

Preservation strategies for East Asian painting

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In July 2008, the Williamstown Art Conservation Center hosted a workshop entitled “Care and Handling of East Asian Scrolls and Screens,” conducted by Andrew Hare, Supervisory Conservator of East Asian Painting at the Smithsonian Institution’s Freer and Sackler Galleries in Washington, D.C. This technical bulletin presents some highlights from the workshop. Andrew’s approach to preserving East Asian paintings in Western collections integrates Eastern and Western preservation principles, while remaining aware of the interactive nature of painting formats. Additional and more detailed instructions are found in the references cited at the end of the article.

The basic presentation formats for East Asian painting have the best preservation strategies inherent in their design. The formats of folded album pages, rolled scroll paintings and folded screens make them portable and accessible, are protective of surfaces and colors, and are easy to store safely when not on view. Since East Asian paintings are interactive objects, repetitive use will inevitably cause wear. Thoughtful handling practices will prolong the useful life and integrity of the painting and will limit the types and frequency of conservation treatment and remounting.

Scroll Paintings The earliest scrolls date to the Tang dynasty in China (618-907 A.D.). Chinese mounting techniques evolved into both hand scroll and vertical scroll formats, each with a specific viewing method. During the sixth century, these techniques were introduced in Japan and perfected over the centuries. The scroll mount is designed to present the painting in the most esthetically pleasing manner while protecting it from the environment. The mount is considered part of the finished painting and necessary for its appreciation, even though the color and type of mountings may change several times in the life of the artwork. The most important elements in scroll construction are the proportions above and below the painting. Traditional layouts are based on Chinese mythology and follow specific rules for proportions and colors. The basic ratio for the decorative silk, satin or brocade mountings is two-thirds above (heaven) and one third below (earth) the painting. The mountings of scrolls, as well as screens and albums, also provide a layer of paper or silk at either the beginning and end (or between separate works in the case of albums) to protect the paintings housed in the center of the structure. These mountings become an important element within the object and are necessary when attempting to view the painting in its traditional display. The laminate structure of East Asian paintings on paper or silk, and their mountings, which include glue and



Figure 1



Figure 2

starch adhesives, paper, silk, wood, ivory, jade and bone or metal, make proper care a complex undertaking, especially when they are not additionally protected by a frame and glazing as is typical in the West. [Fig. 1]

General Scroll Care Damage to East Asian paintings consists of three main types: *Physical* deterioration from improper or hasty handling or neglect, and *chemical* or *biological* deterioration due to improper storage and display environments. A clean, pest-free environment, with a stable relative humidity level of 50 to 60 percent and temperature of 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit will help retard physical distortion, embrittlement, and mold. Generally, scrolls are some of the most vulnerable art objects in a collection and should be exhibited in the least vulnerable display area. When handling East Asian paintings use a meditative approach: slow down, use clean hands, prepare a viewing space, and think through the procedures before you handle the artwork.

Handling Scrolls Precise handling techniques are developed with experience and are modified for each handler's height and arm length. The act of "reading" a hand scroll resembles that of reading a book. The scroll should be unrolled on a flat, clean surface and opened from right to left. This process for viewing hand scrolls is important to ensure the safety of very long scrolls as well as to create intimacy for the viewer. Only a single narrative section should be opened at any one time. [Fig. 2] To view the next section, the right portion should be rolled to meet the left (keeping the proper tension on the rolled section), cradled in both hands and brought back in front of the viewer to begin again. The same process should be used to roll the scroll back to the beginning, only in reverse. When ready to re-roll the scroll for storage, roller clamps (Futomaki-hinged cylinders of wood) fitted to the bottom roller are traditionally used when necessary to increase the diameter of a tightly rolled scroll and to reduce stress on the painting. A modified form of these rollers can be made from Mylar or Zotefoam® tubing covered in Stockinet®. These modern rollers are made of inert lightweight materials, and are cost effective. [Fig. 3] During re-rolling, a strip of Japanese paper can be rolled within the structure to mark weaknesses or tented areas in the scroll to alert future handlers. Once rolled correctly, a strip of clean, soft paper (3-4 inches wide) can be wrapped onto the outside of the

scroll to protect the silk mountings from abrasion of the wrapping cord. Both hanging and hand scrolls should be wrapped with muslin, Tyvek®, or an acid-free paper and stored in a protective box on a flat surface. The box may be made of traditional Pawlonia wood or archival boxes can be constructed from acid free blue board. The storage materials and box itself become a microclimate for the object, protecting it from fluctuations in the environment and dust, as well as slowing down the handler with the several layers of protection. Alternative systems for outfitting flat files with hammocks of muslin can be effective for scrolls without boxes or when scrolls are over-sized.

Displaying Scrolls For hanging scrolls and hand scrolls, limited display helps to reduce fading and color change of the silks, paper and paint media, as well as preventing damage due to dust and the environment. Additionally, while the object is “resting” off display, its absence builds anticipation for viewing the object with fresh eyes once it is brought out again. A rotation cycle of six months on display at low light levels, followed by four-and-a-half years in storage is maintained at the Freer and Sackler Galleries. While this may be difficult to achieve in a home setting, consider rotating your personal collection seasonally and avoid direct sunlight of any amount. Because continuous display of a hanging scroll will cause progressive, permanent planar distortion, there should be two display periods of three months with a rest period at least three months between them. This policy will cause less distortion than one continual exhibition period of six months. Roll scrolls for storage or pull shades or blinds when the home or room is not occupied for long periods of time.

