

Developed in collaboration with Conservator James Bernstein and Golden Artist Colors, Inc.

## Unstretching and Re-stretching Existing Canvas Paintings

Artists may sometimes take a painting off a stretcher without having thought about or having prepared mechanisms for safe support, handling, wrapping and storage. If un-stretching, storing, transporting or re-stretching an existing painting, I heartily recommend first consulting with a painting conservator and getting extra hands if needed from a fine arts handling firm that specializes in contemporary paintings.

If the canvas being stretched is oversized and it is anticipated the painting will be unstretched and re-stretched in the future, extra care is needed. Repeated untacking, unstretching, rolling, re-stretching and retacking of canvas paintings wreaks havoc on a painting's structural strength. The fabric margins, often uncoated and exposed to scrapes and the air, are particularly vulnerable.

To cushion the tacking margins so the staples won't cut into or crush the weave, introduce an intermediate strip of fabric strapping between the canvas and the staples. This will also provide a rip-tape that may be pulled up at the time of staple removal, making the job much easier. Be certain not to use staples longer than 3/8" for the stapling, as longer ones will be difficult to remove.

If a painting does need to be rolled, it must first be determined if the painting structure is flexible enough to withstand rolling without cracking and firm enough (not tacky) so the media will not stick to protective interleaving paper, plastic or the canvas verso. If a painting may be safely rolled, the largest size cardboard tube should be used. Giant tubes used for pouring concrete columns are the best; the diameter of the tube should be no smaller than 12", with larger diameter sizes being preferred. Paintings should always be rolled face outwards, with a protective interleaving sheeting over the paint surface. While inexpensive and available in large sizes, polyethylene sheeting is not always the appropriate material for wrapping of

paintings, especially if in direct contact with paint surfaces. Plastic wraps contain plasticizers that, over time, may migrate into acrylic and oil paint films, permanently altering the drying, firmness or tack of paint films. A fine art handler or conservator may best advise on the appropriate wrapping materials that will be safe for a particular painting structure.

After a painting is rolled, the entire tube needs to be protective wrapped and stored appropriately. Options are standing on tube end, hovering from a pole, bar or cable running thru the center of the tube, or placed upon off-set collars at the far ends of the tube. The tube should never be allowed to lie flat along the length of the tube directly against a shelf or floor. The entire weight of the painting and tube would be pressing upon and deforming the painting along the contact area.

Often, when stored, paintings are out of sight and out of mind. Beware of sealing up paintings and storing them for extended periods. Incomplete curing of paint materials, plasticizers given off by storage materials, and ambient temperature and pressure can lead to paint softening and sticking to wrapping materials over time. Inspect rolled paintings on a regular basis to be sure they are stable and that no unfavorable changes are taking place.

### Re-stretching an Existing Painting

Restretching a canvas with a painting on it IS NOT THE SAME as stretching an open canvas that has yet to be painted. Successive size, ground, paint, assemblage and varnish applications produce a multi-ply structure. With each layer, the weave is restricted further and the ability to stretch or flex the structure without damage is limited. Thus, GREAT CARE is needed when re-stretching a painting so as not to introduce cracks, lifting, delamination or other negative effects. If you do have a painting that needs

re-stretching, consult with a painting conservator experienced in the stretching of modern and oversized works. The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works in Washington, DC, maintains a directory of conservators, providing referral information by specialty and region.

NEVER re-stretch an existing painting COLD! The worst thing one could do would be to come into a cold studio and go right to stretching a cold painting. If permanent cracks are desired in the image, then go ahead and stretch away. But there is nothing more unsettling than the sound of cracking paint as stretching pressure is applied pulling a cold, stiff canvas!!!

You will recall, all of the materials in a painting structure have the ability to swell or contract, to varying degrees, depending upon the wetness or dryness of the ambient room environment. Allow a painting to remain in a climatized space with adequate warmth and humidity for 24 hours prior to the stretching. This will improve painting flexibility, making the re-stretching much safer and easier. Remember to coax the painting to "give", rather than to force it through excessive might. Maintain a constant studio climate until the stretching is complete, staples and all.

### Permanent Constructions?

I remember when I was first making art. I wanted to do everything in a way in which it never needed to be undone. That meant lots of white glue, nails, and for pretty much everything, overkill. I have since become very wary of completely sealed, glued-down constructions. I have come to learn there is no such thing as a "permanent" installation. One never knows by what chance of fate, an artwork may need to be removed, un-mounted, repaired, relocated and remounted.

Therefore, I would urge against excessive use of non-reversible materials: the strongest,

most insoluble glues, and wholesale slamming down of everything. To achieve a perfect adhesion bond can be very elusive. Great precaution and restraint is prudent.

Also, it is important to be realistic about the demands being made of artist materials. A piece of fabric can only hold so much paint, medium and assemblage objects. Gravity is ever present and will play its part over time. Remember that each unreasonable demand has the potential to add a nail into the coffin of painting brevity.

If eager to work on a monumental scale, do so. Just acknowledge that all the variations at work in a painting structure are magnified exponentially. Consider breaking super-scale paintings into component parts; this will enable assembly, disassembly,

transport and storage with greater safety and ease.

For further discussion and resources regarding canvas preparation and stretching, see:

Bernstein, James. *A Remarkable Way to Stretch Canvases (and other Essentials of Canvas Preparation)*.

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