

# THE ART OF NEW YORK LIVING

## How's It Hanging?

*By Kenneth Jay Linsner*

Not many people give a second thought to the way in which their pictures and memorabilia are prepared for hanging on the walls.

In the West, we prefer to use something called a 'frame' for both the paintings, prints, drawings and memorabilia that we collect. This differs from the Eastern taste for hanging and hand scrolls. While much more compact when rolled, the latter will inevitably crack and abrade from rolling and un-rolling. I have several hanging scrolls on display and the primary problem appears to be the accumulation of dust that appears weekly on the top of the pieces as well as the bottom roller. In New York apartments the lack of adequate ventilation also poses a problem. Organic films from cooking (oils and fats) will deposit on the painted surfaces of hanging scrolls and in most instances these can not be removed. Museums, which display hanging and hand scrolls, almost always encase them. This is not practical for the average collector. One simple solution which offers some protection is to hang the scroll and frame it with posts to accept screws. These posts should be long enough to yield a small space above the hanging scroll. A glass or, more likely, a Plexiglas sheet can then be secured to these posts to yield a protective shield to the main face of the scroll. Air will still circulate and dust will still accumulate but a full-face blast of liquid or cooking volatiles will be deflected from the surface. Hand-scrolls, usually rather long, .... I have one that is 309 inches in length ... can only be displayed in part. Most museums create a special cradle for the end rollers of the scroll and roll and unroll the piece to display a short section at any given time. If fashioned from Plexiglas this cradle is rather tasteful. The cradle and the scroll should be under a Plexiglas box, however.

Light , we've discussed in the past, is another problem for hanging and hand-rolls. A client of mine had a rather bright example, of length, which she kept partially rolled up in a cradle on the floor. Unfortunately, the scroll faced a window and when she attempted to sell the piece at auction the top, although still attractive, no longer matched the section that had remained rolled up on the floor. This made the piece un-salable. If you decide to create a plexi-shield for your scroll(s) or a box to display a hand scroll, make sure that the Plexiglas you use is ultra-violet absorbent.

Western framing techniques usually require that a wooden molding be fitted with two 'eyes' on the reverse and that a braided wire is strung between them to bear the weight of the frame and artwork. Most commercial framers know what size of 'eye' to use and what the gauge of the wire should be. I would always suggest testing this out by holding the picture from the wire and feeling any change in the eyes or stretch of the wire for a second or two. If the frame is large, two hangers should be supplied. These hangers can either be of the mirror type, with built in suspension loops of aluminum, or fitted with heavy gauge wire. This requires two attachment points on the wall and some considerable measuring since it is rare that the wall of a home is exactly square. It is unlikely that older apartment walls would even come close.... or even perhaps more recent ones. I once saw an apartment wall, no more than two years old, that when viewed from the entrance door was parabolic. A level on top of the molding is the best way to determine if the piece is straight but be aware that it is easy to driven crazy by a straight hanging picture when the ceiling line curves. I have taken to adjusting the hanging of such pictures to minimize the curve of the ceiling while avoiding the feeling that the picture is being hung at an angle. It is a matter of taste and trial and error.

Pre-war apartments often offer challenges. The plaster encountered is usually dry and crumbling. The use of brass picture hooks with angled nails will often lead to a large hole in the wall and pile of dust on the floor. For simple surface crumbling I have used a piece of tape to secure the surface before an attempt at placing the anchor nail in the wall. For crumbling walls only anchors and perhaps epoxy will work. In France, I have encountered the other extreme.... apartments with solid poured concrete walls which

require the use of a masonry drill and lead wall anchor to hang a simple picture of any weight. In one case I saw multiple adhesive hooks and hangers glued down to such walls as a dangerous alternative.

The Western frame is a support for the work, which it encloses, particularly paintings on canvas. The technique of stretching fabric on a wooden support, called a stretcher, and then supporting it within a molding for hanging, was established early on. Virtually all of the professional framers will fix the painting to the molding with clips which are screwed into the frame and which hold the stretcher in place. I have however seen numerous variations; the worst being nails that pass through the stretcher into the frame. Never allow a framer to do this since it prevents movement in the stretcher and will eventually lead to draws or cracking in the canvas.

Since the frame is the support for the stretcher and picture it should bear all of the weight of the hanging. The screw eyes or mirror hangers should be placed on the frame itself. I once appraised a collection of important Impressionist and Expressionist paintings, which had had their frames removed...since the decorator thought it more striking to present the works in that manner. Unfortunately, all had screw eyes inserted into their stretchers and, in fact, the paintings were supporting their own weight...a kind of crucifixion. This was reversed quite quickly when I informed the owners of the potential for disaster. Always make sure that the weight of the picture is carried by the frame.

Although I once addressed the subject of backings it would be good to repeat it here. I favor covering the back of paintings and pictures with a thin acid free board and/or protective paper. If a painting on canvas, a small vent hole should be allowed in the acid free board. This will allow the painting to move with changes in heat and humidity while protecting the rear from dust and possible water damage from a leak at the ceiling line. In highly humid conditions.... such as in houses near the sea...better paintings and prints should be excluded, but what is used for decoration should have a protective backing and in some cases a moisture barrier. I have been asked about using glass or

Plexiglas for a glazing on original oils on canvas or board. In most instances I would object to this. It serves only to hold moisture in the frame. Dust that does penetrate will be deposited in the glass based upon mini-thermal currents set up in the space between the glazing and the work of art. When deposited on the glazing these will yield a 'negative' of the work. based upon the difference between the lighter and darker areas of the image and the amount of heat in each of them. This can often be confused with moisture damage to the surface of the work. Finally, if you are using a Western framing technique make sure that if glazing is used that is held away from the surface of the artwork either through matting or something called a 'frame space' if you choose to 'float' the print or drawing. No one said that the *Art of New York Living* is easy.