
Beyond the Margins: A Survey of Framing Trends and Preventive Conservation for Modern and Contemporary Paintings

Abstract

Frames have long contributed to the physical integrity and presentation of paintings, yet there are limited data on framing conventions for modern and contemporary paintings. To document framing trends, the Museum Conservation Institute (MCI) developed an on-site survey focused on painting collections on display at 13 museums and galleries.

What started as a small academic research project expanded into a half-year study that included six weeks of data collection in the field. The survey was further supplemented with information obtained from on-line museum catalogs. The paintings surveyed dated from the 1880s to the present and included both permanent collections and temporary exhibits. The surveys addressed the following questions:

What are the style preferences for the framing and display of modern and contemporary paintings?

How do these framing and display preferences affect the paintings' long-term preservation?

Distinct trends in the prevalence of traditional, tray, and strip frames were observed for paintings dating from 1880 to the present, as well as a negative correlation between the frequency of glazing and painting size. These observations led to an examination of strategies and best practices required to safely frame and display modern and contemporary paintings.

Introduction

Historically, frames tended to reflect collectors' preferences and regional styles; however, the age of modernism ushered in new methods of display that influenced framing styles. By the 20th century, paintings were increasingly displayed as self-contained works free of any formal or decorative connection to their surroundings (Gaiger 2009). Many paintings have since been exhibited on blank gallery walls, popularized in the mid-twentieth century, employing simplified frame moldings or eliminating the frame entirely (Allan 2013).

Despite ongoing changes in the physical and presentational contexts of paintings throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, the frame persists. Today, stakeholders might choose to house a work of art in a frame based on its materials, region, style, historical period, and the artist's intent. Framing decisions are also affected by institutional preferences.

Recent exhibition trends have also had an impact on how works are handled and exhibited. Over the past two decades in the U.S., many museums with fine art collections have devoted nearly half of their temporary exhibitions to contemporary art (Halperin 2017). As museums show more contemporary works of art, the exhibition of unframed and non-traditional paintings will also likely increase, presenting new handling and display challenges.

In addition to contributing aesthetically, the frame can play a practical role in the preservation and handling of a painting. Many institutions that exhibit and loan their paintings can rely on the works' frames to protect them from the frequent handling

inherent in the process of packing and displaying art. When used effectively, the frame has the potential to contribute to a painting's safe exhibition and long-term preservation.

By looking beyond the margins of a painting, a deeper understanding of framing and display conventions is possible, leading to better informed decisions for the exhibition and care of modern and contemporary paintings.

Methodology

Survey Groups

Over a four-month period, two groups of surveys were conducted to collect data on different topics. The first group (Group A) recorded specific frame attributes of 341 paintings dating from 1880 to the present; the second group (Group B) recorded the prevalence of glazing in 964 paintings, including the works surveyed by Group A. Various data from these surveys were combined to document observed trends.

Group A: The first survey focused on frame styles and approximate dimensions of 341 paintings dating from 1880 to present from 13 collections in Washington, DC and New York, NY (Appendix A). From this group of 341 paintings, 223 in-depth survey forms were completed on-site by visiting public galleries and temporary exhibitions.

The in-depth surveys recorded supplemental information relating to a painting's frame construction, materials, decorative qualities, glazing, observable hanging hardware, and context. For the remaining 118 paintings, surveyors recorded only the basic features of frame style, frame prevalence, and dimensions in order to expand the overall data analysis.

Group B: The second, broader survey was carried out to determine the prevalence of glazing in 964 paintings observed on-site in DC and NY collections, including the 341 paintings surveyed by Group A. Paintings with glazing were tallied and categorized according to approximate size.

Survey Criteria

For this survey, frames for paintings on rigid and flexible supports were examined. Works on paper were not included in the sample. The observed media included oil, acrylic, enamel, tempera-based media, and mixed media.

General painting and frame measurements were recorded through on-site estimations or taken from on-line museum catalogs. Based on the longest edge of the artwork, the surveyed paintings were categorized as small (<36 inches), medium (36–60 inches), or large (>60 inches).

