

# Mastering Mounting



by  
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## Scrolls: The Chinese Approach

During a recent trip to China, I spent three weeks studying scroll mounting with a Chinese master. I was taught the basics of both traditional preservation mounting and commercial scroll mounting. It's interesting that even an old Chinese tradition has given way to mass production and the fast-paced requirements of today (Photo 1).

### Basic Scroll History

The history of the Chinese scroll dates back to the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.), when mounting specialists were enlisted for maintaining the Royal Academy calligraphy and

paintings as mountings on boards and screens. Techniques evolved during the Song dynasties (960-1271), developing the hand scroll and vertical scroll mounting methods known today. During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), mounting skills were elevated to the point where mounting artisans were very highly paid. And by the Ching dynasty (1644-1911), the Su County mounting artisans were as famed as the master calligraphers and poets of the time.

### Historic and Contemporary Scrolls

During the sixth century Chinese mounting techniques were introduced into Japan, where the techniques were also perfected over the centuries. By the 16th century Japan had established three basic hanging scroll styles: *Shin*, *Gyo*, and *So* (see April 2001 PFM for detailed diagrams). Traditional layouts have very specific rules for the proportions and colors for each style, while style selection is determined by the painting's subject



Photo 2: This is a set of four different colored plum blossoms. These hyogu scrolls have an off-white silk with a narrow  $\frac{1}{8}$ " brown liner surrounding the paintings. Optical illusion makes heaven and earth appear to be out of ratio, but they are indeed  $\frac{2}{3}:\frac{1}{3}$  as they should be.



Photo 1: Mass production scroll mounting is common in Beijing. This is the front entrance of a retail scroll shop that produces more than 100 scrolls a day for their own sales as well as for other merchants.



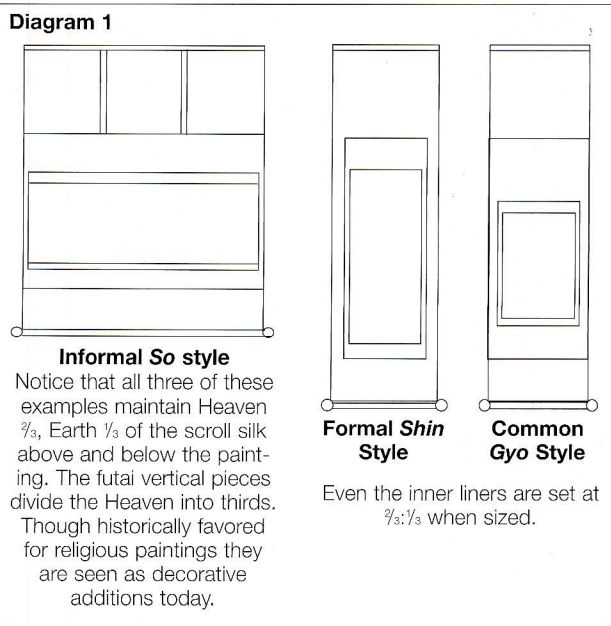
matter. The formal Shin style was used only for religious Buddhist paintings (Diagram 1). The semi-formal *gyo* style was the most common type of mounting for colored paintings of birds and flowers. The informal *so* mounting style was used mostly in tea ceremonies.

The goal of scroll mounting is to preserve paintings and present them in as esthetically pleasing a manner as possible. *Hyogu* and *mincho* style scrolls are basic and informal (*hyogu* [Diagram 2] means "to decorate the surface"). These are considered contemporary styles, and they are the most commonly seen and taught today in both China and Japan. *Hyogu* scrolls are commonly used in mass production because of standardized dimensions and assembly line scroll mounting practices. *Hyogu* may have either a narrow colored liner surrounding an entire painting (Photo 2) or be quite simple, with no colored liner at all.

Mincho-style scrolls are a little more detailed and elaborate while still being capable of being made in production houses. The labor required is about the same; the parts are just assembled in a different order. (Note: Next month's column will explore the assembly of a *hyogu* scroll in Beijing.)

## Proportions

The most important elements in scroll construction are the proportions above and below the painting. It is said that 30 percent of the finished picture is in the painting and 70 percent is in scroll mounting that surrounds it. The basic ratio for the silk scroll area above the painting is  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the total, with the other  $\frac{1}{3}$  below the painting. Diagram 3 illustrates this,



with the space above the art, known as "heaven," twice as wide as the space below the art, known as "earth." This proportion does not include the actual painting, only the silk of the scroll. Though the side panels vary in width depending on the style of the scroll, for contemporary mountings they are often about half of the width of "earth."

A vertical painting may have one, two, or three colors of silk used in a scroll, like a triple mat. The innermost

liners on *hyogu* scrolls are often  $\frac{1}{2}$ " wide strips that are mounted to show  $\frac{1}{16}$ " of color, much like a thin innermost liner mat (Photo 3). Often the plain, unlined *hyogu* mounting will be offset or accented with another addition, such as the fan at the top of the painting in Photo 4.

