

Preservation Framing (also known as Conservation Framing)

Webster defines preserve as: "To keep safe from injury, harm, or destruction." Thus, the responsibility of the artwork owner and the picture framer is to house the art in such a way that it will be maintained in its present unaltered condition. The paramount guideline is that the work done to house the art must be totally reversible, allowing the art to return to its original condition as if it had never been framed. *Preservation* practices in framing should not be confused with the work of *conservators*. That involves treatment to improve the condition of damaged art. It should also not be confused with *presentation* which is about visual preferences. *Preservation* is about technical choices and methods. Mistakes in presentation can be changed at any time. But mistakes in preservation usually have permanent consequences.

Standards for preserving art and keepsakes have been developed by FACTS – Fine Art Care and Treatment Standards, Professional Picture Framers Association (PPFA) Guild and Standards Committee, the Library of Congress and others. As previously stated, preservation standards are constantly changing, especially as new technologies for creating artwork are developed.

Here are some definitions to help you become familiar with framing and preservation terms:

Acid-free: One difference between *archival* and non-archival framing materials can be expressed in terms of their pH, which is the measurement of hydrogen ions they contain. To understand the term, remember from chemistry class the pH scale runs from zero to 14, with a pH of seven representing a neutral (neither acidic nor alkaline) solution. Values below seven represent increasing acidity; those above seven signal increasing alkalinity. Nonarchival framing materials containing unpurified wood pulp fibers tend to have pH values of less than seven, and those made of pure *cotton rag* have values higher than seven. Library of Congress standards today call for a pH between 8.5 to 9.5 to meet archival specifications. (Caution – absence of acidity alone is not enough – see *lignin*). It is safe to say that all conservation boards are acid-free. But, not all acid-free boards are necessarily conservation quality.

Acidity: High acidity in paper products used in framing is damaging to artwork causing discoloration (acid burn). Studies have also shown that paper degrades more rapidly in an acidic environment.

Alpha Cellulose: This is material usually made from wood pulp that has been purified by removing *lignin*, and other potentially damaging substances. F.A.C.T.S. guidelines state that purified alpha cellulose wood fiber can be used interchangeably with cotton rag in archival framing.

Archival: Having to do with a place in which historical documents are preserved (archive). It is considered synonymous with preservation framing.

Backing Board: Rigid backing to prevent the art and mat from buckling or to protect works on canvas from damage from the back. Acid-free foamboard is typically used. Rag covered acid-free and alpha cellulose foamboard are higher quality options for original works, vintage pieces, etc. that the owner wishes to protect in the best way possible. Coroplast is another option for preservation framing and has been used by

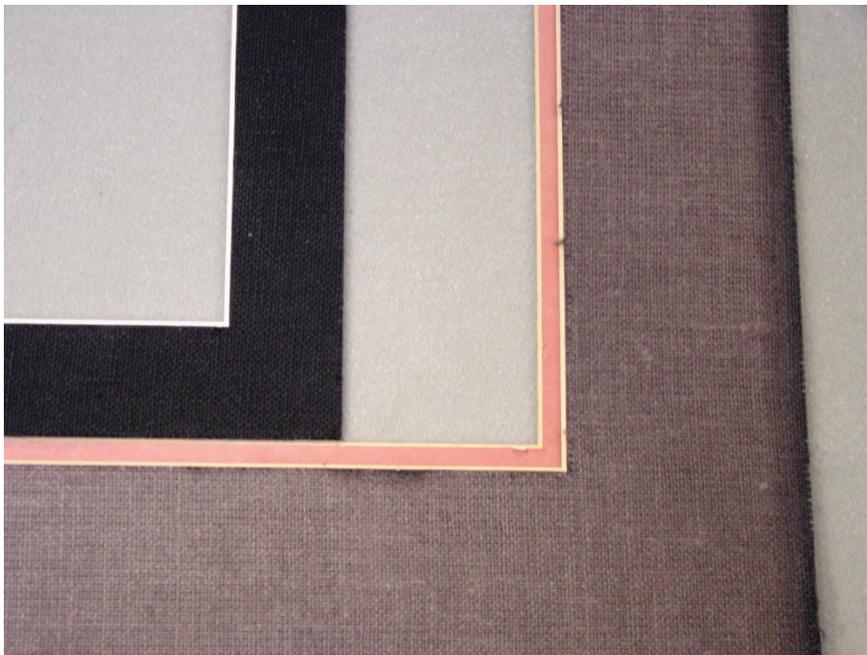
museums for years. Some feel it is superior to foamboard products as it is a chemically inert polypropylene copolymer that will not “out-gas”. However, current thinking is returning to the idea that foamboard is the better option.

Buffered: An alkaline reserve is added to the framing material during manufacture to help maintain alkalinity. The buffer removes acid from boards, but the materials won't remain nonacidic forever. After a period of time, they may turn acidic and begin to attack the artwork. An added buffer helps to delay the return to acidity.

Conservator: A conservator specializes in the restoration or repair of damaged artwork. Framers are not as a general rule conservators. Nor are conservators necessarily framers. We have repaired the framing work of conservators that did not measure up to standards of preservation and new damage was occurring.

Cotton Rag Board: Term used when referring to mat and backing boards made from cotton product. In the past, old rags were bleached, purified and processed into pulp used for paper. Hence the name “rag board”. Today preservation grade boards are made from cotton linter (the fuzz of short fibers that adheres to cotton seed after ginning) pulp not rags.

Glazing: Glass or acrylic used to cover and protect the front of the art. “Light is the source of all our visual pleasure in art. Ironically it is also the environmental factor which is most threatening to the preservation of many works of art.” (Protecting Works of Art From Damage by Light by Judith Walsh) Light damage includes discoloration, fading and brittleness. This damage is serious and irreversible. No conservation treatment can restore color or strength to light-damaged materials. Therefore, in preservation considerations, only UV filtered glass or acrylic will do.



This mat illustrates several things: fading from glass that is not UV protected, as evidenced by the dark outer edge; acidic mat as you can see from the brown bevels; poorly cut mat – this is a fabric mat and shows frayed areas along the bevel edge. It is compared to a linen mat that illustrates what the proper mat should look like – no fading, no fraying, clean white bevel.

Hinge: A hinge is used to hold the artwork in place. It can be a paper, cloth or mylar product. To meet preservation standards, hinges must allow the artwork to be removed without damaging the art. The highest quality hinge is a Japanese hinge termed because it is crafted out of Japanese papers. The hinge is attached to the artwork with wheat or rice starch paste. It is a difficult hinge to accomplish and is correctly done only with experience. Properly prepared hinges should be prepared from a lighter weight paper than the artwork. The theory is, if the framing package is dropped, hinges will tear first – not the art. Mylar strips or corners are another good choice for preservation framing. The strips are placed on all four sides of the art. The strips attach to a backing board and never to the art itself. So the art can simply be lifted out of the hinge. This method is appropriate for work on heavier paper. Masking tape, scotch tape, duct tape are about the worst things that can be used for hinging, but we see them all the time when reframing or repairing pieces.

Lignin: An organic substance that acts as a binder for the cellulose fibers in certain plant materials. Its presence is considered detrimental to the longevity of paper. [Cotton rag](#) boards are naturally lignin free. [Alpha cellulose](#) boards have been purified of acid and lignin.