Frame Style

Framing and display styles were described and classified under five categories (Appendix B):

Traditional frame: features a lip and recess, known as the rabbet or rebate, which allows the top edge and depth of a painting to be captured and supported.

Tray frame: also referred to as a floater frame. The painting "floats" within a tray-shaped molding that allows the canvas's tacking edges to be seen. The space surrounding the painting, the reveal, can vary according to design preferences.

Strip frame: composed of narrow strips of lathing, often thin wood or metal, screwed or nailed into the tacking edges of the canvas stretcher or strainer.

No frame: the absence of a frame is often intended by the artist as part of the work, especially in large-scale paintings.
Other: singular frame styles that defy categorization.

Photography

Throughout the in-depth survey, Group A frame styles were photographed to complement written documentation. Photographs were taken in RAW and JPEG format with a 24.2 MP Nikon D5300 Digital SLR camera, capturing overall style, corner details, and oblique shots. In post-production, images were cropped to focus on the frame, and the lens distortion was corrected using Adobe Photoshop. These digital photographs and survey forms have been filed in the paintings conservation department at the MCI.

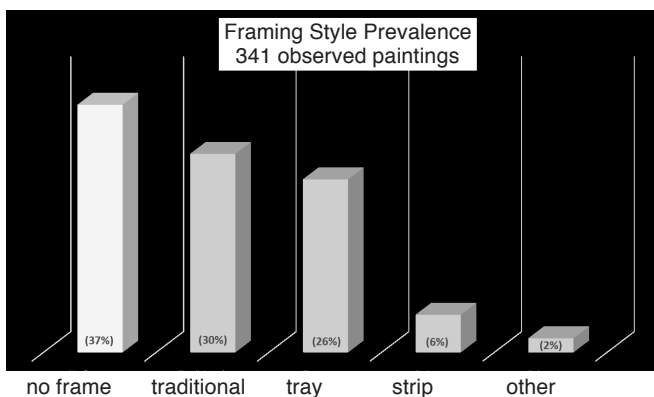
Data Processing

When documentation was complete, surveyors used Microsoft Excel to generate a spreadsheet showing frame characteristics. The spreadsheet allowed for a variety of sorting combinations, aiding in the identification of distinct trends. Noted trends included the prevalence of certain frame styles, the relationship between a painting's dimensions and framing, and the frequency of glazing.

Results: Prevalence of Frame Styles

The prevalence of various frame styles in modern and contemporary painting exhibitions was recorded in 13 collections across Washington, DC and New York, NY. Figure 1 shows the high prevalence of traditional frames (30%) on works dating from 1880 to the present, as well as modern tray frames (26%) on works created from 1930 to the present. The least common frame style was the strip frame (6%), possibly because it was popular with artists of the New York School for a relatively short time (approximately 1920 to the late 1960s, based on survey data) (Allan 2013). The "Other" category comprised singular artist frames.

Figure 1. Frame style prevalence as surveyed by Group A in 341 paintings across 13 institutions. The bar graph represents the number of paintings observed in five categories: no frame, traditional frame, tray frame, strip frame, and other.



The majority of the surveyed paintings (126 out of 341 total) were displayed without frames (Fig.1). A total of 103 of those 126 paintings were from modern and contemporary collections (including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Whitney Museum of American Art, MoMA, and Met Breuer). This data was combined with 23 additional paintings surveyed in Group A.

Discussion

A suitable frame can contribute to the structural support and long-term preservation of a painting while enhancing aesthetic qualities and portability.

Paintings exhibited without frames comprised 37% of the surveyed works. Handling challenges presented by an unframed painting can be partially overcome by the installation of hand-holds or straps on the reverse side of the stretcher (Perry 1978).

Multifunctional hardware containing a D-ring and folding brace can facilitate handling, crating, display, and storage. It is especially important to wear gloves when handling paintings without frames, as bare canvas or painted edges can be easily damaged.

Traditional frames comprised 30% of the surveyed works, with wide variations in moldings, finish, and ornamentation. While a traditional frame can protect a painting, it can also present handling challenges if the ornamentation is elaborate or delicate. In such a case, the frame may require a flat surface for staging when not crated or hung.

