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# CCI Notes

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10/11

## Condition Reporting – Paintings. Part III: Glossary of Terms

### Introduction

This Note explains the terminology used by conservators in condition reports. It will help museum personnel to write and maintain accurate condition report records for paintings. For detailed information on examination and condition reporting, refer to CCI Notes 10/6 and 10/7, *Condition Reporting – Paintings, Parts I and II*.

In this Note,

- (i) terms are listed alphabetically;
- (ii) terms within a definition that are in bold letters are defined elsewhere in the Note;
- (iii) *Other term* is a term that is often used as a synonym for the term being defined; and
- (iv) *See also* refers to a term related to but not synonymous with the term being defined.

## - Abrasion

Damage to the surface of a painting, caused by friction. Some of the **surface coating, paint, or paint and ground** layers are lost because of scraping or rubbing.

*Other terms:* rub, scrape, wear

*See also:* **Skinning**

## - Accretion

A surface deposit of foreign material such as dried liquid residue, foodstuff, or fly specks. Accretion is an accidental addition to the painting's surface, not foreign material intentionally included by the artist.

*Other term:* surface deposit

## - Artist's board

A general name for rigid painting **supports** such as millboard and academy board. These are primarily cardboard with surfaces prepared for oil painting. Also included in this category are **canvas** boards (i.e., cardboard with a primed **canvas** adhered to one side).

*Other term:* secondary support

*See also:* **Strainer, Stretcher, Support**

## - Auxiliary support

The framework over which the painting **canvas** is stretched. It usually refers to a **stretcher** or a **strainer**.

*Other term:* secondary support

*See also:* **Stretcher, Strainer, Support**

## - Backing board

A rigid board attached to the back of the **auxiliary support** or frame to protect the painting. (See Figure 1.)

## - Bevel

The particular shape or cut of a **stretcher** or **strainer** bar with a top surface (adjacent to the **canvas**) that is planed or sanded to slope away from the back of the painting. The bevel prevents the **canvas** from touching the **stretcher** bar when **ground** and **paint** are being applied, and later prevents a **stretcher mark** from developing. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

*Other term:* chamfer

*See also:* **Stretcher mark**

## - Binder

*See* **Medium**.

## - Blanching

A local, opaque, whitish discoloration on the surface of a painting. Blanching occurs because of a loss of or an alteration in the binding **medium** in an oil film, or because of the partial dissolution of a **varnish** film.

*See also:* **Bloom**

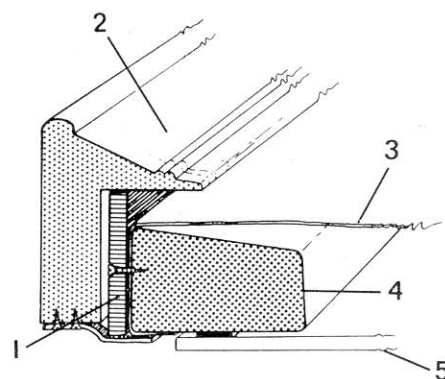


Figure 1. Cross-section of a painting.

1. Edge-strip
2. Frame
3. Canvas
4. Bevelled edge of stretcher bar
5. Backing board

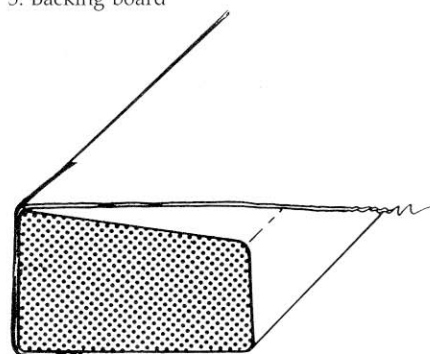


Figure 2. Cross-section of a bevelled stretcher bar.

## - Bleeding

When **paint** spreads or has been spread into adjacent areas of a painting.

## - Blister

A convex **deformation** of the **ground**, **paint**, or **surface coating** over an area of **cleavage**. Blisters are caused by excessive heating, poor adhesion between layers of a painting, moisture, or solvent action. A blister may be a form of blind **cleavage**.

