

# the care & Framing of watercolors

Twenty-six simple framing tips guaranteed to enhance the look of your watercolor paintings and protect them against time and the elements.

By Chris A. Paschke

**H**ow you choose to frame your watercolor painting is every bit as important as your choice of a hot- or cold-pressed surface. A good design choice will enhance the painting, making it even more beautiful, whereas a hastily selected frame that doesn't match the style of the artwork can make the painting seem awkward. Never settle on a frame simply because it's the only one in the storage closet or because it's on sale at the local discount store. Of course, enhancing a watercolor with an appropriate frame is only half the story; protecting it is the rest.

Aside from bad storage practices, most painting damage occurs from poor framing procedures, including the pressing of glass directly against the painting surface and the use of low-grade matboards or adhesives. Essentially, protecting a watercolor painting means never doing anything to it during the framing process that cannot be undone. A properly constructed, basic frame package should include:

- at least one window mat as a spacer between the art and glazing—two to three spacers are best
- a mount board to support the art and mat
- a backing or foam center board as filler to

protect and insulate the work

- UV-filtering glass or acrylic glazing with 97 percent UV protection
- a paper dust cover to protect the painting against moisture, pollution and insect damage.

Whether you frame your own paintings or work with a professional, it's essential to know the important components of a basic frame package and what the different options mean to your work so that you make informed framing decisions.

## Matting Matters

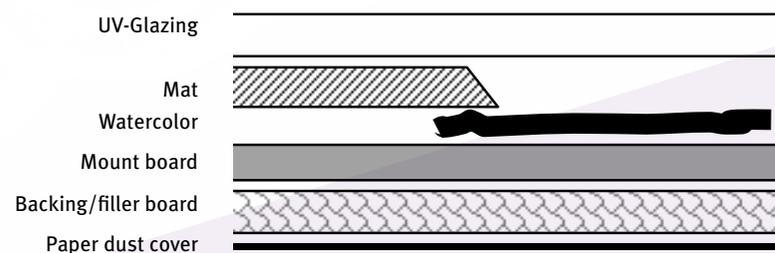
Cut from 4- or 8-ply boards with a window opening to display the artwork, mats protect the edges of the painting, act as spacers that allow for air circulation within the frame and keep the glazing from touching the surface of the work. Mats should consist of buffered rag or conservation matboard materials that are buffered with 2 percent to 3 percent calcium carbonate to guard against acid migration. A pH of 8.5 helps resist fading, discoloration and embrittlement. Though an 8-ply board is highly suggested for a single mat, a double mat with spacers would also create the required depth to accommodate a watercolor that's warped or cockled.



## 1 Basic Frame Package

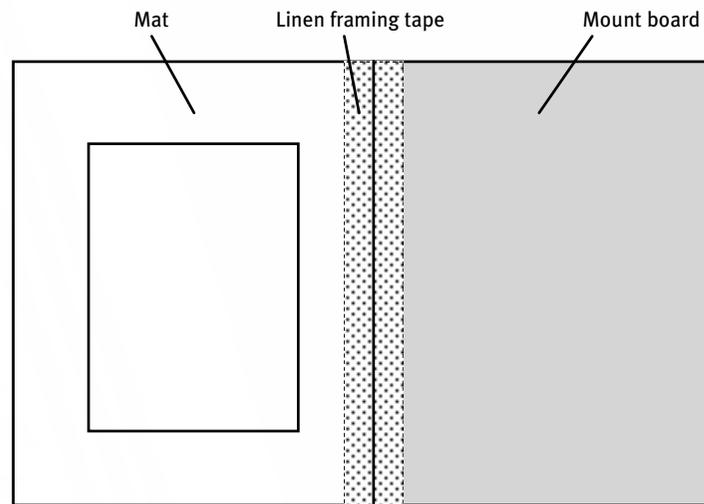


**The Complete Package** A simple, Asian-influenced, watercolor still life painted on 140-lb. Fabriano rough paper, *Moon Gold II* (10x10) has been enhanced with a contemporary version of a double mat: a 2-inch antique white top mat; a 3/16-inch deep, wrapped bevel spacer and a 3-inch white bottom mat. Ultraviolet-filtering clear glass and a dark gray wood, flat-sided stem frame complete the package.



**The Essentials** This cut-out view shows you the components of a basic single-mat frame package.

## 2 Book Hinge



**Picture Book** To create a book hinge, the window mat is attached to the mount board with pressure-sensitive linen tape.

The window mat should be book-hinged to a 4-ply rag mount board backing on the longest side using a pressure-sensitive linen framing tape. Always use a bone burnisher to activate maximum adhesion of any pressure-sensitive tape. Finger pressure rarely activates tapes to more than 50 percent of their capacity.