When selecting a traditional frame molding, care should be taken to ensure the sight edge does not cover too much or too little of a painting's edges, as this can result in abrasion or poor support of the painting (Hyder 1986). Spacers can be added to the rebate of traditional frames to properly secure the painting and to accommodate glazing, if desired. Traditional frames also provide areas on the reverse for attaching backing boards, hardware, and mending plates to secure the painting.

Tray frames comprised 26% of the surveyed paintings and were most prevalent on works created from 1930 to the present. These frames can enhance the handling and structural stability of a painting, as all four sides of the stretcher are supported and attached to the frame, in contrast to a painting contact-fitted against the rebate with mending plates.

A tray frame can also provide optimal surface area for attaching backing boards and hardware for shipping, storage, and display. Due to their simplicity and variation in reveal width, tray frames appear to be a popular choice for the display of modern and contemporary paintings.

Strip frames made up only 6% of the surveyed works and were observed on paintings dating from 1920 to 1960. A strip frame can aid in the handling of an artwork; however, it relies on a painting's stretcher or strainer for support. To respect the artist's intent but better protect the painting, it

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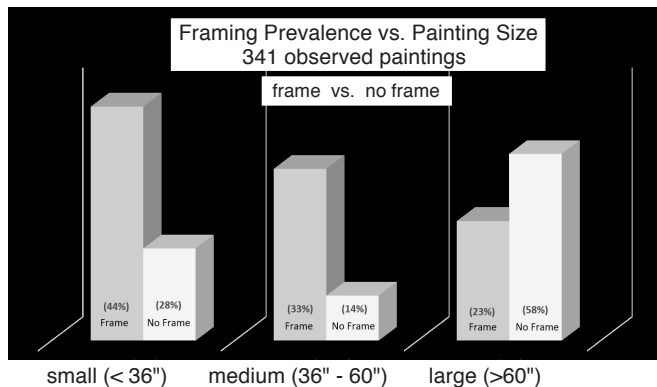


Figure 2. Relationship between frame prevalence and painting size, surveyed and observed in 13 institutions across 341 paintings. The bar graphs represent the number of paintings observed with or without frames in relationship to their size. Based on the longest edge of the artwork, the paintings were categorized as small (<36 inches), medium (36–60 inches), or large (>60 inches).

is possible to retain the strip frame and install an outer tray frame along with glazing.

Results: Framing Prevalence vs. Painting Size

Across the 13 collections in both DC and NY, surveyors found a negative correlation between the prevalence of framing and painting size (Fig. 2). Small paintings had the highest prevalence of framing (44%), followed by medium paintings (33%). Large paintings had the lowest prevalence of framing (23%) and the highest percentage of being exhibited without frames (58%; greater than both small and medium paintings combined).

Discussion

The cost of framing is inevitably higher for larger paintings, which may be one reason why large contemporary works are often unframed. Our survey was based on observing real-world trends and practices in galleries and museums, and we chose to track framing only in relation to painting size. The study indicates that whether or not modern and contemporary paintings are framed is generally a size-dependent decision.

Aesthetic considerations do play a role in deciding whether and how to frame a particular painting. For example, smaller paintings frequently have frames that provide more visual space immediately adjacent to the image. In contrast, large paintings without frames have the potential to visually extend beyond the pictorial space to the exhibit wall, a valued effect.

In a practical sense, large-scale, unframed modern and contemporary paintings with bare or painted canvas edges often pose risks for handling, storage, and display that can be lessened by adding a frame. A frame can potentially safeguard a large painting from the risks inherent in

handling, storage, and display, effectively shifting these risks from the painting to the frame.

Repeated drilling required for the attachment of appropriate hanging hardware, folding shipping braces, and hand holds or straps can be more safely sustained by the frame than the painting's stretcher. Moreover, a well-made frame with crossbars can add to the structural stability of a large painting.

Across all size categories, a frame can contribute to the safe handling and structural stability of a painting. For example, a tray frame can incorporate cross bars and corner braces that provide support and rigidity. Furthermore, a frame profile with a higher and wider top molding can serve as a barrier to protect the surface of the painting and prevent soft wrapping materials from touching a painting's surface during transit.

