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# Removing a Painting From its Frame – Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) Notes 10/12



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## Introduction

Removing a painting from its frame can be a relatively easy procedure, provided that the initial framing job meets accepted guidelines (see CCI Note 10/8 [Framing a Painting](#)). Unfortunately, many paintings are improperly secured in their frames (e.g. nails are frequently driven at an angle through the stretcher into the frame). Such framing methods make it difficult to remove the painting. Special care is required.

## Procedure

Before proceeding, make sure that the paint surface is stable, otherwise lifting or loose paint could be lost during the frame removal procedure (see CCI Note 10/6 [Condition Reporting — Paintings. Part 1: Introduction](#)). As a rule, never try to handle a large painting alone (see CCI Note 10/13 [Basic Handling of Paintings](#)).

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 Note 10/2 [Making Padded Blocks](#)).

It is important to keep the painting from shifting during the rest of the procedure. If the painting does not have a backing board attached to the auxiliary support (stretcher or strainer), place cardboard over the stretcher to protect the back of the painting while removing hanging hardware and nails.

Remove any string or wire from the back.

If the painting is nailed to the frame, carefully remove the nails with needle-nose pliers by gripping the nails firmly and turning them, while pulling gently at the same time. If more leverage is necessary, use a small block of wood as a fulcrum or support (Figure 1). This is a delicate operation. Direct all movement away from the painting because a sudden uncontrolled jolt toward it could damage the canvas. For 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.



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Figure 1. Removing nails with pliers, using a piece of wood as a fulcrum.

When all of the nails have been removed, carefully examine the painting to determine whether it can be easily lifted from the frame. If not, see if 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 toward one side of the frame while lifting the other side on an angle. Lift it slowly and gently. If you encounter resistance, the paint may be stuck to the frame. Avoid pressing your fingers against the paint surface or against the back of the canvas.



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Figure 2. Lifting a painting from its frame.

Keep original frames with their paintings whenever possible. Some frames are made or chosen by the artist for a specific painting. Others are period frames and can be of value themselves. Inscriptions or labels placed on the frame by the artist are very important and can help determine the painting's provenance (its history of ownership, location and use). However, if the frame cannot be reused, carefully record and photograph any information found on the back (e.g. labels, exhibition history, provenance, seals, inscriptions) and place these records in the painting's file. Labels that can be removed should be removed and kept in the file or should be reattached to the new frame. This should only be done after every effort has been made to preserve the relationship between the frame and its painting.

### Bibliography

Keck, C.K. *A Handbook on the Care of Paintings*, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Watson Gupstill, 1972.