

Removing a Painting from Its Frame

Introduction

Removing a painting from its frame can be a relatively easy procedure, provided that the initial framing job meets accepted guidelines (see CCI Notes 10/8, *Framing a Painting*). Unfortunately, many paintings are improperly secured in their frames (e.g., nails are frequently driven obliquely through the stretcher into the frame), and separating these paintings from their frames requires special care.

Before proceeding, make sure that the paint surface is stable (see CCI Notes 10/6, *Condition Reporting — Paintings. Part I: Introduction*). As a rule, one should never attempt to handle a large painting alone (see CCI Notes 10/13, *Basic Handling of Paintings*).

Procedure

To begin, place the painting face down on padded blocks or on pieces of foam positioned diagonally under the corners of the frame (see CCI Notes 10/2, *Making Padded Blocks*).

It is important to keep the painting immobile throughout the remainder of this procedure.

Place cardboard over the stretcher to protect the painting while removing hanging devices and nails.

Remove any supporting hooks, string, or wire.

If the painting is nailed to the frame, carefully remove the nails with pliers by turning them and pulling gently at the same time. If more leverage is necessary, use a small block of wood as a fulcrum (Figure 1). This is a delicate operation. Direct all movements away from the painting, since a sudden uncontrolled jolt could damage the canvas. For



Figure 1. Removing nails with pliers.

difficult situations (e.g., where nails are inaccessible), special tools, expertise, or modifications in technique may be required to avoid damage. In these cases, seek advice from a conservator.

When all the nails have been removed, carefully examine the painting to determine whether it can be easily lifted from the frame. If not, ascertain whether the paint surface is stuck to the rabbet of the frame. If a painting was framed while its paint or varnish was still wet, separating it from the frame could damage the painting. In such a case, or if the painting is still tightly wedged in its frame, consult a conservator.

Once the painting has been loosened in its frame, remove it as shown in Figure 2. Ease the painting towards one side of the frame while lifting. Avoid pressing your fingers against the paint surface or against the back of the canvas.



Figure 2. Lifting painting from frame.

Preserve original frames whenever possible. However, if the frame cannot be reused, carefully record any information found on the back

(e.g., labels, exhibition history, provenance, seals, inscriptions, etc.) for the painting's dossier.

Further Reading

Canadian Conservation Institute. *Basic Handling of Paintings*. CCI Notes 10/13. Ottawa: Canadian Conservation Institute, 1993.

Canadian Conservation Institute. *Condition Reporting — Paintings. Part I: Introduction*. CCI Notes 10/6. Ottawa: Canadian Conservation Institute, 1993.

Canadian Conservation Institute. *Framing a Painting*. CCI Notes 10/8. Ottawa: Canadian Conservation Institute, 1993.

Canadian Conservation Institute. *Making Padded Blocks*. CCI Notes 10/2. Ottawa: Canadian Conservation Institute, 1988.

Keck, Caroline K. *A Handbook on the Care of Paintings*. Second edition. New York: Watson Guptill, 1972.

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