## - Bloom

Areas of white, bluish white, or yellowish cloudiness in the **varnish** layer that is caused by contact with moisture or certain air pollutants. Unlike **blanching**, bloom affects only the **varnish** layer.

## - Buckling

Ridged distortions in the **support** or **paint** layers. Buckling is often associated with **cracks**, **cleavage**, and **flaking**.

## - Bulge

A local convex distortion involving the **canvas** and the **paint** and **ground** layers. Bulge is caused by sustained pressure to the back of the **canvas**, such as exerted by the presence of debris lodged between the **stretcher** and **canvas** or by an object leaning against the back of the **canvas**.

*See also:* **Cockling**

## - Canvas

A fabric painting **support** usually composed of linen, cotton, or hemp, and sometimes of jute (burlap) or ramie, or mixtures of these. (See Figure 1.)

## - Chalking

The powdering of a **paint** layer, caused by an insufficient amount of binding **medium** when originally applied or as a result of damage and deterioration.

*Other term:* powdering

## - Check

A partial **split** along or across the grain of a wood surface. In plywood or in wood that has dried too rapidly, checks may result from surface shrinkage.

*See also:* **Split**

## - Chip

Loss of a small amount of material as a result of mechanical action that caused it to break away.

## - Cleavage

A separation between layers of **paint**, between **paint** and **ground**, or between **ground** and **support**.

### Blind cleavage

An invisible separation between the layers of **paint**, between the **paint** and **ground**, or between the **ground** and **support**. This may appear as a slight **bulge** in the **paint** surface.

### Incipient cleavage

Separation between layers is beginning and further separation could occur.

*See also:* **Flaking**, **Lifting**, **Tenting**

## - Cockling

Wavy distortions or ripples in the **support**, usually associated with works of art on paper.

## - Crack

A break within one or more of the **varnish**, **paint**, or **ground** layers.

### Drying cracks

Occur in the **paint** or **varnish** film during the drying process. Generally, these cracks have rounded or sloping edges and no **cleavage**.

*Other terms:* shrinkage cracks, traction cracks

### Alligator cracks

A pattern of drying cracks that resemble alligator skin and that are associated with the different drying rates of the **paint** layers. The cracks have rounded edges and are often wide, exposing **paint** or **ground** layers below. Although frequently disfiguring, this **paint** condition is normally stable.

*Other term:* alligatoring

### Mechanical cracks

Caused by movement or excessive stress within the various layers of a painting. Mechanical cracks have sharp edges. They may be distributed over the painting or may be restricted to one area associated with specific damage, such as a blow to the back or front of the painting. These cracks are often described by the pattern they create.

### Cobweb cracks

A circular pattern of mechanical cracks caused by a blow to the painting.

### Feather cracks

Mechanical cracks branching off from a centre line, resembling a feather. These cracks are caused by a line of contact against the back of the painting (e.g., a scratch or a glancing contact on the **canvas** with a hammer when keying out).

### Spiral cracks

Mechanical cracks in the shape of a spiral. These are caused by forces within the painting.

*See also:* Craquelure

## - Cradle

A system of wooden bars running horizontally and vertically across the back of a **panel** painting in a grid pattern. Cradles are meant to prevent warping without restricting the in-plane movement of the **panel** in response to changes in relative humidity.

## - Craquelure

A network of random **cracks** over the surface of a painting. Craquelure is caused by drying, by aging, or by changes in relative humidity.

*Other term:* crackle

*See also:* Crack

## - Crazing

A network of fine **cracks** in the **varnish**, causing a loss of transparency. Crazing is associated with an aged and embrittled **varnish** layer.

## - Cupping

A condition where islands of **paint**, separated by **cracks**, develop concave centres with raised edges, like shallow cups.

- **Cut**

A severing of fabric or paper caused by a sharp instrument, leaving clean edges.

*See also:* **Tear**

- **Deformation**

Change in the original shape of a **support**, including **bulges**, depressions, **cockling**, or undulations.

*Other term:* deformation from plane

*See also:* **Bulge, Cockling, Warp**

- **Dent**

A concave distortion on the front surface of a painting. Dents are caused by a blow or by pressure from another object.

