



Aesthetic and Practical Concerns in Displaying Fine Art

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The care and display of fine art spans aesthetic and practical concerns that are at the forefront for any good framer. Clearly the picture frame will have a profound effect on the art it encloses. As nineteenth-century painter Charles Willson Peale remarked, “A good picture deserves a good frame and a bad picture may sometimes preserve its place longer by having a handsome frame.”*



In recent years, collectors and curators have become increasingly aware of the importance of the frame. The practice of historically appropriate framing—having a frame style and design that is contemporary with the artwork—has become a desirable practice. It is essential to work with a framer who understands period styles and designs so that the perfect marriage between a work and its frame can be made.

In framing terms, fitting refers to the practice of placing the artwork into the frame. If the artwork is an oil painting, the primary practical concern is that the inner side of the frame rabbet, or groove, should not come into contact with, and possibly abrade, the painting surface. The rabbet should be lined with a soft felt. In some cases, the painting is executed on wood or fiberboard panel that is warped and it can endanger the panel if pushed flat into the frame rabbet, increasing the chance of cracking or splitting the panel. In such a case, the frame rabbet must be carefully constructed to conform to the curve of the panel in order to support it evenly without undue pressure.

Artwork on paper—watercolors, drawings, pastels, or photography—present specific challenges. Many papers have been made with wood pulp and are acidic, which can burn the paper and create discoloration and damage. The proper course is to use 100 percent rag papers that are acid-free and have no wood pulp. This is true for both the top mats as well as the backing paper used to secure the art in the frame. Works on paper are also glazed—covered with a material such as glass or Plexiglas to protect the surface.

This glazing should never come into direct contact with the artwork. This means that if a mat is not used, a spacer must be inserted between the art and the glazing.

Glazing is a broad term that includes many different types of available glass and acrylics. The best products include filters that eliminate or greatly reduce the amount of harmful ultraviolet and infrared light that touches the artwork; left unfiltered, ultraviolet rays can fade pigments and damage the art.

Many available glazing products offer a variety of features such as non-reflectivity and ultraviolet filtering. One specialty glass embodies all the desired attributes: it is non-reflective, UV filtering, and shatter-resistant. If the artwork is especially large and requires Plexiglas rather than glass, there are other materials available that serve the best interest of the artwork. It is critical that all the options are explored with a knowledgeable framer who can assist you in making the very best choices.

*Letter of March 7, 1805, to Alfred William Grayson (Peale-Sellers Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia).



Living room with *Millet's Garden* by John Singer Sargent on the back wall, and John Sloan's *Grey and Brass* over the mantle.

The careful display of the artwork is just as important as proper framing to the longevity and safety of the object. Practical considerations require that hardware affixed to the back of the frame should be firmly attached and that the wire used is sufficient to bear the weight of the framed artwork. In many cases the artwork is hung from two points, utilizing drings and wire loops that guarantee strength and the stability of the artwork so it remains evenly hung on the wall.

Aesthetic concerns also factor into the presentation of artworks: combinations and juxtapositions of artworks can underscore and amplify stylistic connections and a dialogue between works. Different themes can be developed. For example, modernist explorations of abstraction, seaside landscapes in watercolor, or urban scenes, all in a variety of media, can be grouped or arranged in a room to a powerful and pleasing affect. Such groupings can set the mood for a space or provoke fascinating connections. Those collecting over many years will find that one new acquisition can change the relationship within groupings and will warrant a possible reinstallation of all the artwork to show them all to the best effect. This can prove to be an exciting and compelling aspect of displaying and enjoying a private collection.

Fine art lighting is a major concern for the collector, and is one of the more challenging aspects of displaying fine art. There are a variety of lighting options

available, though most present the primary drawbacks of conventional lighting: the heat, infrared, and harmful ultraviolet rays that such light emits. Fiber optic lighting promises to revolutionize the lighting of fine art because it has none of these drawbacks and it allows for extensive adjustments so that the art is perfectly illuminated. When fiber optic lighting is not an option, there are alternatives. When assessing the different lighting methods, it is wise to consider the nature of the collection. Many methods leave little room for moving artwork or making additions as a collection grows and evolves.

There are lighting systems that employ spotlights, other lamps that wash a wall in light, or lighting that is configured to match the size and shape of the artwork. There are also a variety of picture lights available on the market today. A drawback to picture lights is that they must be plugged into an outlet. Ideally a special recessed wall outlet can be situated behind the artwork. If a socket is not situated behind the art, then the cord trails down the wall behind it to the outlet. Some picture lights employ conventional light bulbs, others use halogen bulbs of varying wattage to which special filters can be attached. In addition to the actual size and number of bulbs inside, some picture lights can be equipped with special arms in different shapes and



This grouping features photography and works on paper, with Asian sculpture in the foreground. Artists include Maurice Prendergast, Childe Hassam, Everett Shinn, Alfred Maurer, Edward Steichen, and Alfred Stieglitz.

lengths to best accommodate the size and shape of the artwork. Most picture lights are available in a range of four or five finishes, such as polished or matte gold. Whatever kind of picture lights are used, it is critical to select lights that can be filtered to eliminate harmful ultraviolet rays.

Finally, the safe packing and transportation of your artwork is critical to its well-being. Whether an artwork goes out on loan to an exhibition or is stored for a time, proper methods and materials should be employed. Changes in temperature and humidity as well as movement warrant careful attention. When an artwork is packed, the delicate and vulnerable gilded and painted surfaces should be protected with specialty wrap that will not cling to the surface, and the artwork should also be further protected from moisture with additional plastic wrapping. Finally, a well-made crate is frequently warranted—one that will allow the exterior to absorb handling and also allow the framed artwork to rest snugly inside, protected from any jarring movement that may occur during transport.

Thoughtful attention to the aesthetic and practical considerations that address both the beauty and safety of fine art will reward the collector with years of pleasure and enjoyment.



In a hall, Asian sculpture is juxtaposed with American modernist works by Charles Demuth and Oscar Bluemner.



Living room with John Sloan, *Gray and Brass* (over the mantle), Everett Shinn, *Rehearsal*, and Winslow Homer, *Plowing-The Last Furrow* (at right).



This thematic grouping successfully combines American modernist works of different media, including photography, works on paper, and oil on canvas and glass. Among the artists represented are Arthur Dove, Paul Strand, Rebecca Strand James, Helen Torr, Max Weber, and Charles Sheeler.