

# Mastering Mounting



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## *Foamboard Breakthrough*

**F**ramers and conservators have had an ongoing love/hate relationship with foamboard for more than a quarter of a century. Manufacturers have availed us with foamboards that are veneer coated, clay coated, acid-free, 100 percent cotton rag, micro chamber, white, black, and colored. They come  $\frac{1}{8}$ ",  $\frac{3}{16}$ ", and  $\frac{1}{2}$ " thick with a wide range of other dimen-

asurable, and affordable. You would think they would be ideal for any custom framing application, but they have never been fully accepted by purists. For years the museum controversy over foamboard has kept framers wondering about its limited use in preservation framing. Even after 30 years, conservators still remain divided over outgassing questions. There has been no proof

that foamboard causes any deterioration or damage to art of any kind, yet the lack of printed research has never freed foamboard of the stigma that it might hurt something.

This lack of independent scientific research of foamboard has precluded the availability of printed results that would have allowed and encouraged the custom framing and museum communities to embrace use of foamboard products as a viable mount, backing, or filler board in preservation enclosures. Any testing of foamboard by manufacturers in the past seemed to be of the surface papers in an attempt to meet ISO (International Organization of Standards) 18916—*Photographic Activity Test* requirements rather

than the foam center itself.

The real clincher on the restrictions of foamboard in framing came with the release of the PPFA's MCPF (Master Certified Picture Framer) program in 2003, which specifically banned the use of foamboard in all preservation framing. The PPFA Competition Board has always allowed foamboard in framing competition, but this discrepancy between MCPF regulations and

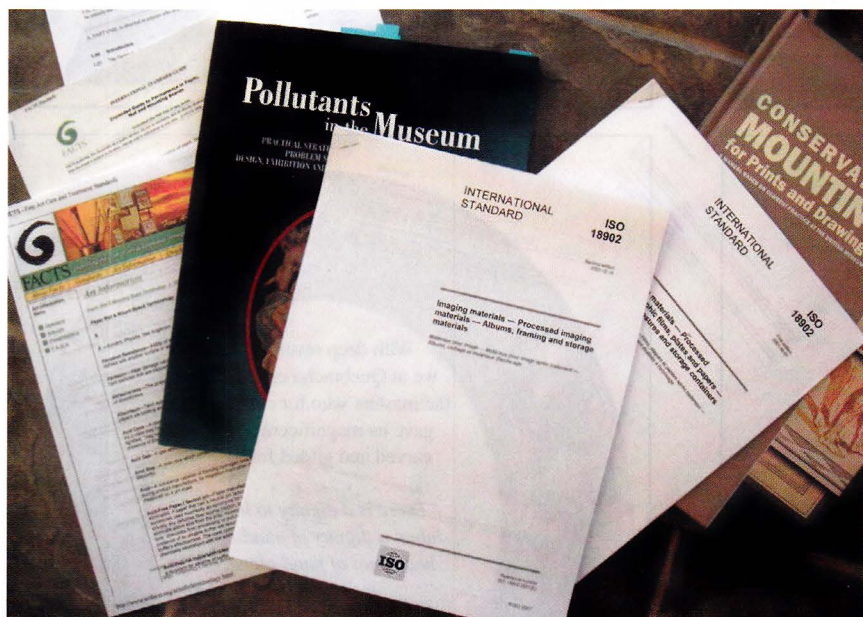


Photo 1: FACTS, ISO 18902, and assorted resource books are impacting the use of foamboard in framing.

sions available in the graphics and advertising industries. They may be used to create signage, as a rigid substrate for wrapping, for one-piece shadowboxes, and for the construction of reusable UPS and FedEx shipping boxes for framed art.

