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SIMPLE STEPS IN CARING FOR VALUABLE ART WORK

Paintings may be objects of great beauty or of historical importance, providing an important cultural link with the past. They may have great monetary value or have sentimental value to their owners. Whatever the case, paintings are fragile creations that require special care to assure their continued preservation.

Paintings consist of various layers. The paint is applied to a support, typically canvas or wood, which is first primed with a glue-sizing and/or ground layer. Traditional paintings are finished with a coat of varnish.

Contemporary paintings, naive, or folk art may not have a ground layer or varnish coating. Paintings that do not have all of the traditional layers may be more fragile and susceptible to change or damage. The paint layers can be made of pigments in oil, acrylic (or other synthetics), encaustic (wax), tempera (egg), distemper (glue), casein (milk), gouache (plant gum), or a mixture of media. The paint can be applied on a wide variety of supports. Although the most common are canvas and wood, other supports include paper, cardboard, pressed board, artist's board, copper, ivory, glass, plaster, and stone. Paintings on canvas are usually stretched over an auxiliary wood support. An adjustable support is called a stretcher; a support with fixed corners is called a strainer.

Paintings change over time. Some inevitable results of aging, such as increased transparency of oil paint or the appearance of certain types of cracks, do not threaten the stability of a painting and may not always be considered damage. One of the most common signs of age is a darkened or yellowed surface caused by accumulated grime or discolored varnish. When a varnish becomes so discolored that it obscures the artist's intended colors and the balance of lights and darks, it usually can be removed by a conservator, but some evidence of aging is to be expected and should be accepted. However, when structural damages occur in a painting such as tears, flaking paint, cracks with lifting edges, or mold, consult a conservator to decide on a future course of treatment for your painting.

MAINTAINING A SUITABLE ENVIRONMENT

It is important to maintain a proper environment for your paintings. The structural components of a painting expand and contract in different ways as the surrounding temperature and humidity fluctuate. For example, the flexible canvas may become slack or taut in a changing environment, while the more brittle paint may crack, curl, or loosen its attachment to the underlying layers. If a painting could be maintained in an optimum environment, in one location at a constant temperature and humidity level, many of the problems requiring the services of a paintings conservator could be prevented. Paintings generally do well in environmental conditions that are comfortable for people, with relative humidity levels between 40 and 60 percent. Environmental guidelines have been developed for different types of materials. Paintings on canvas may react more quickly to rising and falling humidity levels than paintings on wood panels, but the dimensional changes that can occur in a wood panel can cause more structural damage. Owners of panel paintings should be particularly conscientious about avoiding unusually low or high relative humidity and temperatures to prevent warping, splitting, or breaking of the wood.

Museums strive to maintain constant temperature and humidity levels for works of art, but even with expensive environmental control systems this task can be difficult. In most cases, gradual seasonal changes and small fluctuations are less harmful than large environmental fluctuations. Avoiding large fluctuations is very important.

For example, a painting stored in what would generally be considered poor conditions (such as a cold, damp castle in England) may remain structurally secure for centuries, but begin to deteriorate rapidly if moved into "stable" museum conditions simply because of the extreme change in its environment.

One of the simplest and most important preservation steps you can take is to have protective backing board attached to paintings. A Fome-Cor (or archival cardboard backing) screwed to the reverse of a painting will slow environmental exchange through a canvas, keep out dust and foreign objects, and protect against damage during handling. Be sure that the backing board covers the entire back of the picture; do not leave air vent holes, which can cause localized environmental conditions and lead to cracks in paint. The backing board should be attached to the reverse of the stretcher or strainer, not to the frame. Have a conservator or reputable framer attach it for you.

DISPLAYING PAINTINGS

The display of paintings requires careful consideration. Direct sunlight can cause fading of certain pigments, increased yellowing of varnish, and excessive heat on the painting surface. It is best to exhibit paintings on dividing walls within a building rather than on perimeter walls where temperature fluctuations will be greater and condensation can occur. If paintings are placed on uninsulated exterior walls, it may help to place small rubber spacers on the back of the frame to increase air circulation.

Although a fireplace is often a focal spot for a room, a painting displayed above a mantel will be exposed to soot, heat, and environmental extremes. Hanging paintings above heating and air conditioning vents or in bathrooms with tubs or showers is also inadvisable because the rapid environmental fluctuations will be harmful. Select a safe place away from high traffic and seating areas.

When lighting paintings, use indirect lighting. Lights that attach to the top of the frame and hang over the picture can be dangerous. These lights cast a harsh glare, illuminate and heat the painting unevenly, and can fall into the artwork causing burns or tears. Indirect sunlight, recessed lighting, or ceiling-mounted spotlights are best for home installations. Halogen lamps are increasingly popular, but halogen bulbs emit high levels of ultraviolet light (the part of the spectrum that is damaging to artworks) and should be fitted with an ultraviolet filter when used near light-sensitive materials. These bulbs emit high heat, have been known to explode, and may pose a fire hazard. Tungsten lamps may be preferable for home lighting.