Results: Glazing Prevalence vs Painting Size

Glazing, which usually relies on the presence of a frame, protects the paint surface from scratches, pollutants, and light. Glazing can be glass or acrylic and have special features such as an antireflective coating, UV filters, safety and shatterproof properties, and scratch resistance. (Distinctions between specific types of glazing on the paintings surveyed were beyond the scope of this study.)

In our survey, the rate of glazing correlated negatively with painting size. Of the 964 paintings surveyed, 81% did not have glazing, but small paintings were glazed more frequently than large paintings. In fact, of the 180 works that were glazed (19% of the total sample size), most were small paintings (60% of those glazed). Reasons for this could include cost, institutional or curatorial preferences, available security personnel, and the stability of the paint media.

Glazing Prevalence for 964 Observed Paintings

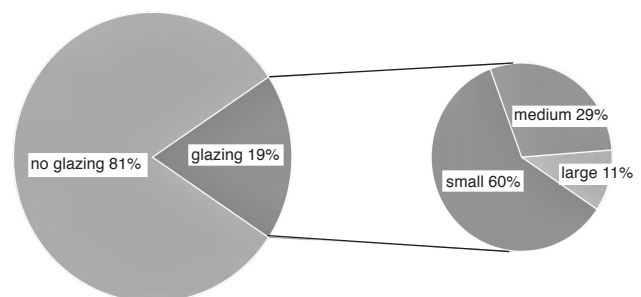


Figure 3. Relationship between glazing prevalence and painting size for 964 paintings across 13 institutions. The left pie chart represents the number and percentage of paintings with glazing, regardless of size (including works from the Group A survey). The smaller pie chart (right) represents the sizes of paintings exhibited with glazing. Based on the longest edge of the artwork, the surveyed paintings were categorized as small (<36 inches), medium (36-60 inches), or large (>60 inches).

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Discussion

The preservation concerns associated with unframed and large-scale paintings are not easily addressed with typical glazing options, which may be costly or limited by the size of commercially available materials.

While varnish was often used as a proto-glazing method prior to the 20th century, changing artistic practices resulted in a preponderance of unvarnished paintings (Woodcock 2005). Later, many contemporary artists incorporated vulnerable and mixed media, prompting institutions to balance preservation concerns with the aesthetic experience.

One way to address these concerns without imposing a frame on the work is to cover the work with a glass or acrylic vitrine, which offers site-specific protection to large, vulnerable surfaces, especially in areas of high traffic within a gallery space.

A simple acrylic or glass box can have a refined appearance when “kept thin and wide so that it is visually well separated from the painting” (Hackney 2007). Furthermore, the vitrine backing can be painted the same color as the gallery wall to minimize its appearance. However, addressing one preservation concern can raise new issues, since glazing and vitrines can add weight to the painting, making handling more difficult (Woodcock 2005).

Conclusion

A better understanding of framing conventions aids in both the display and preservation of modern and contemporary paintings. The data collected from this survey reflect general trends, but only in the context of current institutional display preferences. However, as nuanced as framing decisions can be, the construction and style of a frame will nevertheless play an important role in the preservation and interpretation of a painting.

The results of this survey are based on just one method of collecting and processing data from publicly accessible paintings on display. The interpretation of these results indicates that there are indeed observable trends in modern and contemporary frame styles, influenced by the size and time period of the artwork and institutional preferences.

While the frame generally serves a function in preservation and safe handling, how well these goals are achieved will inevitably vary based on the frame’s design.

When installed properly, a frame with a backing board and glazing protects a painting from dust, debris, and visitor contact and provides a buffer against rapid changes in temperature and relative humidity (Stout 1975).

More than a simple appendage to a painting, a good frame reduces the likelihood of damage to the tacking edges by attaching to the back of the stretcher, and can provide structural support through reinforcements like cross bars and corner braces. Lastly, an effective frame will provide a suitable location for attaching hanging hardware and backing boards, thus minimizing the placement of drill holes into the stretcher itself.

The methods employed in this survey can be expanded to cover new locales, different cultures, additional frame styles, and larger sample sizes.

