

## FRAMING WORKS ON PAPER BEFORE THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The picture frame is a physical border which separates and mediates between the world depicted in a work of art and the world which we inhabit. Frames have been protecting paintings from physical abuse and enhancing viewers' appreciation of them for over a thousand years.

Artworks on paper, however, were not framed until glass (initially created for architectural purposes) could be used to cover them. Before that, paper born art was commonly affixed to a wall with paste or sealing wax, pasted into books, or pasted inside of the lids of boxes. Those items which were pasted into books have generally come to us in a high state of preservation. Prints which were pasted inside box lids have in many cases been rather well preserved, since the paste seems to have sealed the wood and the box has shut out light, pollution, and extremes of temperature and humidity. Those which were adhered to the wall have in most cases been lost.

Art on paper which was framed in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries has usually suffered a fate similar to the works which were affixed to the wall. Early frames sandwiched the artwork between the glass and a wooden shingle backing, while the edges of the paper were exposed to the rabbet of the frame. Glass of this period often had a high enough sodium content to allow sodium to be leached out onto its surface where it would draw water from the air. Moisture might also have invaded the frame from such sources as unsealed exterior walls or accidental wetting. The wood of the frame as well as the backing gave off chemical pollutants which darkened and destroyed the paper. Light coming through the glass attacked inks and paints causing them to become translucent and fade. Light also caused additives and lignin in the paper to darken and the cellulose of the paper to lighten.

This situation began to change when the British Museum developed the window mat in the mid-Nineteenth Century. Mats made from good quality cellulose could isolate the art's paper from the frame and the glass to some extent, but most backing boards were made from lesser quality fibers and could be harmful. One interesting exception among backing materials is a board which was used in France called straw board. This was alkaline and may be found today in quite good shape. Sadly, the latter part of the Nineteenth Century saw a proliferation of poor quality papers and boards which contained lignin and alum; these boards were destructive to themselves and to paper which was near them.

By the middle of the Twentieth Century, concern for the preservation of prints and drawings was high enough that cotton fiber board was brought to the market. To this has been added such preservation framing materials such as ultra-violet filtering glazing, alpha cellulose fiber board, plastics and metals for sealing and sequestering the art package, and buffering and scavenging materials.

Since today's most sophisticated frame will still allow light to fall on the art object, it can not be considered the optimal preservation system. It is a world away, however, from the disasters which the previous century has seen.