

Common Framing Mistakes

Here are some common mistakes in framing along with tips on how to avoid them.

Overheating Gesso

One of the most common mistakes in working with gesso is to overheat it. This not only makes it thicker due to evaporation, but the excessive heat creates a hidden time bomb, when the gesso begins to crack and peel from the wood substrata later on.

The problem can be solved by diligently watching the heat of your gesso mixture so it does not get above about 100 degrees. Workshop tradition calls for gesso to be heated gently before it is applied to the wood surface of a frame. Gesso is often placed in a double boiler so that the heat does not destroy the adhesive qualities of the delicate glue.

Keep pouring hot water into the double boiler rather than keeping it on a stove. I usually just put my finger in the water to see if it's cold, then top it off with some hot water to try and keep it at a constant warm level. As my mentor told me, "blood warm."

If you cover the gesso and keep moving the lid back and forth as you use it, there is a better chance the heat will be retained. The ambient temperature of the workshop has an effect on the process, and in winter months you have to work a little harder to maintain an even temperature. I have found that a thick stoneware crock helps retain the proper consistency of gesso best.



Gesso, bole, and moulding sample by Max Kuehne shows the developmental stages of the gilding process from raw wood, gesso (white), bole, (red), silver leaf with oxidized silver, and gamboge finish. Photo: Eddie Owen, Gold Leaf Studios, Washington, DC.

—William B. Adair

Using Spray Mounting

Some framers still continue to spray mount as an alternative to other mounting methods—often because of cost. That can be a real mistake. There are more factors involved than the cost of a can of adhesive.

First, a spray booth is required to meet OSHA health requirements. Add to that the need for space for weighting during curing, and the cost for a can of spray almost equals the cost of other methods.

Second, the effectiveness of spray adhesives is also questionable. Those that describe themselves as "permanent bond" refer to tear strength, not longevity. When a permanent spray has been properly applied in two directions with significant overlap with full adhesive coverage of the substrate, given the correct amount of time for solvent evaporation and positioning, and applied manually or with a vacuum press and placed under a weight for full curing for 24 hours, then it is permanently bonded at that time and will tear apart if you try to remove it from the substrate.

However, as the spray bond is subjected to fluctuations in temperature and humidity over time, the once-permanent bond weakens. The result can be bond failure. Paper prints absorb moisture, causing fiber expansion, which results in bubbles. Even after the paper dries out, the fibers never return to their original thinness and the bubbles remain.

There are far more dependable mounting methods available. Spray adhesive is truly a thing of the past.



Typical spray mounting products from the past, with a rubber brayer for manual application.

—Chris Paschke, MCPF, GCF