

MASTERING MOUNTING

Mounting Silks And Chinese Paintings

by Chris A. Paschke, CPF

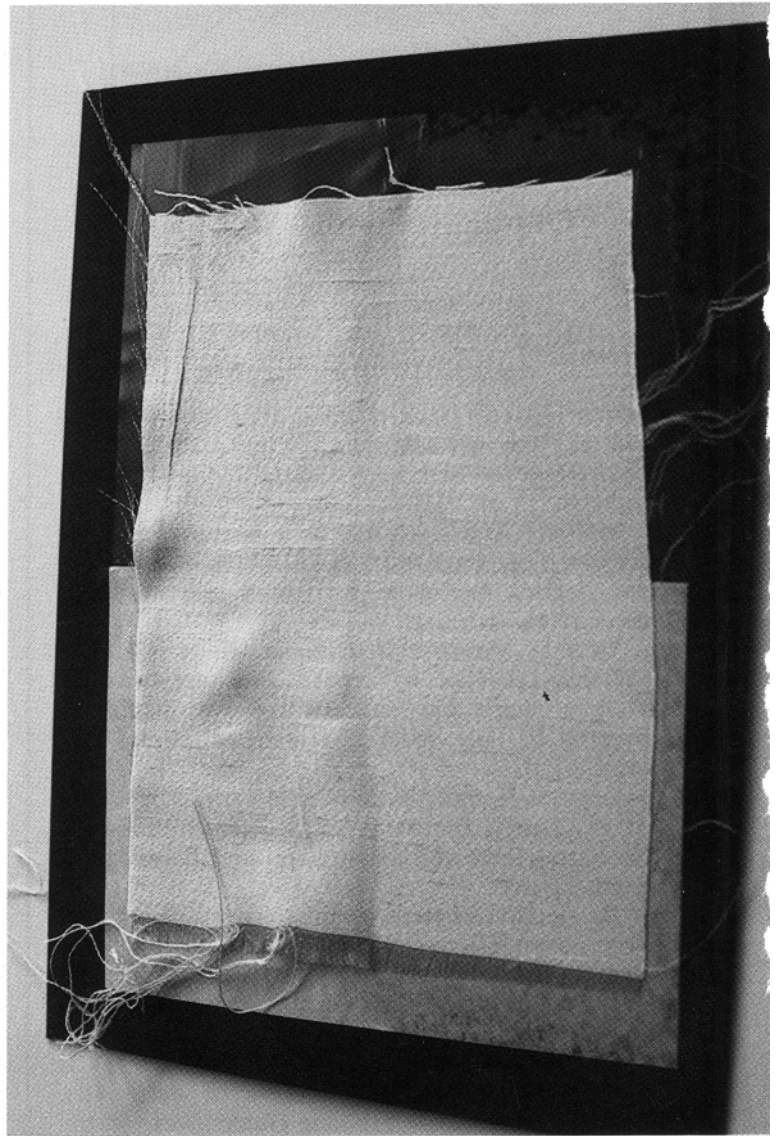
In light of this month's conservation issue, one of the projects that generally brings terror to the hearts of many framers are those beloved and cherished silks. Silk scarves, Japanese and Chinese silk paintings, silk tapestries and needlework brought back from travels in the Orient, can all be beautifully and "conservationally" framed. The framing job could easily run into the hundreds of dollars, depending on the size and procedures used, but what about those small \$5 and \$10 pieces picked up in Chinatown; you know, the ones the client hopes to frame for maybe ... \$25!

The Options

As with many framing jobs, there is a right way and a cheap way to do things, and we're going to explore both. *You* must be the judge based on your individual situation, if conservation is mandatory, adhesives must never be used; if inexpensive, short term (non-archival) presentation is elected, there are ways to mount with adhesives. An important element to stress here is to create a bond with your client, illustrate your knowledge by explaining the options, and control the situation by gently directing them into the right decision based on the facts. Common customer objections generally result from their lack of understanding the steps required to properly frame a silk, and sometimes that's all the closure of a high ticket sale may need.

An educated respect for decorated silk artworks is a must; in most cases

It may be surprising,
but it is possible to
frame silks both
beautifully and
conservationally.



you must treat them as you would needleart. The traditional conservation method of framing a silk is to stitch it to another fabric, attached to a wood stretcher. Ideally this should *always* be the approach. Let us not be such purists, however, that we close ourselves to all other alternatives. Perhaps an alternate solution (though not ideal) will keep us from

losing the job without sacrificing our principles. Let's not throw out the baby with the bath water!

