

Mastering Mounting



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Mounting Chinese Scrolls

Last month “Scrolls: The Chinese Approach” covered the basics of Chinese scroll mounting, styles of scrolls, and how an artist backs a painting. This month covers the actual process

of scroll mounting, which is to Asia as Western framing is to the U.S. It is their Asian process of choice for all types of artwork, from fine art to mass production. The process I was taught during my “everything you need to know about scroll mounting in a week or less” was fast, furious, and from a mass production point of view.

The Gallery of Kuan yu in Beijing was the location for my studies. It is family owned and run with a staff

of six girls and a master scroll mounter. The girls who work there were brought from a distant village, and the workers live, work, and play together under the owner’s care and control.

Being a production operation, they use standard measurements and proportions for all their scrolls. The girls work with very little chatter, completing a great many scrolls each day. While I was there, a 500-piece production scroll job came in for a 3' x 6' handwritten character representing “longevity” that was to be sold in assorted tourist shops (Photo 1).

Proportion, Placement, and Backing

Photo 2 illustrates the proportions of heaven to earth in relation to the art. “Tao” (left) is 17" wide x 44" long with an 18" heaven, 12" earth, and 13" x 14½" art, made into a modified Mincho A scroll style. The “Peonies” (right) is 10" x 29" with 10" for heaven, 5" for earth, and 6¼" x 14" art for a true 2/3:1/3 ratio in a Hyogu B style.

Scrolls are built up from the art. The trim or liner strips are always applied to



Photo 2: This image shows the scroll proportions of heaven to earth in relation to the art. “Tao” (left) is 17" wide x 44" long with 18" heaven above and 12" earth below the 13" x 14½" art in a modified Mincho A style. “Peonies” (right) is 10" x 29" with 10" for heaven and 5" for earth with 6¼" x 14" artwork for a true 2/3:1/3 ratio in a Hyogu B style (see July 2005 “Mastering Mounting,” Diagram 2).



Photo 1: The 3' x 6' handwritten character “longevity” on gold flecked xuan paper was a new 500 piece scroll mounting project for the girls that was to be sold in assorted tourist shops. They completed five of them (between other projects) the first day.

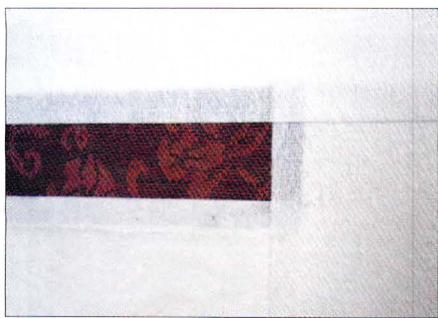


Photo 3: This close-up shows the overlapping of the paper-backed silk trim pieces at the top and to the right in the "Tao" art in Photo 1. The brown liner was adhered first, then the side pieces, and finally the top and bottom. At the lower left is the backed rice paper character artwork.



Photo 4: The art has been backed, flipped to face up, and trimmed on two sides. It is nearly ready to be dried traditionally on a smooth board or in a commercial drier.



Photo 5: The dried art is being squared up for the scrolling assembly. An 8' long $\frac{1}{2}$ " acrylic bar is used as a straightedge for all trimming. The bottom is squared first, then the corner will be placed along it to square the sides accordingly.



Photo 6: Once the art has been squared, pieces of paper-backed silk will be sized for the scroll sides, top, and bottom. The silk paper is made ahead off time and stored for later use.

the artwork first, then the scroll sides, followed by the top and bottom pieces. Close examination of any scroll easily illustrates the sequence of the application (Photo 3). Since many of the paintings mounted in this shop are painted on-site, the first step in the scrolling process is backing the art (Photo 4).

Squaring and Sizing

Backed pieces are traditionally adhered to a smooth board and allowed to dry a few days, but large commercial operations have driers like the large 8' x 10' hydraulically operated, felt lined unit used at this location. This art was wet backed then dried within ten minutes in the big press along with other pieces.

Once the backed artwork has dried it needs to be squared up for scroll mounting. An 8' long $\frac{1}{2}$ " thick heavy acrylic bar is used as a straightedge for all trimming during the scroll mounting process. The bottom of the art is squared off first, and a 90-degree corner is used to align the right side to the bottom. The bottom is then loosely folded to the top squaring the right trimmed side and a metal pointer (lower left in the Photo) is used to prick holes in the top of the art marking the line to be trimmed (Photo 5).

The silk that is used for scrolls comes as a very sheer single layer that has been backed with paper prior to use. The same backing method is used for the silk as the art. Silk is adhered face down to the table with water; starch paste is brushed on with a 12" wide hake brush; paper backing is applied; and the unit is dried ten minutes



Photo 7: The blue plastic is used as a barrier to mask off the artwork edge so the paste can be brushed on evenly. The left corner shows an application brush in high gear. The brown trim liner will be aligned on all four sides, with $\frac{1}{3}$ overlapped onto the art with $\frac{2}{3}$ left exposed.