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Further Reading

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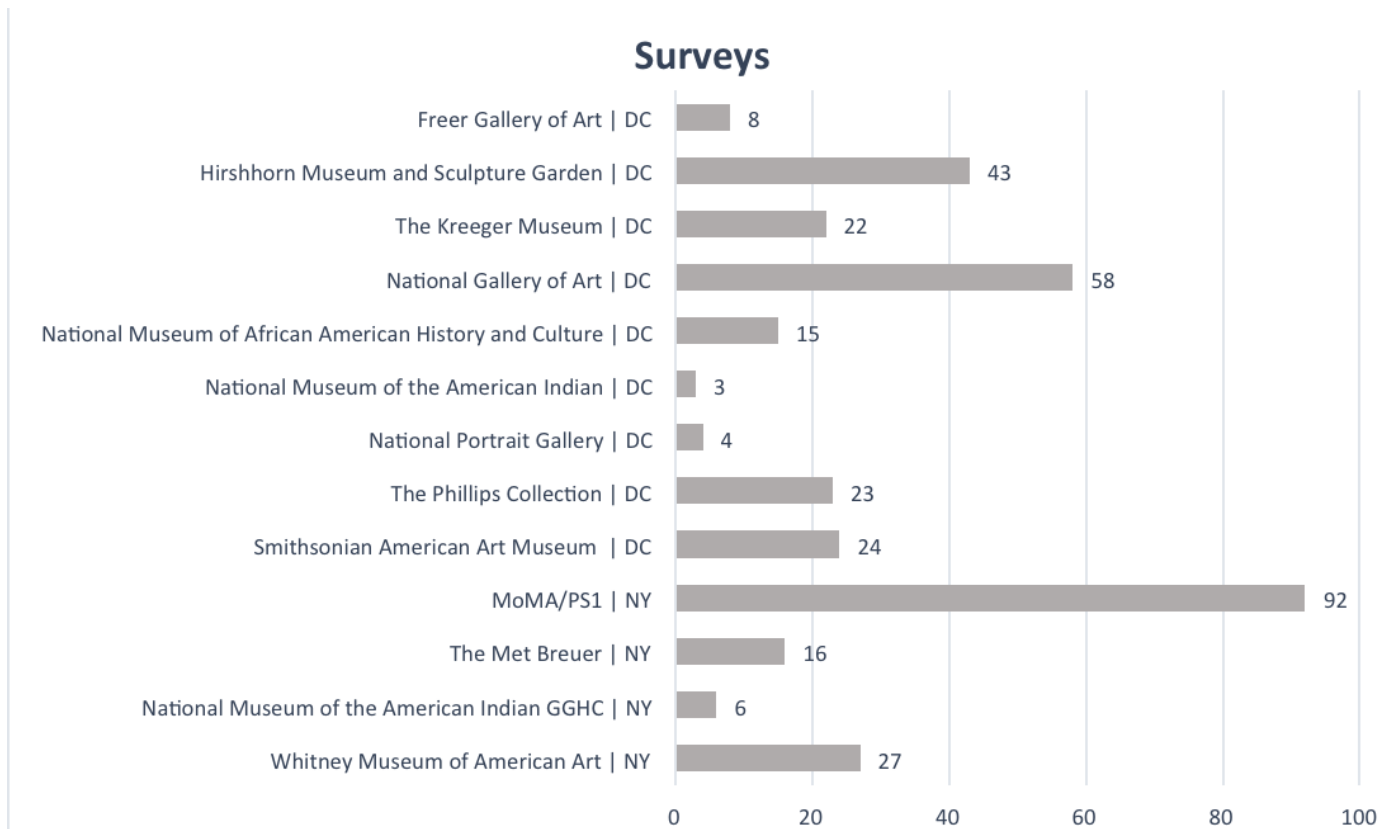
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APPENDIX A: Survey Locations



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APPENDIX B: For this survey, frame styles were broadly classified into the following categories:

Traditional Frame

Traditional frames (Fig. 4) can have diverse materials, profiles, and ornamentation while being similar in construction. This survey considered traditional frames to be those which feature a lip and recess, known as the rabbet or rebate, which allows the top edge and depth of a painting to be captured. Contemporary frames that exhibit this structure might have more minimal moldings. However, we also observed the use of old frames for new paintings, such as Impressionist artists' use of modified gilt frames that were toned to suit their paintings' light palette and matte textures (Penny, 2010). Both contemporary and period-specific formats continue to be used in the display of modern and contemporary paintings today.