- **Draws**

Ripples in the **canvas** radiating from the corners (corner draws) or edges of a painting. Draws occur during exposure to low relative humidity (e.g., during winter), and may disappear when moderate relative humidity returns.

- **Edge-strips**

Thin protective strips of wood or metal attached to the four sides of a painting and extending above the **paint** surface. Edge-strips are used to isolate the **paint** surface from the **rabbet** of the frame. (See Figure 1.)

- **Facing**

A reinforcing material, usually tissue paper, temporarily adhered to the surface of a painting. Facing ensures that loose **paint** particles are temporarily secured, and protects the **paint** surface during conservation treatment.

- **Fill**

Material replacing lost **paint** or **paint** and **ground** so that the area of **loss** becomes level with surrounding **paint**.

*Other terms:* infill, infilling, luting

- **Flaking**

An unstable condition in which particles of **paint** or **paint** and **ground** become detached.

*See also:* **Cleavage, Lifting**

- **Gouge**

A concavity or impression caused by material being scooped out from the surface of a painting, **support**, **auxiliary support**, or frame.

- **Grime**

A disfiguring deposit on or ingrained in the surface of a painting. Grime is often a combination of air-borne soot, nicotine, cooking oils, smudges, and finger and palm marks.

*Other term:* **Surface dirt**

- **Ground**

An opaque white or coloured coating applied to the **support** as a base for the **paint** layers. The materials used for the **ground** vary.

*Other term:* **Priming**

### - Impasto

Pronounced brush strokes or a thick application of **paint** standing in relief on the surface of a painting. Impasto may be a thick or simply a slight build-up on an otherwise smooth surface.

### - Imprimatura

A thin layer of **paint** applied over the **ground** by the artist to provide the base tones for the painting.

### - Inpainting

Applying new **paint** on areas where original **paint** has been lost or abraded.

*Other term: Retouching*

*See also: Overpaint*

### - Keys

Small wedges inserted into slots at the corners of a **stretcher**. Tapping the wedges and driving them further into their slots forces the corners apart and expands the **stretcher**. This is called "keying out".

*Other term: wedges*

### - Lifting

A form of deterioration in which pieces of **paint** or **paint** and **ground** are partially detached and elevated above the **paint** surface.

*See also: Cleavage, Flaking, Tenting*

### - Liner

The inside portion of a frame that borders the painting. Liners are constructed separately from the frame, but are usually secured to the frame and can become loose or detached.

### - Lining

The process of adhering a new fabric to the back of a painting on **canvas**. Lining also refers to the fabric itself. Applying a new fabric to the back of a painting that has previously been lined is called **relining**.

*See also: Relining*

### - Loose lining

A fabric stretched directly behind, but not adhered to, a painting on **canvas**. Loose lining provides protection and additional support to the painting.

*Other term: blind lining*

### - Loss

An area where **paint** or **paint** and **ground** are missing because of damage or deterioration.

*Other term: lacuna*

### - Marouflage

The process of adhering a painting to a rigid **auxiliary support panel**.

### - Medium

The film-forming material that holds together the **pigment** particles in **paint**, such as drying oil in oil **paint** and vegetable gum in watercolour **paint**.

*Other terms: Binder, vehicle*

## - Mitre joint

The corner where the horizontal and vertical bars of a **stretcher** or **strainer** are each cut at a 45° angle so that when they meet they form a 90° angle. **Stretchers** should ideally have mitred joints; otherwise, distortions in the **canvas** could occur when the **stretcher** is expanded. (See Figure 3.)

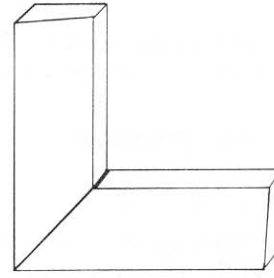


Figure 3. Mitre joint.

## - Overpaint

**Paint**, not applied by the artist, that covers original **paint** and that is often an excessive and unnecessary alteration to the image. Overpaint hides areas of damage or is used to make cosmetic changes to the image.