### Mounting Dos and Don'ts

Mounting adhesives used to attach the painting to a backing board come in a few varieties: permanent, removable and reversible. For watercolors, avoid any permanent adhesives and mounting methods, including fully mounting any painting to a backing board using spray adhesive, wet glue, pressure-sensitive boards or dry-mounting. To remove permanent adhesives, you must use solvents, which saturate the painting, leaving residue for the life of the work. Likewise, although you can reactivate removable adhesives by introducing heat, which softens the adhesive, allowing you to separate the painting from the backing, there will always remain some level of adhesive saturation in the artwork. Only reversible adhesives and museum-mounting methods should be used for original artwork, as they allow for future removal of



**Sitting Pretty** Once the window mat is attached to the mount board, align the painting and lightly mark its position so you'll know where to add hinges.

the painting from the framing package with no adhesive residue or damage to the work.

Never allow masking tape, linen tape or double-sided tape to come into direct contact with your watercolor paintings. And never attach the painting to the back of the window mat. A common mounting mistake is to tape the entire perimeter of the painting to the back of the window mat in an attempt to prevent it from shifting or buckling in the frame. This restricts the paper from expansion and makes buckling more likely to occur. The watercolor should be hinged to the back mount board with the book-hinged window then closed over the edges of the art. If properly applied, the book hinge and the inner edges of the frame will keep everything in alignment once fully assembled.

The recommended method of attaching watercolors to mount boards is to create pendant or T-hinges, using either commercially acceptable pre-pasted starch hinges or starch paste with Japanese rice paper. Use pendant hinges when a window mat will be covering and supporting the hinged art around all four sides. Hinge placement varies depending on the size and weight of the image, but the outermost hinges should begin a little more than

## 3 Mounting Methods



**Pendant Hinge** The feathered edges of the hinges help prevent any indent showing through to the front of the watercolor when using starch paste. Only 1/8-inch of the hinge is pasted to the back of the painting.

one width (not length) of the hinge from the edge of the art (see the illustration at right). Additional hinges may be needed at 12- to 15-inch intervals.

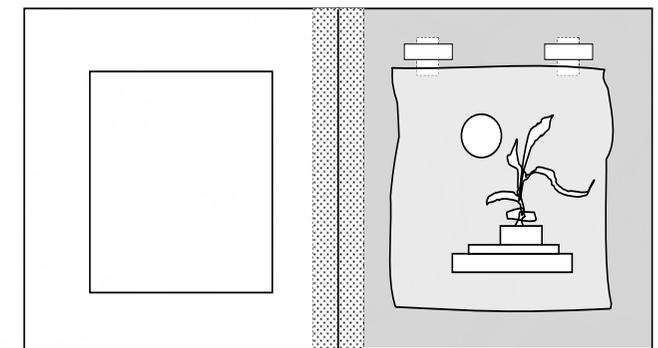
Attach pendant hinges with a small amount of cooked starch paste to the top 1/8-inch of the back of the painting. When dry, glue the hinges to the mount board and close the hinged window mat down over it. Pendant hinges are fine for small, lightweight watercolors, but heavier papers require more support.

The strongest hinges are T-hinges, which actually start as pendant hinges, but then reinforcement pieces are applied horizontally across the faces of the first hinge pieces (see the illustration above, right). T-hinge crosspieces provide additional support and never actually come in contact with the artwork. You can find commercial pressure-sensitive hinging products, such as Lineco Hayaku, and museum-mounting kits with wheat starch and Japanese paper at most fine art suppliers.

Before the crosspiece is attached to the pendant hinge, align the painting onto the book unit backing. Close the hinged mat over the painting to double-check alignment, open and apply the horizontal crosspiece. When finished, the mat unit is ready for glass and frame.



**T-Hinge** When a horizontal crosspiece is added to a pendant hinge for reinforcement it's called a T-hinge. The hinge is shown here against a gray background so you can see how it works. In actuality, it will be mounted to the solid board side of the book-hinged mat.



**Suspended T-hinges** suspend the painting from the mount board.

## 4 Glazing



**Protect and Serve** To give your watercolor paintings adequate protection against the effects of harmful UV rays, you should use either UV-filtering glass or acrylic glazing. For this painting, I used UV-filtering clear glass.