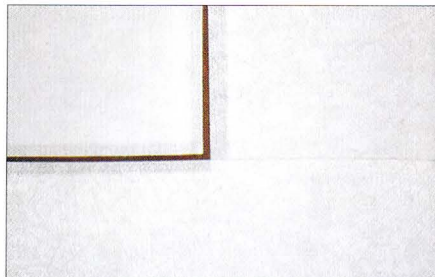


Photo 8: The first layer surrounding the art is a contrasting decorative accent or trim piece of $\frac{1}{4}$ " silk. This is applied the same width to all four sides, with $\frac{1}{3}$ attached to the back of the art and $\frac{2}{3}$ exposed. Once the silk strips are added, the scroll pieces are applied to that trim strip, leaving about $\frac{1}{16}$ " to $\frac{3}{32}$ " of colored trim exposed.



Photo 9: Once the four brown trim pieces have been applied, the silk side pieces are put on using the same technique. The top and bottom scroll pieces are added last so that they'll be the top layer.



Photo 10: After all the scroll pieces have been applied, the acrylic bars are used to weight the scroll while excess widths are trimmed from the top and bottom of the scroll. The upper and lower right scroll pieces are wider than the side pieces.

in the drying press. The pre-backed silk is kept in rolls of assorted colors and patterns for later use.

All the pieces are sized, cut, and squared for the scroll from a pre-mounted silk paper (Photo 6). There need to be two side pieces, one top and one bottom. Though all pieces are cut exact length (heaven and earth), they will be cut slightly wider than needed and trimmed to exact size after gluing to the art.

Attaching Liner and Scroll Pieces

The first pieces attached to the back of the art edges are the contrasting liner strips. In this case they are brown silk cut about $\frac{1}{4}$ " wide, which have already been sized for this project. Using a plastic sheet as a barrier, align along the bottom edge of the back of the art and brush starch paste about $\frac{3}{32}$ " along the bottom (Photo 7). With the art face down, attach the $\frac{1}{4}$ " trim piece with about $\frac{1}{3}$ of it to the starched artwork (Photo 8). Complete all sides the liner tape needs to be applied, see Tao, Photo 2.

Turn artwork with liner attached face up to begin attaching the scroll pieces. Apply the adhesive to the colored strip the same as above and align the side scroll pieces (Photo 9). An absorbent rice paper scrap is laid over the applied adhesive bond and pressed flat manually to adhere and absorb before moving to each new step.

After all four pieces have been glued, an acrylic straightedge and knife are used to trim off the excess widths of heaven and earth (Photo 10). The long side edges are then very narrowly rolled over back onto



Photo 11: Reinforcement pieces have been added at the top and bottom of the back of the scroll for wrapping onto the wood rods. The pieced scroll is now laid face up for the backing to be cut to size.



Photo 12: The heavier backing piece is evenly brushed with starch paste to prepare it for aligning and mounting the pieced scroll. This layer is required to reinforce and support the completed scroll and is an integral part of scroll mounting.



Photo 13: The pieced scroll is gently unrolled face up onto the pasted backing sheet and brushed down with a 12" wide soft hake brush. Note the $\frac{1}{4}$ " trim strips in the lower right corner.



Photo 14: After the scroll has been pasted to the backing, the whole unit is flipped face down to attach the label to the back for later identification. Notice the faint rolled edges of the scroll beneath the backing layer. These were rolled after piecing but prior to backing.

itself about $\frac{1}{8}$ " to give the sides added strength. One ply paper is also added to the top and bottom of the scroll to help reinforce it for attaching to the rods and hanging.

Scroll Backing

Now the pieced scroll is laid face up over a heavier two ply rice sheet to be trimmed as its scroll backing (Photo 11). Generously apply wet starch paste with a 12" wide, soft bristle, hake brush to the backing paper (Photo 12). The pieced scroll is loosely rolled face up, top to bottom, for application to the backing. It is applied bottom to top while actively brushing the scroll as it is unrolled against the starched backing (Photo 13). This helps ensure there are no bubbles once applied.

Finishing Up

The entire scroll is then peeled gently from the table and flipped face down for application and alignment of the title label and reinforcement tabs on the back (Photo 14). The scroll is then placed in the large hydraulic dryer to be pressed flat and dried for ten minutes (Photo 15). The drier is much like a large version of our dry mount presses with its heat element in the top, but is totally encased with $\frac{1}{4}$ " soft felt padding for absorption and even pressure. The starch never glues itself to the felt.

After it is dry the entire backing of the scroll is rubbed with a block of natural beeswax and aggressively rubbed with a smooth river rock to toughen and waterproof (Photo 16).