*See also:* **Inpainting, Retouching**

## - Paint

A film-forming material composed of **pigment** and a **medium** such as oil, resin, gum, or glue.

## - Panel

A rigid primary or secondary **support** of wood or metal. Traditionally, a panel was a wooden board or a number of boards joined together. Now, it also refers to **supports** such as masonite, hardboard, or plywood.

*Other term:* solid support

*See also:* **Artist's board**

## - Pentimento

An original design that was changed by the artist. Pentimento may be visible because of textural differences in the **paint** surface or because of increased transparency of the overlying **paint**.

## - Pigment

Coloured particles in powder form that become **paint** when combined with a **medium**.

*See also:* **Medium, Paint**

## - Priming

*See* **Ground**.

## - Puncture

A small hole through a painting. A puncture may accompany a **deformation** in the surface, and is caused by an impact.

## - Rabbet

The recess in a frame against which a painting rests.

*Other term:* rebate

## - Relining

Applying a new fabric to the back of a painting that has previously been lined. Relining usually involves removing the previous lining fabric and adhesive before applying new fabric with fresh adhesive.

*See also:* **Lining**

## - Retouching

A traditional term that has been used synonymously with **inpainting**. However, **inpainting** is more precise because **retouching** can also imply **overpainting** so that original **paint** is covered.

*See also:* **Inpainting, Overpaint**

## - Selvedge

The original woven edge of a piece of fabric where the **weft** threads return over the **warp** threads. A selvedge usually has a tightly woven "finished" edge.

*Other term:* selvage

## - Sight edge

The visible perimeter of a painting, not the actual edge that is hidden under the **rabbet** of the frame. (See Figure 4.)

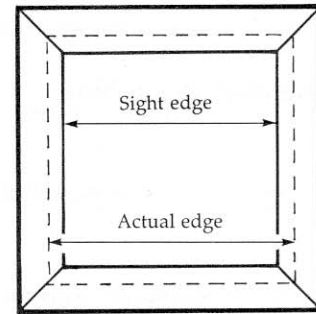


Figure 4. Sight edge.

## - Size

A solution or gel applied to raw **canvas** or to a wooden **support** before the **ground** layer is applied. Size reduces the absorbency of the **support**. Traditionally, skin glues, gelatin, gum, or starch were used. Modern materials include acrylic formulations.

*Other term:* sizing

## - Skinning

**Abrasion** of original **paint** by inexperienced cleaning. Skinning often emphasizes the **weave** of the **canvas**, since **paint** is removed from the raised portions of the painting's surface.

*Other term:* over-cleaning

## - Split

A complete separation through a piece of wood along the grain.

*See also:* **Check**

## - Strainer

A wooden frame with fixed, non-expandable corners over which a painting **canvas** is stretched. Strainers are **auxiliary supports** for paintings. Strainers should not be confused with **stretchers**, which are expandable.

### Strainer bars

The four principal wooden parts of the strainer.

### Cross bar(s)

Extra horizontal or vertical part(s) added to strengthen the strainer.

*Other term:* cross brace

*See also:* **Stretcher**



## - Stretcher

A wooden frame with expandable corners over which a painting **canvas** is stretched. Stretchers are **auxiliary supports** for paintings.

### Stretcher bars

The four principal wooden parts of the stretcher.

### Cross bar(s)

Extra horizontal or vertical part(s) added to strengthen the stretcher.

*See also:* **Bevel, Mitre joint, Strainer**

## - Stretcher mark

A line of **cracks** or a **deformation** in the painting surface that follows the inside edges of the **stretcher** or **strainer** parts.

The image of the **stretcher** or **strainer** is also sometimes visible because of relatively crack-free areas immediately above the **stretcher** or **strainer**. These crack-free areas result from the humidity-buffering capacity of the wood from which the **stretcher** or **strainer** is made.

*Other term:* stretcher crease

## - Support

Any material, such as **canvas**, wood, paper, ceramic, metal, glass, ivory, or plastic, that carries the **ground** and **paint** layers.

### Composite support

Two or more materials forming the support, such as **canvas** adhered to cardboard or to Masonite.