Foamboard has become the corrugated cardboard replacement American framers cannot live without. They are tough, smooth, lightweight,



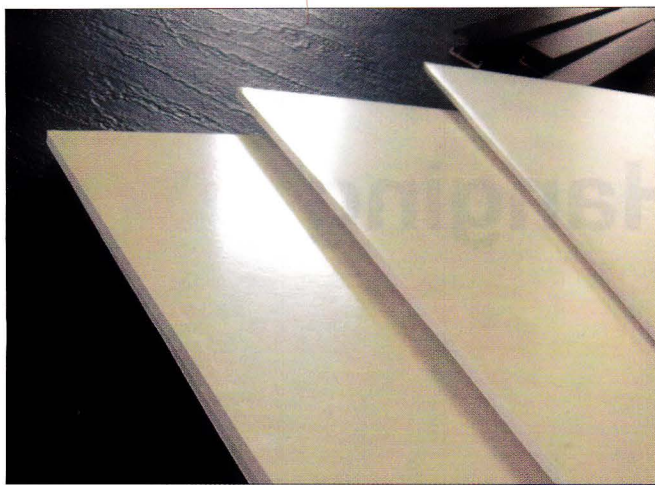


Photo 2: Though tough to see in this photo, the three foamboard surfaces have a high degree of variation. Step 150 has a very high shine, and the dry HA adhesive has a total nonslip surface feel (left). Regular plain clay-coat foamboard (center) has a medium gloss and smooth, slick feel. HartMount HA foam (right) has a satin finish.

Competition Guideline allowances was an inconsistency that led to frustration among the ranks. Foamboard had been embraced in framing for decades, and now framers were being told it was not acceptable.

### Foamboard Breakthrough

As an active member of the ISO committee, I represent both the U.S. and the picture framing industry. A colleague, Dr. Mark Mizen, and I fought to get the title and focus of ISO 18902:2000 *Imaging materials—Filing enclosures and storage containers* updated to reflect both albums (scrapbooks) and framing as specific enclosures and containers to better suit our industries. Prior to this revision, there was nothing in the ISO directory that specifically covered materials routinely used in framing. Foamboard was therefore very important.

In December 2007, after years of reworking and updating the existing document, ISO 18902:2007 *Imaging materials—Albums, framing and storage materials* was finally released. With the launch of this document the wheels have been set in motion to change the course of the acceptance of foamboard in custom framing. This is the first international document, and the only one in the U.S., to officially state that the use of polystyrene (foam center) board product is acceptable for use in framing enclosures. The full document may be purchased from the ISO website at [www.iso.org](http://www.iso.org) (Photo 1).

### Resources

Resources for foamboard research results have been sketchy at best. Even PPFA went to the Canadian



Photo 3: A common time saver and money maker is to mount multiple prints on an oversized board. Since prints in this sample were to be trimmed flush to the edge, as many as possible were placed for a single session in the VacuSeal. A sheet of Gilman HA Reveal is the adhesive-coated foamboard in this sample. The entire board must be covered with release paper to protect the platen or glass from adhesive transfer.

Conservation Institute (CCI) when putting the MCPF program together because of a lack of American information, with nothing available from the American Institute for Conservation (AIC).

In her 2002 book *Pollutants in the Museum Environment*, Pamela B. Hatchfield defined foamboard as made up of “foamed, extruded polystyrene faced with paper or plastic.” She discussed use of polystyrene in museum cases and enclosures and suggested care when using it, but she stated no real restrictions. She did cite results from a 1972 Kennett study of burning plastics, which stated that detectable degradation products (vapors, gas) may be produced by polystyrene, polyvinyl acetate, and even polyester at highly elevated temperatures. If artwork is caught in a fire, plastic outgassing would seem to be the least of one's worries, however.

### PPFA and FACTS Reactions

As a result of the new ISO document release, PPFA is finally looking into modifying the requirements and limitations of its MCPF regulations to allow the use of foamboard in preservation framing. Conservators and archivists involved in the rewrite of 18902 are all in full compliance with this acceptance. To meet these ISO specifications, the selected foamboard surface papers are required to meet all PAT requirements of ISO 18916. That does not mean dry mounting to a clay-coated foam is museum quality, but hinging to 100 percent cotton rag may be.

