



# SAVING YOUR Treasures

*A Website about what you can do to protect and preserve the things of importance in your life*



## **Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center Nebraska State Historical Society**

1326 S. 32<sup>nd</sup> Street, Omaha, NE 68105 (402) 595-1180, Fax: (402) 595-1178  
[treasures@nebraskahistory.org](mailto:treasures@nebraskahistory.org)  
[www.nebraskahistory.org](http://www.nebraskahistory.org)

### **CARING FOR FRAMES AND FRAMED OBJECTS**

#### **COMPOSITION OF FRAMES**

**Frames can be made from just about anything. Common materials can include:**

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

**Decorative elements** of frames may include:

- Carved wood elements
- Composition: Decoration made from composition or “compo” are mixtures of different materials such as wood pulp and shellac; calcium carbonate and adhesive; plaster; and even paper pulp with adhesive. Compo is usually cast in molds to form elaborate elements, which in earlier times were most likely hand carved of solid wood. Elaborate molded compo elements are glued to the wood frame structure and then varnished, painted, or gilded.
- Gilding can be with gold leaf, copper alloy leaf (“Dutch metal” leaf), or silver leaf (called silver gilt). Gilding on frames is generally either water gilding, which is water-soluble and can be removed with a wet cloth, or is oil gilding, which is not water-soluble.

#### **Defining some frame parts**

- 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 of the art wishes for 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.

### **Frames in History**

Frames were sometimes made for valuable items that would be taken in carriages or on ships as a means of protecting the item inside. Cases were made for pocket watches so they could be used on bedside tables and in carriages. Frames vary in size--from ones that are so large they must be disassembled to remove them from a room to ones so small they enclose jewelry-like portrait miniatures and mourning locks. During several periods of history, frames may have been fitted with covers or drapery that was drawn on drapery rods. These covers were used to protect the contents from light damage, dust, and smoke.

### **HANDLING FRAMES**

Much of the damage to frames occurs when they are being handled, moved, and hung. Frames are often large and very bulky. 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 will complicate the prospect of resting the frame on the floor. Specially sized blocks may be needed to keep protruding decorative 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 moving 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!

#### **To move a framed item**

- Handle large 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.
- If the frame is too large for one person to handle, others should be enlisted to help. 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 you anticipate.
- Keep in mind that decorative elements on the frame may be glued on and may be made of composites. Grabbing decorative elements may cause them to break off or may crush protruding features.

### **HANGING FRAMES**

- "D" rings on picture hooks should be used to hang the frame from the wall.

- Standard museum practice avoids using eyehooks and picture wire, especially for large or heavy frames. Suspending the frame with picture wire causes uneven pressure and stress on frame parts and picture wire is known to snap over time.
- Bumpers or pads should be applied to the bottom corners of the frame.

### **STORAGE OF FRAMES AND FRAMED OBJECTS**

A frame should be the right size for the object placed within it. The rabbet of the frame should be lined with archival felt to protect the edges of the object from abrasion. The object in the frame should be held in the frame with brass mending plates that have been bent to fit securely and screwed into the back of the frame with brass screws. 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. The board should be larger than the outside dimensions of the frame. Paintings should be stored in secure spaces with proper environmental conditions and should be covered with fabric or polyethylene dust covers.

### **COMMON PROBLEMS FOR FRAMES**

Common problems with frames include the loss of compo elements and the discoloration and damage of gilt decoration. Other problems can include flaking compo, flaking paint, and poor prior repairs. Gold "paint" is often used to "restore" frames. This paint quickly discolors, becomes unsightly, and is very difficult to remove. Occasionally, one will find a frame that has become structurally unsound. Most of these common problems will require the services and advice of a conservator. Keeping a frame dusted and away from heat and sooty smoke will contribute to a long life for the frame. Never paint anything on the surface of the frame.

### **CLEANING FRAMES AND FRAMED OBJECTS**

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.

#### **How to dust**

- Movement of the brush should always begin at the top element and then proceed from top to bottom on each side element, finishing across the bottom element. Little to no pressure should be exerted on the surface of a painting.

#### **How to clean glass**

- If the glazing needs to be cleaned, apply a glass or Plexiglas cleaner to a cloth and then transfer it to the glazing. This will avoid damage caused by over spray from the cleaner.
- Avoid the edges while using the dampened cloth to clean the glazing.

- Do not use excess liquid as it may soak down between the glass and the frame and damage both the frame and the painting.
- No solvents, solutions, or other methods should be used.

**No other cleaning should be done.** Remember that water gilding is soluble in water and can be removed with a damp cloth. If the gilding or other decoration is discolored or if parts are falling off, conservation work is required. Consult with a conservator.

### **EMERGENCY PROCEDURES FOR FRAMES AND FRAMED OBJECTS**

If your frame should get wet in a flood, leak or other emergency, don't panic.

- Remove the frame from the source of water as soon as possible.
- Don't try to dry the frame with toweling. Compo may have been softened by the water 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 the object flat and face up.
- 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. In any case, contact a conservator as soon as possible for advice and assistance.

Also see "Matting and Framing".

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