### Primary and secondary support

In a composite support, the primary support lies directly below the **ground** and **paint** layers, and is supported by the secondary support. For example, when **canvas** is adhered to Masonite hardboard, the primary support is the **canvas** and the secondary support is the Masonite hardboard.

### Rigid support

A support material such as wood, Masonite, or metal.

*Other term:* solid support

## - Surface coating

A transparent layer or series of layers applied to the surface of a finished painting. Various materials are used as surface coating, including natural resins, drying oils, waxes, and, more recently, synthetic resins.

*Other term:* surface film

*See also:* **Varnish**

## - Surface dirt

A deposit of dust, dirt, **grime**, nicotine, soot, or other contaminant on the surface of a painting.

*See also:* **Accretion, Grime**

## - Tacking margin

The part of a **canvas** that wraps around the edges of the **stretcher** or **strainer** and that is held by tacks or staples.

*Other term:* tacking edge

## - Tear

Where fabric or paper has been forcibly pulled apart, leaving ragged or irregular edges.

*See also:* **Cut**

## - Tension garland

Scalloped pattern along the edges of the **canvas** indicating where the original tacks held the fabric to an **auxiliary support**. Tension garland is useful for approximating the original dimensions of paintings that may have changed in size. Anomalies in the tension garland can also indicate that the **canvas** was stretched for **priming** before being mounted onto the original painting **stretcher**.

*Other terms:* scalloping, stress garland, stretcher garland

## - Tenting

A type of **cleavage** where the **paint** or **paint** and **ground** layers are cracked and are forced upward in a tent shape. Tenting is caused by compression from shrinkage in the **canvas** or wood **support**.

## - Turn-over edge

The edge of a fabric-supported painting where the **canvas** is first turned over the **auxiliary support**.

## - Varnish

A clear solution of resin dissolved in oil or solvent, which dries to form a transparent film. Traditional varnishes consist of natural resins, such as mastic, dammar, or copal. Recently, various synthetic resins have been used. Varnish is usually used as a final **surface coating** over a finished painting to even out the gloss, to saturate the colours, and to protect the **paint**.

*See also:* **Surface coating**

## - Warp

A distortion, such as a bend or curve, in a rigid or semi-rigid material. Warp also refers to the threads in a fabric that run parallel to the **selvedge** edge.

*See also:* **Weft**

## - Weave

The pattern created by overlapping **warp** and **weft** threads in a woven fabric.

### Plain (tabby) pattern

One **weft** thread woven alternately over the **warp** threads. (See Figure 5.)

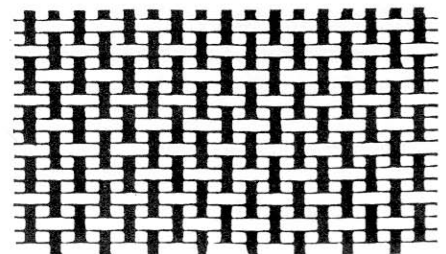


Figure 5. Plain (tabby) pattern weave.

### Twill pattern

A complex weave that creates a diagonal pattern on the cloth. (See Figure 6.)

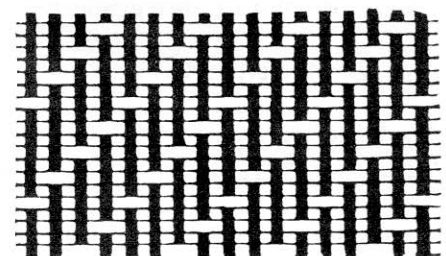


Figure 6. Twill pattern weave.

*See also:* **Warp**, **Weft**

## - Weft

The threads in a fabric that run at right angles to the **selvedge** edge.

See also: **Warp**

## - Wrinkle

A condition in a **paint** or **varnish** film in which the surface exhibits puckers, ridges, and furrows that occurred during drying.

## Further Reading

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by the Staff of the Fine Arts Section

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Copies are also available in French.

Texte également publié en version française.

© Government of Canada, 1994  
Cat. No.: NM95-57/10-11-1994E  
ISSN 0714-6221

Printed in Canada