The final steps include the



Photo 15: Commercial driers are routinely used to expedite drying in all production scroll operations. Much like our dry mount mechanical presses, they are lined with 1/4" felt pads top and bottom for moisture absorption. The lid is hydraulically operated, and the scroll will be dry in five to ten minutes.

attachment of the top 1/2" square or half round wood piece, and the 1" wood rod at the bottom for weight and to be used as the core of the rolled scroll. Placement of the small metal rings are completed in the top wood piece and 1 1/4" wide cording is added as a dual purpose scroll tie and hanger (Photo 17).

Troubleshooting

If you feel challenged and fearless

enough to try scroll mounting, here are a few things to look out for. Remember, this is not just a simple case of Western wet mounting to a rigid mount board. There are structured procedures even for mass produced scrolls of non-valuable art images, the Chinese equivalent to our posters. And there are potential hazards, which include:

Paper Creases

Unbacked Xuan paper artwork may be folded, crushed, wadded, or rolled prior to backing, but all defects will smooth out during the backing process if done properly. Once backed, the art then needs to be matted, framed, or scroll mounted to protect it. When storing, it requires either a tube, box, or placement between two rigid boards.

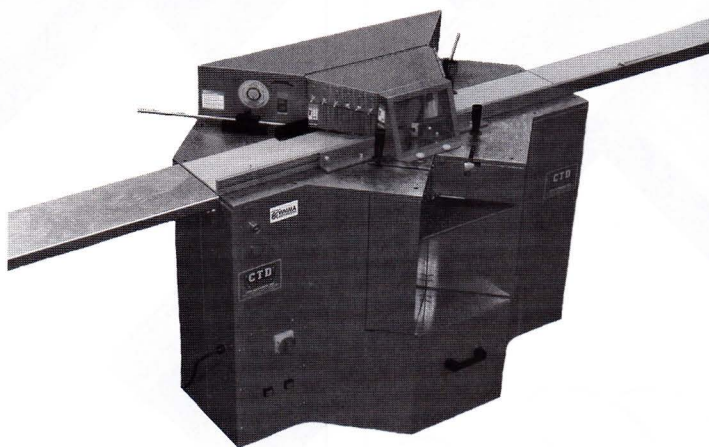
Bleeding Colors

When inks run or drag as paste is applied, it is a sign of old, poorly made, or inferior quality ink sticks. When colors run or bleed, it may be because they weren't allowed to dry long enough. Both colors and inks should be allowed to dry two weeks prior to wet mounting. And you never know by appearance which inks or colors might run. And yes, there are things that can be done.

Which Side Is Up?

Prior to backing, when a Xuan paper painting is wet, it is very difficult to tell the painted side from the verso side. Take care to mount the art face down, so the backing ends up on the back. The chop and signature are generally on the left of the art, but there can be more than one chop as one is the title

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Photo 16: After drying, the mounted scroll will be rubbed with a beeswax cake and aggressively burnished with a smooth river rock to help stiffen and waterproof the backing.

and one the signature. If you do not know Chinese characters, you may never be able to tell the right side from wrong side.

To Scroll or Not to Scroll

In 2000 I advised not to try scroll mounting at home. Even after studying more in depth with a far better grasp of the procedure, I still agree with my original assessment. I totally respect the art of scroll

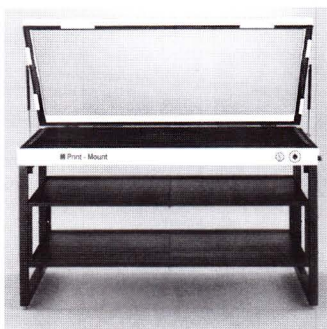
mounting, and just as we assess each new framing project to decide if it is suitable for dry mounting, the same holds true for scroll mounting. There are levels of scroll mounting from traditional, preservation techniques to mass production. Traditional scroll mounting



Photo 17: The completed scroll is now fitted with a large round wooden rod at the bottom and small, 1/2" square top rod. Two hangers are added and a tie string affixed to the hangers at the top for rolling or hanging.

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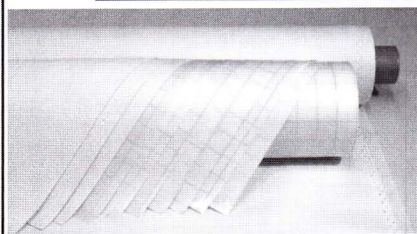
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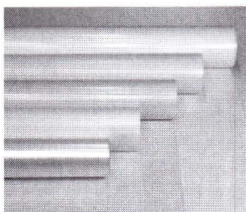
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remains a process no framer should undertake on his or her own. There are paper conservators and scroll mounters available to do this for your customers, so farm it out. As for scroll mounting a low-cost, open-edition piece—well that's a judgment call. ■

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.