### Glazing Options

Watercolor paintings require the protection of either glass or acrylic glazing. Glass products are available as premium clear, reflection control and UV-filtering (clear and reflection control); acrylic sheeting options include regular and UV-filtering. Reflection-control glazing has an etched surface that shatters the reflection as light passes through the glass, eliminating much of the glare. The compromise, however, is that this glazing can also affect the crispness and clarity of the painting beneath. The choice of clear or reflection-control is a personal preference, but UV-filtering glazing is a must for all watercolor paintings because of the unknown pigment properties and light sensitivities possible with water-based paints. Ultraviolet-glazing blocks 97 percent of all harmful UV rays. Although it can't stop pigments that are naturally sensitive to visible light from fading, it will slow down further UV damage.

## 5 Hardware

### Putting It All Together

In order to meet museum standards, a sheet of  $\frac{3}{16}$ -inch or  $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch foam (called a "filler board") should be placed behind the mount board for support and protection. A pH-neutral, corrugate, gray board from Lineco can also be used to fill the rest of the frame depth to prevent the dust cover from puncture. The filler boards should be just shy of the frame depth so there's room to insert diamond points or brads without compressing the package. There should be a slight amount of wiggle room in any finished package to allow for watercolor paper expansion and movement within the book-hinged mat unit. A package that's too tight will encourage buckling and warping.

A dust cover should be used to seal or close the back of the frame package to help deter insects and protect the painting from exterior humidity and pollutants. Blue-gray acid-free, buffered backing paper is ideal and brown Kraft paper is OK, but black Kraft paper will leave a carbon ghost on white walls and should be avoided. Line the edge of the frame with double-stick tape and stretch the paper across, then trim the paper to fit.

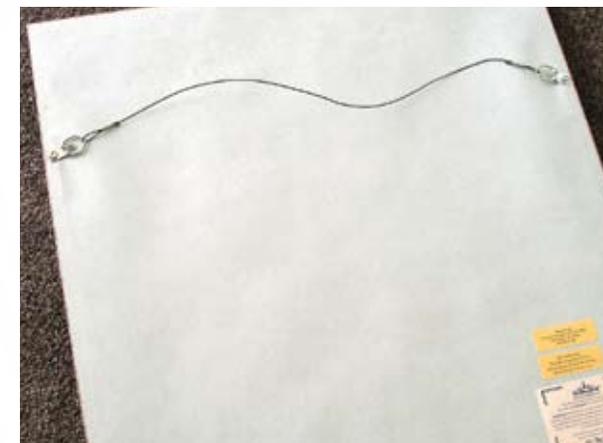
### Hanging It Up

Don't leave wires and hardware to afterthought. For a wood frame, D-rings used with screws should be the hanging hardware of choice. (Screw eyes are weak and may snap at the wood line or pull out of the wood altogether. Likewise, sawtooth hangers should not be used for most framing. They create undue stress on the top leg of the frame, stressing the top corners and encouraging warp and damage.) D-rings should be set one-third of the way down from the top of the frame, and the wire should make a 60-degree angle to the side of the frame to relieve stress.

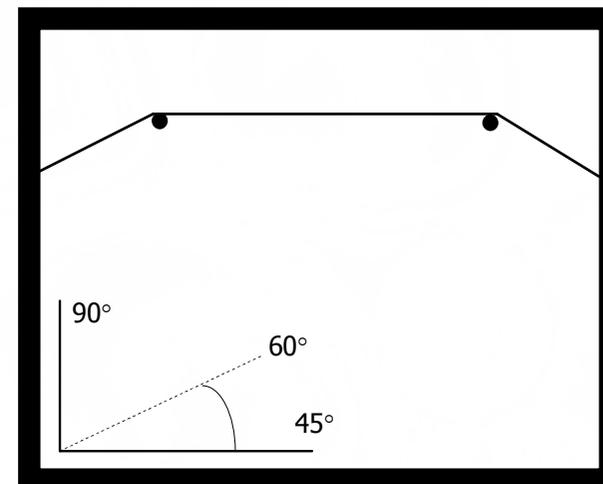
The wire needs to be strong enough to accommodate the frame but you don't need to go overboard. To help keep the frame level and lessen the stress on the point at which the D-ring is screwed into the frame at each side, hang the painting with two wall nails or frame hooks, never just one.

Even when watercolors have been correctly handled and museum-mounted, it's important to check them at least every five years for damage caused by light, humidity, insects and pollution. 

**CHRIS A. PASCHKE** has been a mounting specialist, educator and columnist to the framing industry for more than 25 years, and an artist since birth.



**Finished** A dust cover should be applied to the entire back surface of the frame to help protect the painting from moisture and insects. Plastic bumpers (not shown) attached to the lower corners keep the frame level and allow for air.



**Hung Up** When the painting is hung, the wire should make 60-degree angles from the nails to the sides of the frame.



**Wired** The wire should be heavy enough to hold two times the weight of the frame package. It should be loose enough to allow for the piece to be hung with two nails or frame hooks.