HANDLING PROCEDURES

Pictures are usually safest when hanging on a wall, provided that they are well framed, with the picture and hanging hardware adequately secured. Larger paintings should always be secured with two or more hangers to avoid risk of sagging or falling. If you must store a painting, avoid damp basements or garages, where pictures can mold, and attics, which are very hot in the summer. A good storage method is to place the paintings in a closet with a stiff board protecting the image side of each artwork and a backing board attached to the reverse. Here again, a backing board attached to the reverse can protect your painting.

Do not risk damaging your paintings by moving them any more than is absolutely necessary. If you must remove a painting from the wall or move it to another room, clear the pathway of furniture and obstructions and prepare a location to receive it. The frame must be stable and secure. If it is old or there is glazing (glass), ensure that it can withstand being moved. Determine if you can lift the painting safely by yourself to avoid breakage or irreparable damage to the artwork. If the frame is massive or the picture is wider than your shoulders, ask someone to help you. If the painting is of a manageable size, lift the frame with both hands by placing one hand in the center of each side. Always carry it with the image side facing you. Remove jewelry, tie clips, belt buckles, or other clothing that might scrape the surface. Hang paintings from picture hooks (not nails) placed securely in the wall; a heavy picture requires two hooks. Before hanging, examine the back of the painting to ensure that the hanging hardware is strong and secure. If the painting is framed, the hardware should be attached to the back of the frame, not to the stretcher or strainer. If picture wire is used, attach a double strand of braided wire to the sides of the frame (not to the top edge) with "D" rings or mirror plate hangers. These types of hangers are secured to the wooden frame with two to four screws. Hanging can be more complicated with contemporary paintings that do not have protective

frames. Moving and hanging unframed or large paintings safely may require the services of professional art handlers who may be reached by calling a local museum, historical society, or reputable art gallery.

FRAMING GUIDELINES

If you intend to buy a new frame for a painting or have a painting treated by a conservator, take the opportunity to have it properly framed. Ideally, a painting should be held in the frame with mending plates that are attached to the frame with screws. Brass mending plates can be bent and adjusted so there is light pressure on the back of the stretcher or strainer. Sometimes nails are used to frame paintings, but nails can rust, fall out, or protrude through the canvas. Ask the framer or conservator to pad the rabbet, the part of the frame that touches the face of the painting, with felt or another suitable material to protect the image.

HOUSEKEEPING GUIDELINES

After carefully examining your paintings for loose or flaking paint, dust them every four to six months. Feather dusters can scratch paintings. Instead use soft, white-bristle Japanese brushes, sable (such as a typical makeup brush), or badger-hair brushes (called "blenders" and used for faux finishes). Encaustics can be lightly buffed with a soft, clean cloth. Never try to clean a painting yourself or use any liquid or commercial cleaners on a painted surface. Commercial preparations can cause irreparable damage to the fragile layers of a painting. Avoid using pesticides, foggers, air fresheners, or furniture sprays near artworks. Remove paintings from a room before painting, plastering, or steam cleaning carpets or wallpaper. Return the artworks only when the walls and floors are completely dry.

DISASTERS AND OTHER PROBLEMS

If a disaster such as a flood or fire occurs in your home, remove paintings from standing water or debris. If the paint is flaking, lay the painting flat with the image side up to limit paint loss. Consult a professional conservator as soon as possible for assistance in limiting damage to your artwork. Wiping smoke, mud, or other contaminants from a painting may result in additional damage. An information packet on disaster recovery is available from the American Institute for Conservation.

Other problems will require the help of a professional conservator. Insect infestation, flaking paint, paint loss, torn canvas, cracks with lifting edges or planar distortions (wrinkles or draws in the canvas), mold growth, grime, or very discolored varnish are problems that only a professional conservator is trained to address. Repairs are most often, but not always, successful depending on the medium, age of artwork, and extent of damage combined with the skill level of the conservator. It is recommended that owners take precautionary steps to adequately conserve and preserve the beauty of artwork for generations of enjoyment as well insure priceless works to cover loss of the assessed value.

TIP: CONTACT EXPERTS FOR FURTHER GUIDANCE

Always ask an expert or seek professional service if you think you need assistance or have a concern about the art you own. It's always better to ask than be sorry. If you should have any questions about the art work available or purchased at Hunter-Wolff Gallery, please call at 719-520-9494. Whether a serious collector or casual admirer of art, we want to help guide you in properly maintaining your art work, adding to your collection, or finding answers to your questions.