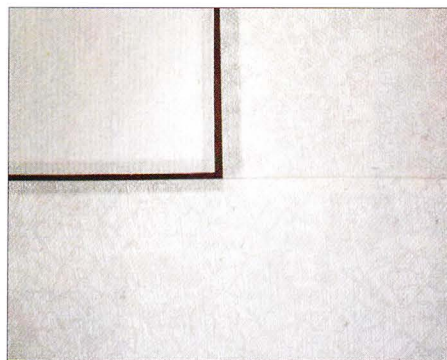


Photo 3: The faint shadow of the brown liner is evident behind the painting to the left and the silk scroll addition to the right. This also shows the seam between the bottom of the right side and the earth portion of the scroll. They are not just glued on top.

## Mounting, Backing, or Stretching

Most Chinese paintings are done on thin, 1-ply *xuan* paper (see "Making Mulberry Paper" in May 2005 PFM for more on this), which requires backing by the artist before the painting is considered finished. This process is known as mounting, backing, or stretching the painting. Once backed, the painting may then be mounted for display in either Chinese traditional scroll format or Western mat and frame. Scrolls may be designed as hand scrolls or hanging scrolls. Hand scrolls may be of any length horizontal surface that may be unrolled gradually as the viewer goes



Photo 4: The four plain unlined *hyogu* paintings have been accented with the insertion of small fans at the top in the space of heaven. From left to right they are chrysanthemum, bamboo, orchid, and plum blossom—the "four gentlemen."

on a journey through time and scenes with the artist. Hanging scrolls may be rolled up and changed according to season or mood of the owner or artist, like rearranging framed art.



Historically, scroll backing materials were made of fine silk, satin, and brocade, while the scroll ends were made of ivory, porcelain, jade, gold, silver, and sandalwood. Scrolls are displayed in temples and public places only when there is no concern about the painting or calligraphy becoming soiled, damaged, or ruined.

## Western Framing

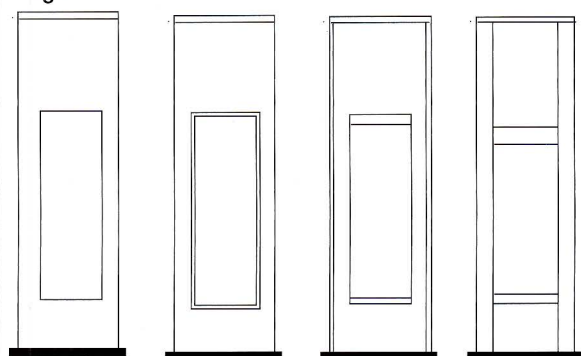
Once the backing paper has been applied to the painting, it may then be framed using Western techniques (Photo 5). Chinese masters agree that natural wood is best for framing Chinese art because the materials are in better harmony with the painting. They also encourage wide mats (or silk strips), allowing a 4" minimum surrounding border for paintings up to 16". And mat color must also be in harmony with the painting. Even when a painting has been scroll mounted, it is best to place it behind acrylic or glass to protect it from the elements.

## Backing Papers

When water and ink are applied to thin *xuan* paper, the fibers are altered by moisture absorption so they need to be restretched back to their original structure. By fixing the paper to a second paper layer of equal weight, its original shape is restored and the colors of the painting enlivened. The backing paper is known as "life paper" because backing the art livens up the painting by making the colors and tones pop and the imperfections all the more visible.

The same weight paper should be used for backing so that both layers react the same during humidity and

Diagram 2



### Informal Hyogu style

These are used most today, especially for landscapes, birds and flowers.

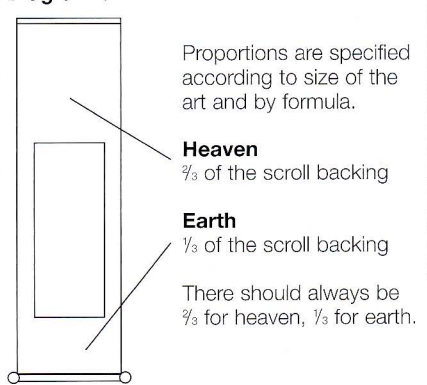
### Informal Mincho style

They have decorative silk strips the full length of the outer edges of the scroll. Developed during the Ming dynasty they remain popular today for landscapes, bamboo, ink paintings and poetry.



Photo 5: The paintings have been backed with paper and may be either completed as a scroll or matted and framed in a regular wood frame. Paper mats or pieces of paper-backed silk are used as the surrounding mat.

Diagram 3



Proportions are specified according to size of the art and by formula.

### Heaven

$\frac{2}{3}$  of the scroll backing

### Earth

$\frac{1}{3}$  of the scroll backing

There should always be  $\frac{2}{3}$  for heaven,  $\frac{1}{3}$  for earth.

temperature changes. This process does not necessarily involve scroll mounting. Backing is also referred to as "stretching" the painting because of its ability to remove wrinkles created by water absorption during painting. The mount (backing) of a painting is considered part of the finished picture and is most often applied by the original artist. But there are times when a single-sheet painting or stone rubbing is brought into a frame shop by someone other than the artist, and it will not have a reinforced mount. Then what?