When preparing to hang scrolls for exhibition, it is important that the object remain safe, especially when lifted. It may be necessary to have a second person available for assistance when hanging it. Thoroughly clean and dry your hands to remove skin oils prior to art handling, and wash periodically through the process as the hands can become soiled or damp. Gloved hands can be dangerous unless the gloves fit tightly. Never touch the paint surface directly. It is important to cradle the scroll in one hand when unwrapping the tie and clasp from around the scroll. Prior to hanging, one or two feet of the scroll should be unrolled on a clean table to assist in safe handling. The eyelets and knots found on the hanging mechanisms should be checked for security and stability. Decorative hooks are used to



Figure 3

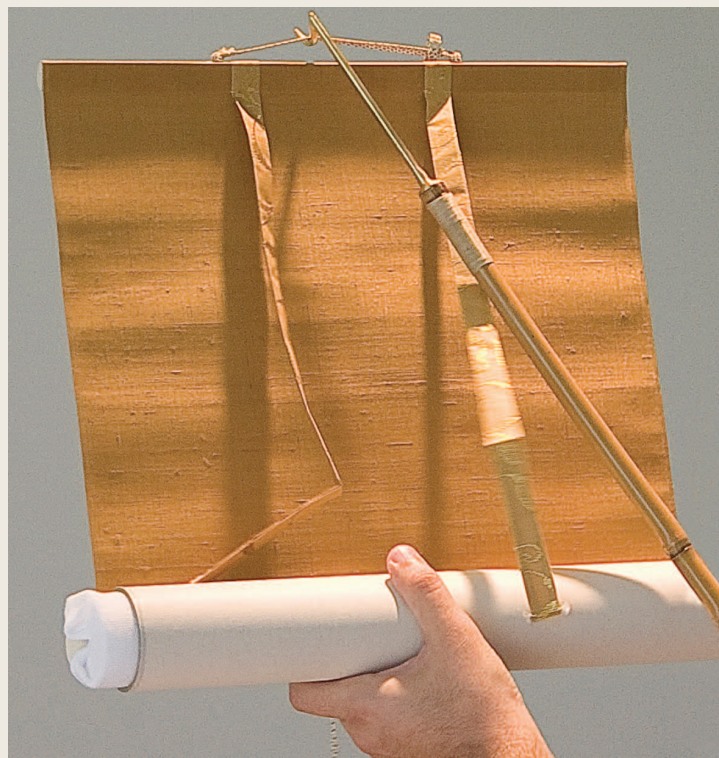



Figure 4

hang the scroll, and the number of hooks depends on the width of the object and the number of hanging mechanisms provided by the artist. J hooks are often used below the bottom roller to secure it safely to the wall. The Yahazu (hanging hook on a bamboo pole) is slipped under the hanging cord to lift it to an adjustable wall hook and then gently removed, while being aware not to touch the Yahazu to the back of the object. [Fig. 4]

Albums Determining the front covers of an album can be tricky unless some time is spent observing the security of the hinges at all four edges of the folded structure before attempting to open it. Albums open from left or from the bottom and should be handled carefully when turning pages at their outer edges, as failures at the page joints are common and may damage further. Albums must be examined and displayed flat, as they do not have a supporting spine like Western books, and cannot be kept upright on a bookshelf. While on display, the album may be kept open, but must be supported by book supports under the front and back covers to relieve stress on the binding. The intended

display of albums involves viewing the painting and the facing decorative page as one object. Books with broken bindings, pages or loose covers should be wrapped and tied or boxed to prevent further damage. Collapsible, multi-flap book boxes made from thick paperboard, laminated with fabric or paper, and secured with clasps are commonly used for this purpose. 

*Further information on scroll mounting, conservation of Japanese paintings and vocabulary for East Asian painting terminology can be found on the website of the Freer Gallery of Art. See “The Conservation of a Japanese Painting” in the publication *Asian Art Connections* [w www.asia.si.edu/education/Connections_Fall_2004.pdf]. Additional guidelines for handling album and screen formats may be found in Andrew Hare’s “Guidelines for the Care of East Asian Paintings: Display, Storage and Handling,” in *The Paper Conservator*, vol. 30, 2006, pages 73-92 [For information, see www.icon.org.uk].*



Leslie Paisley (right) has been the chief paper conservator at WACC since 1989. She apprentice-trained with Christa Gaehe from 1977-1982 before receiving her Certificate of Advanced Studies at the Center for Conservation and Technical Studies at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, in 1983. Prior to joining WACC, she was senior paper conservator at the Pacific Regional Art Conservation Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. Amanda Malkin is the pre-program intern in the paper lab at WACC. She earned her BFA in Fine Art Photography from Rochester Institute of Technology in 2007 and intends to complete graduate study in art conservation in the near future.