The FACTS Foam Center Board subcommittee began working on an industry foamboard standard back



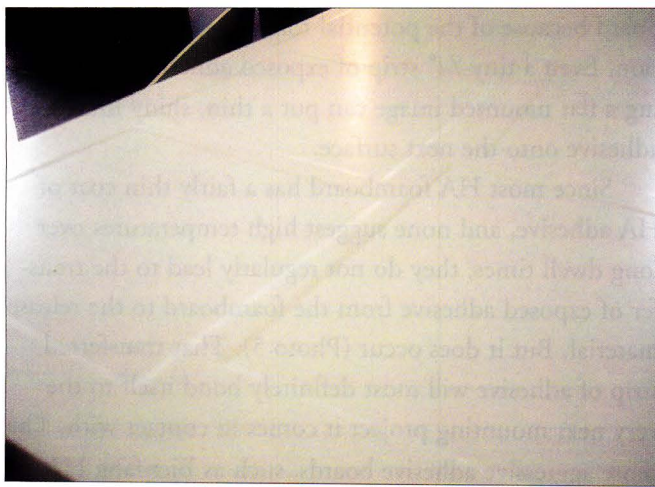


Photo 4: The sample illustrates a wasted sheet of Gilman HA foam. I aligned four images onto it and mounted them in a 4060 VacuSeal--only to have them fall off when removed because there were mounted to the wrong (nonadhesive) side. The foam clearly shows indentations of the images.

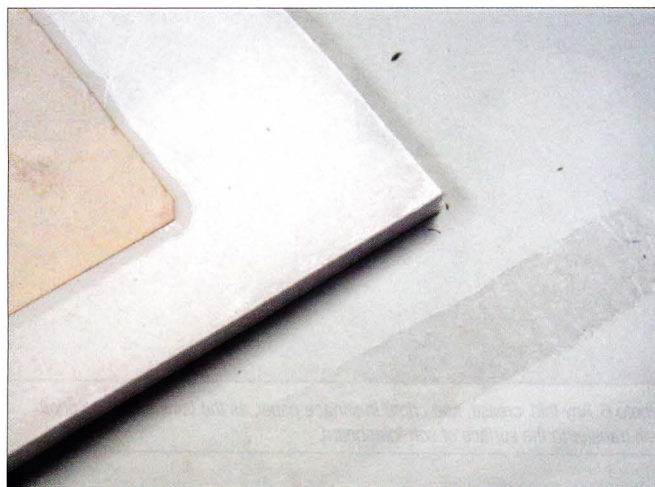


Photo 5: A 1" strip of transferred adhesive came from the bottom 1" edge of the Bienfang Step 150 foamboard just above it. This must be wiped from the single-sided release paper prior to future mounting.

in 2004. But with limited printed documentation of foamboard in the U.S., it was forced to put the project on hold until the release of the 18902 update. The latest word is that the committee will be dusting off its information, and release of a FACTS foamboard standard is just around the corner.

## Board Variations

Plain white clay-coat foam is slick and glossy, and oddly enough the clay layer is actually considered a better barrier by many conservators than an uncoated acid-free or cotton-rag surface paper. Acid-free (buffered) foamboard has a warmer, off-white color and a soft, toothy surface; it is wonderful for deep bevel wrapped mats or shadow-boxes. Bright white and 100 percent cotton rag foam-

boards have a cold, crisp, bright white surface color and a soft, porous surface with wonderful adhesive absorption.

Foamboard surface appearances vary from one surface paper to the next and from manufacturer to manufacturer. Boards vary in physical thickness as well as in edging shapes. Not all  $\frac{3}{16}$ " boards are actually  $\frac{3}{16}$ ". Some measure  $\frac{3}{16}$ " including the surface papers, some measure the foam itself without papers, and some are slightly less than  $\frac{3}{16}$ " even with the papers included. The outside dimensions also vary and may be  $\frac{1}{4}$ " larger or smaller than 32"x40".

