into the window mat rather than adhered in any way.
  4. Glass warped or cracked: this could prove very dangerous to both item and staff during unframing. Note also whether the glass may be original to the frame or is old. Old glass is often warped or has minute air bubbles.
  5. Frame joints loose: this could cause the frame to be unstable during and after unframing. Note whether the frame seems to be original.
- C. Turn the framed item face down on the padded surface.
- D. Remove the hardware. Discard old wire if approved, and place old screw eyes in place in the container.
- E. Clean the back of the frame by dusting and mark the frame edge with a label identifying it by item name, division, etc.
- F. Record on the examination form any labels or notations found on the back of the frame.
- G. Remove any labels or notations on the backing paper, which is usually destroyed when the frame is opened, by carefully slicing around their edges with a microspatula or palette knife. Insert the labels into a folder accompanying the forms.
- H. Remove the backing paper by carefully tearing it away, and discard if approved.
- I. Remove the retaining devices (nails, brads, diamond-shaped wedges or framers' points) by gently loosening them with sideways tapping and pulling towards the center of the frame with needle-nose pliers. Place the retainers in the container with the screw-eyes.

J. Check that no retaining devices or obstacles remain hidden below the exposed backing by closely examining the space between the backing's edges and the inner rim of the frame.

K. Reach under the glass/plexiglas front and slightly press it with your fingers to determine whether it is free of the frame's rabbet. Depending on this, remove the contents of the frame in one of the following manners:

1. If the glass is not attached to the rabbet, and the item is fairly small (less than 24" x 36"):
  - a) Continue pushing up on the glass with your hands at diagonal corners, rest the freed contents on the back edges of the frame to get a new grasp, and then place the contents, still face down, on a clean surface.
  - b) Try to determine which layer of backing material is in direct contact with the item without disturbing it.
  - c) Carefully lift off any miscellaneous backing materials which are not attached to the reverse of the picture. Gently dust the back.
  - d) Cover the back with a rigid support of acid-free board and turn the contents, including the glass, face up.
  - e) Carefully lift the glass up off the item, making sure the paper is in no place stuck to the glass. Place the glass back in the frame and secure it within. A piece of rigid board should be included for protection against breakage and the frame should be placed in storage.
2. If the glass is not attached to the rabbet, and the item is large or heavy:
  - a) Cover the back with a rigid board, invert the frame, and lift the frame away.
  - b) Repeat step e) above.
3. If the glass is separately attached to the frame:
  - a) Cover the back of the frame with rigid board.
  - b) Stand the frame on one of its long edges on padding.
  - c) Tilt the whole ensemble backward until the frame's contents become loose and fall against the hand supported rigid board.
  - d) Ease the tilted contents on the board down onto the table surface.
  - e) Place the frame and glass in storage as above.

L. Note on the examination form the components of the housing unit (i.e., window mat, backboard, etc.); their conditions; and the means of adhesion to the item, if any. Note in particular any damage which the housing unit may have caused to the item (matburn, woodburn, cockled hinges, tape stains, light degradation, etc.).

M. Note the condition of the item, both on the front and on the back if possible, with special attention to problems which are the result of bad housing, storage, and handling which might otherwise be attributed to problems occurring in-house. Consult with a conservator if there is any question of conservation treatment being needed.

N. If the item is hinged into an acid mat which you wish to discard, the hinges may be able to be cut from the backboard safely with a scalpel. Never attempt to remove hinges from the back of the item or remove an item attached in any other way without consultation with a conservator. Otherwise, isolate the item from the acid materials with a sheet of buffered paper slip under and over the item.

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### Framing Tools and Materials

- A. Large table(s) with padding.
- B. Storage space for frames and unframed pictures.
- C. Good light source.
- D. Appropriate documentation forms.
- E. Framing tools such as brads, brad wrenches, brackets, screws, screw drivers, drill, etc.
- F. Inert pressure-sensitive tape (e.g., 3M Scotch Brand Magic Mending tape #810 or J-Lar transparent tape - not to be in contact with the item).
- G. Acid-free corrugated board exactly the size of the glass of plexiglas glazing; polyester film moisture barrier the same size.
- H. Glass or plexiglas cleaner and lint-free rag.
- I. Frame and glazing material.
- J. A properly housed item, either matted or encapsulated with archivally approved materials, that will prevent the item from coming into direct contact with the framing materials. (see [illustration of housing options for display](#))
- K. A well-ventilated, relatively dust-free room with air filtration and a relative humidity of 45-50%, in which the item has been allowed to acclimate for a while.

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### Framing Procedure

- A. Clean the frame with deionized water and let dry thoroughly. If it has old paper tape residue, remove loose areas of the tape with moisture if it is possible.
- B. Cover the rabbet with buffered board if necessary to fill gaps.
- C. Clean the glazing material and let it dry thoroughly.
- D. Make a sandwich of the frame contents with the acid-free corrugated backboard on the bottom, topped by a moisture barrier of polyester film, the matted item and the glazing material. UF-3 Plexiglas is the preferred glazing material since it filters out 98% of the ultra violet radiation and is unbreakable. However, if the item is on thin paper or has friable or flaking media, it must be glazed with glass, owing to the static electricity inherent in the plexiglas. Sprays purported to reduce static have only a temporary effect. Plexi and glass require different cleaning solutions and

different packing techniques, so it is wise to label the back of the frame to indicate which glazing material is used.

E. Hold this protective sandwich together with an inert pressure-sensitive tape applied on each side in three layers as follows: Lay a strip along the very outermost edge of the glazing material along one side overlapping the front by about 1/8th of an inch. Back the exposed part of this tape with a second piece the same length. Lay a third piece over this to provide an adhesive edge to wrap around the back of the corrugated board or polyester film moisture barrier. Repeat this for each edge to produce a "sealed package."

F. Insert the sealed package into the frame, face down.

G. Hold the sealed package in place with whatever method has been approved (for example, brads or brackets).

H. Dust seal the back of the frame over the back board with an approved tape. Original labels, if they have been encapsulated, may then be adhered to the back.

I. A moisture barrier (such as polyester film) and a rigid backboard (such as acid-free corrugated board) may be added to the back for extra protection against environmental changes and mishandling.

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Prepared by [D. van der Reyden](#), 1984 (revised 1999).