Tray Frame

Tray frames (Fig. 5), sometimes referred to as floater frames, are so named because the canvas appears to float inside the tray molding. The painting is situated in the tray and often held in place by screws inserted in the back of the frame, allowing the viewer to see the entire artwork. This frame exposes the canvas edge rather than covering it with a rabbet. In effect, the painting may appear unconstrained while still defined in an enclosed interior space. Depending on the aesthetic preferences of a given exhibition, institution, or individual, there can be variations in the space between the frame and painting, known as the reveal or shadow gap. The rise in popularity of this frame style is tied to the legacy of frame designer Robert Kulicke, who conceived of a welded metal frame not long after developing a wooden floating frame for the furniture and design company Knoll in 1953. In the late 1950s, MoMA decided to standardize the frames on much of its painting collection, commissioning the Kulicke welded aluminum frames which began production in 1960 (Allan 2013).

Strip Frame

Strip frames (Fig. 6) are constructed of strips of thin wood or metal screwed or nailed into the sides of the canvas stretcher or strainer. Despite its unobtrusiveness, the strip frame still defines the edges of a painting and helps draw attention to the image (Kiilerich 2001). Like the tray frame, the front face of the strips can be flush or extend just beyond the painting's surface, adding slight protection to a painting's edges. This frame style was used frequently by Abstract Expressionists in the 20th century (Brettell 1986).

No Frame

The absence of a frame is often part of the concept behind paintings displayed today, especially large-scale works. The preference for no frame reflects the intent of 20th- and 21st-century artists who aim to display their paintings unadorned (Kiilerich 2001, 321). A variation of this display technique is sometimes called "gallery wrap," where the tacking edge of the canvas is stapled or nailed to the back of the stretcher or strainer, allowing the side edges to be clean or painted, sometimes serving as a continuation of the composition.

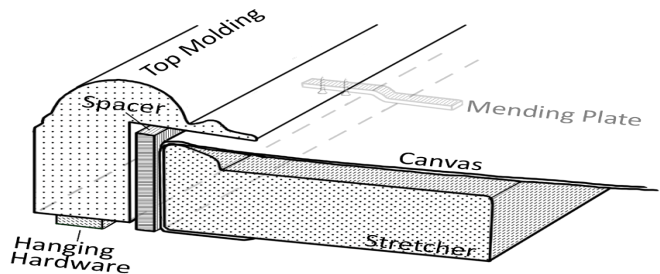


Figure 4. Example of a traditional frame.

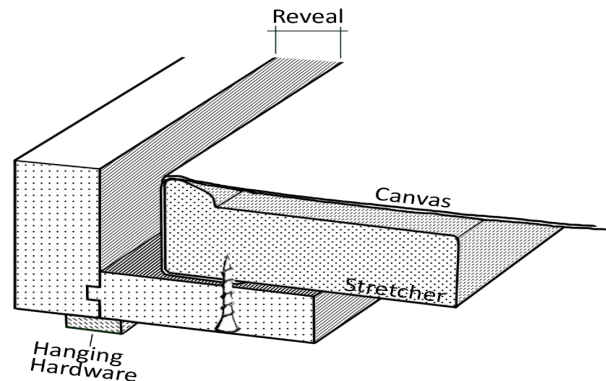


Figure 5. Example of a tray frame.

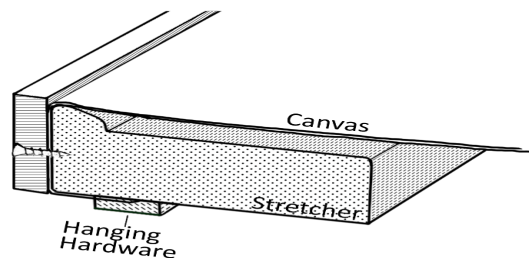


Figure 6. Example of a strip frame.

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