Conservation Preparation— The Right Way

Cut a piece of undyed, 100% cotton muslin, several inches larger than the actual silk, and prewash it twice.

continued on page 96

MASTERING MOUNTING

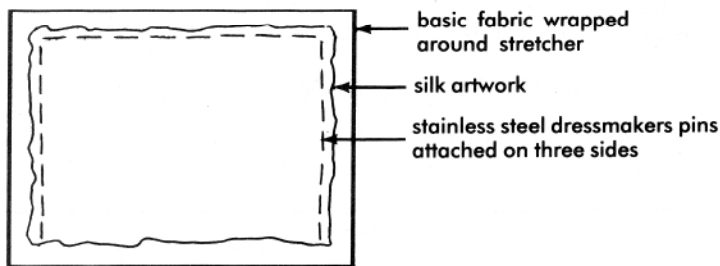
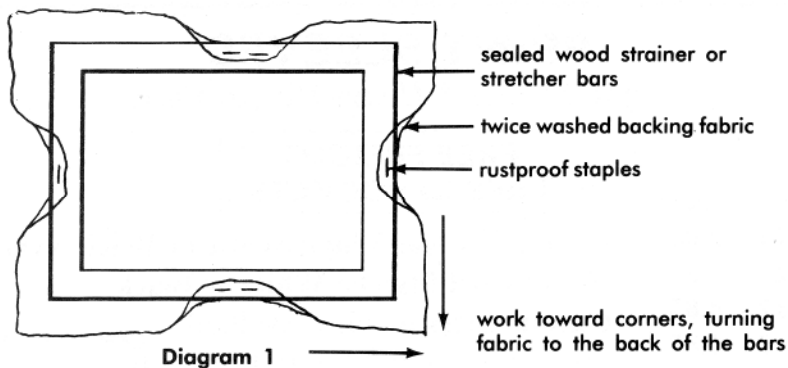
continued from page 94

The initial wash should be in detergent and water, the second in a clear water wash to remove any acidic sizing and soap residue. Dry and press the fabric. Some schools of thought advocate using the same type of fabric as a base, in this case undyed, natural silk, so the fabrics will react similarly to changes of temperature and humidity.

Wood stretcher bars should be constructed to accommodate stretching the larger washed base fabric. Be certain to seal the wood with 3-4 layers of varnish or a shellac/alcohol mixture. The Smithsonian Institute recommends 50% de-colored, de-waxed shellac and 50% paco alcohol which will prevent the wood acids from penetrating the artwork or their gases from infiltrating the framed, inner environment.

Stretching

The washed fabric is stretched



onto the sealed stretcher bars and stapled on the reverse (or backside) using stainless steel or rustproof staples. Stretch the fabric beginning

from the center back (as is done when stretching canvas), working toward the outer corners alternately, until the entire piece is attached at the same time (diagram 1).

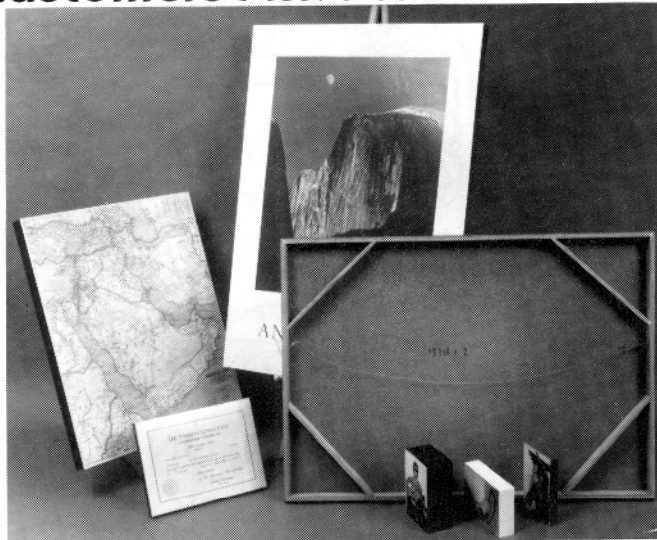
Using thin, stainless steel dressmakers pins, attach the silk artwork to the fabric base on the top and two sides only, and stand the unit vertically to allow the silk to settle naturally for several days or up to a week. Readjust the silk to smooth out puckers and wrinkles naturally created by gravity (diagram 2).

With a slender-eyed, rustproof needle, designated for use with silk, and silk thread of a corresponding color, gently stitch the silk into position on the washed, stretched fabric, by sewing only to the same three sides that were originally pinned. Stitches should be plentiful enough to support the size of the art and they should be evenly spaced. On overly large items the art might need tacking within the central body to aid in its support. Note that the backing fabric is stretched to the bars first and the silk is attached afterwards; stretching the backing and silk artwork together could damage the silk or pull it in unnatural directions.

Optional stitching procedures include mounting the backing fabric over acid-free foam board (with or without batting) and lacing it across

continued on page 98

Customers Ask For Boxframes!



You take the orders, we do the work!

Just send us the poster & we'll custom build THE BOX to fit, in your choice of 33 mica side colors. The poster surface is laminated for a durable, easy to clean product. We will do one piece or 100. Turn around time in our shops is 2-3 days. A \$30 sample set is available or you can send us a poster from your shop. Call us for more information.

