FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS page

Conservation: Most frequently asked questions

What is "Foxing"?

Foxing is a fungal infection which can often be detected by the indication of areas of brown discolouration. The discolouration is the result of iron oxides and hydroxides, produced by the chemical reaction between acids discharged by mould, and the colourless iron salts and impurities embedded in the card.

What is the difference between acid free and acidic card?

Acid free card - All 100% acid free rag matt core and lining paper is made from cotton fibers. All components are acid and lignin free and have a ph factor of approximately 8.2.

Acidic card - Acid card is made from compressed wood fibers, which contain lignin which is highly acidic. Acidity, which causes discolouration, brittleness and decomposition of the paper, is transferred from card to card. Foxing is often a result of acidic card and poor atmospheric conditions.

What damage is caused by Ultra Violet Light [uv]

Daylight contains the highest amount of UV light, and as we have discovered that all textiles are subject to damage by light, as are watercolours and art on paper, it is always important to consider the harmful effects of light when placing artworks in the home. Oils may change more slowly, but in important ways. [e.g. Breakdown of ground and paint medium, drying and cracking of the paint surface, paint and varnish discolouration.]

I know that it is not practical to maintain museum standards in private residence, but it is certainly advisable to consider areas for hanging important works of art and monitoring the amount of light in certain areas at certain times of the day. Preventative measures could simply mean that curtains are drawn for a limited period in order to prevent direct contact with sunlight. Light can only damage what it reaches and although most deterioration is on the surface this is the very essence of artworks. Light does not only cause change in colour but also in strength, as in the weakening of textiles and the destruction of paint medium.

Example of organic material affected by light:

1. Paper, cotton, linen, wood, parchment, leather, silk, wool, feathers, hair, dyes, oils, glue's, gums and resins
2. Almost all synthetic dyes and plastics are affected by light

3. Stone, metal, glass and ceramics with some exceptions are not affected by light, and we need not worry too much about wood, bone or ivory if their surface colour is not important

It is advisable never to hang any work of art in direct sunlight, and as fluorescent tubes are reasonably high in UV, preferably do not attach a light to the top of the frame. This method of lighting the paint surface can also cause damage by heat.

How do protect my works of art on paper

1. AVOID FLUCTUATIONS IN RELATIVE HUMIDITY [RH] AND TEMPERATURE WHEREVER POSSIBLE
   1. The RH should be between 40 to 60%.
   2. Try not to hang works in areas where there is a rapid change of temperature E.g. a fire place.
   3. Always have a separator between the paper and the glass. This will prevent condensation and the rapid forming of moulds.
   4. Paper should only be attached to the mount at the top, as this will allow for expansion without cockling

2. KEEP LIGHT LEVELS LOW [50 lux]
   Works on paper are extremely sensitive to light and should never be exposed to direct sunlight. Light breaks down the molecular structure of paper, embrittling and discolouring it.

3. FRAME ARTWORKS WITH QUALITY ACID FREE MATERIALS

4. MONITOR THE PROGRESS OF YOUR PAINTING.
   Check regularly for cockling, mould and foxing.

5. NEVER TAMPER WITH THE WORK, SEEK PROFESSIONAL ADVICE
   Paper is easily soiled, stained, torn, creased and devalued as a result of incorrect handling. To avoid loss, paper must be processed, handled and stored with great care. The integrity of the paper must be safe guarded if the aesthetic and commercial value of the print is to be preserved.

Should I and how do I varnish my painting

Why Varnish?

Paintings are exposed to atmospheric conditions and air pollutants. Oil Paintings are generally not framed under glass as this causes severe reflections and so, a protective layer i.e.: varnish is advisable. As oil paint ages, it looses its reflective quality and absorbs light, loosing its richness and definition. Varnish not only acts as a protective covering, but revitalizes the paintings visual quality

Varnishing

1. Make absolutely sure that the paint surface is completely dry. This could take several months, depending on the thickness of the paint

2. Make sure that the paint surface is clean. Use a clean, dry, soft haired brush to remove dust and fluff from the surface. Do not use a soft cloth, as this could hook and remove any uneven paint and cause flaking. If there is a dirty varnish, or a layer of surface dirt, it would be wise to consult a professional restorer in order to have the painting cleaned

3. Select a clean area with good ventilation and make sure that there is enough surface space to lay the painting flat

4. Select a varnish. There are many commercial varnishes to choose from. You need to ensure that the varnish you use is easily removable and whether you require a high shine, semi shine or matt surface. You can apply a varnish by brush or spray depending on your preference.

Personally, I use a synthetic varnish mixture of White spirits and ketone N resin and I spray apply to the paint surface. I find that spraying gives a more even surface and the varnish can be thinly applied.

Apply the varnish. Apply the varnish thinly and evenly, using raking light to ensure that no areas are missed. If using a brush, ensure that your brushstrokes are multi-directional to avoid streaking.

Ensure that you use a good quality brush that does not shed its bristles and if you spray apply you will need a air compressor and spray gun

Drying: Once you have completed the varnishing process, lay the painting flat until dry and then store upright