## Getting Started

One of the questions that has arisen on the PPFA's Hitchhikers and Grumble online forums is how to deal with thin, wrinkled rice-paper paintings. If the piece is brought back from the Orient, it is safer to proceed because the inks and colors will have lacquers in them and will generally not run. It takes a week for the lacquers in the inks to set prior to mounting. If a painting is from a local artist who is into Chinese ink painting and *sumi-e*, it should have already been stretched and flattened for you.

The procedure that follows covers the backing (mounting or stretching) process for an original painting and is only the first step in scroll mounting, which will be covered next month.

Always work on a clean, flat, and non-porous surface. A perfect surface would be a piece of acrylic sheeting. It is clear, so it may be placed over any opaque surface. The Chinese prefer either a wood grain board or a solid red table beneath the clear plastic because imperfections in the art contrast better against it.



### Backing Step-by-Step

1. Cut the backing paper 2" larger than the art all around
2. Lightly mist the table and lay the original painting face down on the plastic surface (Photo 6).
3. Apply paste by lightly drawing a soft, wide hake brush from the center to the outside in all directions to flatten and even it out. There must be no air beneath.
4. Counter roll the backing sheet, align the bottom edge, and smoothly apply it over the pasted painting, using a stiffer palm bristle brush to smooth as you unroll.
5. Apply paste with a soft brush to the outer edges of the backing paper.
6. Gently lift the pasted painting and backing from the



*Photo 6: The Chinese prefer a red table, which makes flaws easier to see. The original painting is moved to the table for mounting. At this point, the art is face up. Lightly mist the table and lay the original painting face down on the smooth surface and adhere it to the table. The 12" wide hake brush and bowl of paste are in the upper right and water sprayer in the lower left.*

table by its outer edges, taking care not to tear it as you lift it off the work surface.

7. Place the artwork face up on a smooth vertical board, acrylic, or window and tap around the outer edges to hold it in place (Photo 7).

8. Brush the edges to stick the paste, and blow air behind the unpasted art to keep it lifted off the surface to allow it to dry.

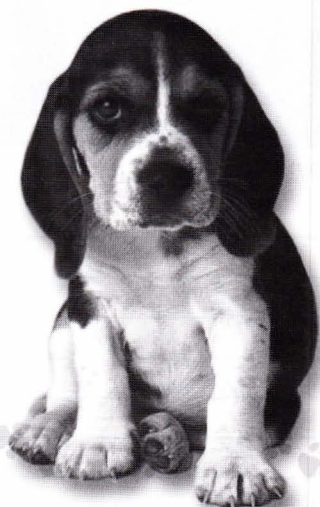
9. After a few days, cut the stretched art from the

board. Then it will be ready for the scroll.

### A Parting Thought

Mounting the painting is only the beginning and makes it a completed masterpiece awaiting its final scroll or mats and frame. It appears to be a rather invasive

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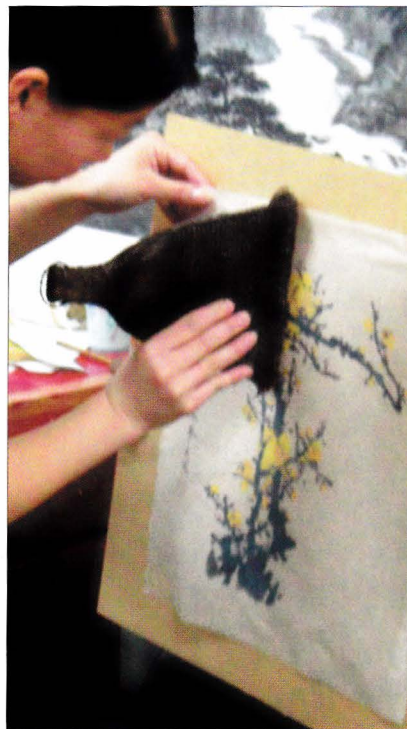


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approach to an original painting considering that we are taught to do nothing to the art. No sealers on pastels; no liquid laminates on



*Photo 7: To smooth the scroll to the drying board, the artwork is placed face up on a smooth vertical board, acrylic, or window and tapped around the outer edges to hold it in place. This will maintain trapped air between the drying board and the backed art.*

digitals. But with scroll mounting we are soaking the painting with water to bind it to another sheet. Though this is a common practice in Asia, perhaps Western framers should not be tempted to try this technique at home. ■

Chris A. Paschke, CPF, GCF, Mounting Editor, owns Designs Ink in Tehachapi, CA, featuring commercial custom framing, fine art/graphic design, and industry consulting. Specializing in mounting, matting, design creativity, and fine art, she works with industry leaders and has taught for the National Conference. She has written two books on mounting: "The Mounting and Laminating Handbook" (now in its second edition) and "Creative Mounting, Wrapping, and Laminating." She can be contacted at [www.designsinkart.com](http://www.designsinkart.com).