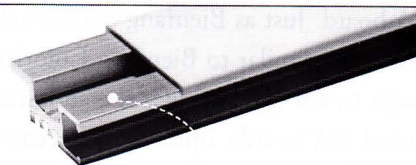
## HA Foamboard

Heat-activated foamboard surfaces are all quite unique,

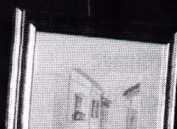
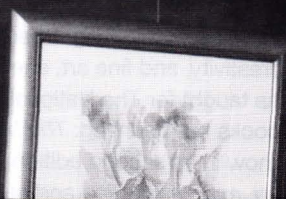


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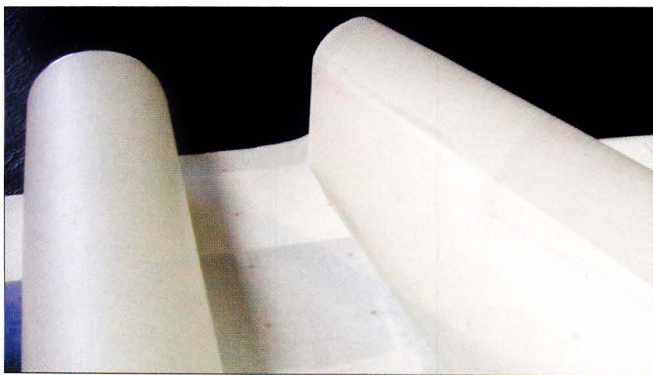


Photo 6: Any fold, crease, and crimp in surface paper, as the laminate in the photo, will transfer to the surface of soft foamboard.

and though tough to see in a photo, most foamboards have some degree of uniqueness (Photo 2). Step 150 has a very high shine and almost rubber feeling to the touch, not the least slippery (left). The regular plain clay coat foamboard (center) has a medium gloss and smooth, slick feel. The HartMount® HA Foam has a satin finish. Some boards are more compressed at the outer edges, some have interleaving sheets to help prevent adhesive blocking (melting together), and some are very difficult to tell which side is the adhesive and which is the plain clay coat.

A common time saver and profit maker is to mount multiple prints on a single oversized board. After mounting and cooling under a weight, prints are trimmed flush to the edge for framing. The entire adhesive-coated board should be covered with release paper to protect the platen or glass from adhesive transfer (Photo 3).

Both sides should be studied so you will be familiar with the tooth and the touch of the adhesive side of any HA board. Just as Bienfang double-sided release paper looks very similar to Bienfang ColorMount, it can be tough to tell which side is the adhesive side of some clay-coated HA boards, once they are removed from their cases. I once aligned four images onto a sheet of Gilman HA foam then attempted to mount them in a 4060 VacuSeal only to have them fall off when removed because I mounted them to the nonadhesive side. The damaged foam (Photo 4), which had to be discarded, clearly shows indentations of the images.

## Other Issues

You should always take care to routinely clean all release materials when mounting with an oversized sheet of film or tissue adhesive or when selecting heat-activated foam-

board because of the potential for adhesive contamination. Even a tiny  $\frac{1}{16}$ " strip of exposed adhesive surrounding a flat mounted image can put a thin, shiny line of adhesive onto the next surface.

Since most HA foamboard has a fairly thin coat of HA adhesive, and none suggest high temperatures over long dwell times, they do not regularly lead to the transfer of exposed adhesive from the foamboard to the release material. But it does occur (Photo 5). That transferred strip of adhesive will most definitely bond itself to the very next mounting project it comes in contact with. The more aggressive adhesive boards, such as Bienfang HA Step 150, tend to exhibit this behavior more.

This is not a bad thing nor does it indicate a problem product; it simply forces a framer to develop better routine mounting habits. Since release paper is coated with a nonstick layer of silicone, any adhesive residue will not permanently bond to it and may be easily wiped off after cooling with a clean, lint-free rag. The residue may not always be visible but will always be detectable by light finger touch across the release paper surface. Your hand should move smoothly across the silicone surface and will feel snagged if it hits any residue. Routine wiping of the silicone surface with a rag prevents later problems.

Folds, creases, and crimps in surface laminate or release papers will transfer the same damage to soft surface foamboards (Photo 6). Though vinyl laminates are known to be repositionable when first applied, that is not the case with HA foamboards.

All in all, regardless of whether it's preservation framing or decorative laminating, the future of foamboard in custom framing seems assured forever.

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