UNIQUE MOUNTING SERVICES

Dimensions
949 Springfield Rd.
Columbiana, Oh. 44408
1-800-356-9528

Foamount
6121 Shadyside Rd.
Shadyside, Md. 20764
1-800-342-8322

Serving the picture framing industry since 1972

MASTERING MOUNTING

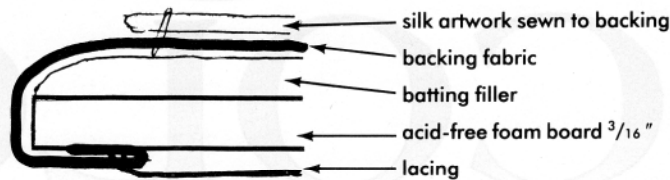


Diagram 3

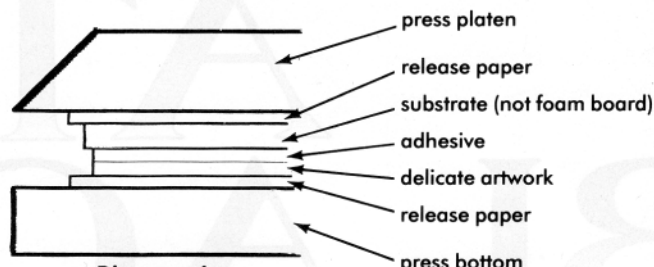


Diagram 4

continued from page 96

the back, rather than stapling (diagram 3). Muslin or 100% cotton fabric might better withstand the strain and pull necessary to adequately lace smoothly. In that case the silk would be stitched to the backing as above. Another option is stapling 4-ply rag board to the front of the bars, stretching the secondary base fabric around to the back of the bars, then stitching the silk to that base.

Framing

Whether matting or spacers are used, it is vital that the glazing *never* come in direct contact with the silk. Wood mouldings should have sealed rabbets (as the stretcher bars) to prevent acid-burn. With the advent of conservation UV glazing (both glass and plexi), the natural fading of these silk artworks may be somewhat retarded. Proper glazing procedures, therefore, may not only protect from harmful dust and insects, but also from the damage of ultra-violet light rays.

Exceptions—The Cheaper Way

Based upon the entire concept of conservation (as mentioned in *Removable Does Not Mean Reversible*—this issue), when dealing with a silk original, never do anything that is not reversible. That means *never* cut or trim the borders and *never* mount it with wet, spray, pressure-sensitive or dry mount adhesives. But here come the exceptions.

Some of the more inexpensive silk

paintings (purchased domestically, often priced within the \$10 range) are often backed with a thin paper. I personally veer away from wanting to dry mount any of these and often prefer hinging them instead. They are generally stiff enough to support hinging and there are no risks of an adhesive reaction. Wet, spray or dry mounting a previously mounted silk could be risky, since the used adhesive remains an unknown and either water or heat could release the silk from that original paper backing.

Oriental silk paintings (even inexpensive ones) must be dealt with carefully since we don't know the type of pigment used and it may be sensitive to moisture or heat. Acids also need to be considered, as they can burn the silk over time. If the decoration on the silk is such that it will tolerate mounting the artwork with adhesive, there are methods, controversial though they may be, that will answer the call.

Probably the best "controversial alternative" to sewing the silk would be dry mounting rather than hand mounting, using wet or spray glues. When using any adhesive, never forget the classic "thin fabric fear" of adhesives absorbing through the artwork. By using an acid-free, removable, low temperature tissue, the risk of adhesive absorption is brought to a minimum, as long as the basic mounting elements of time, temperature, pressure and moisture are ad-

continued on page 100

MASTERING MOUNTING

continued from page 98

dressed. Refer to manufacturer's suggested times and temperatures, but generally speaking, 1-2 minutes at 160°F for a dry mount press and 3-4 minutes at 160°F for a hot vacuum press are good starting points (photo 1). Times may vary depending upon the size of the silk artwork.

It is also possible to actually mount the silk face down in the press in order to minimize the amount of adhesive absorption because adhesives will notoriously travel toward the heat source. As with some silks, this process might be especially worth trying when attempting to mount a fabric as lightweight as a chiffon (diagram 4). Simply assemble the regular mounting package, then invert the entire package so the silk is face down with the board against the platen.

If color tinting is desired, you may elect to use a pure film adhesive, but closely monitor the time and temperature to avoid making the artwork transparent by adhesive absorption ("Ghosting Newsprint", PFM November 1991).

Conclusion

As framers, we should not take on the responsibility of making decisions for our customers. We may never comprehend their emotional attachment to a piece of artwork, and who are we to determine what is affordable to them anyway? If at all possible, conservation standards and ethics should dictate your approach to handling silks, but there are many extremes to each solution. Yes, there are the *proper* methods, but we are also in the business of *framing* fine arts, posters, collectibles and memorabilia. So when that client walks in with the \$5 silk from Chinatown, are we really bound by our skills as professionals to frame it as a one-of-a-kind imported Chinese tapestry? PFM

Chris A. Paschke, CPF a second generation framer, owns Designs Ink, Oxford, Connecticut. Ms. Paschke is the 1993 educator for the Seal Products/Fletcher-Terry/Dahle HOW-2 educational workshop series, and is a regular lecturer and demonstrator at industry events around the country.