

Mounting and Framing Silk Screens

These items, now used largely as wall decor, have specific framing considerations.

Byōbu, which means wind wall (byō wall, bu wind), are ornate, portable screens used to separate interior spaces and provide privacy within a section of a room, originally used as windbreakers in the airy Japanese residences of antiquity. They are folding screens made of several joined panels—generally two to eight—bearing decorative painting, gold leaf, and calligraphy from the Han dynasty of China and are thought to have been imported to Japan in the seventh- or eighth-century Nara period.

Nowadays, they are largely viewed as aesthetic fixtures, separating sections of a traditional restaurant or serving as artwork



The completed frame design for a client who brought in this two-paneled byōbu screen, now a family heirloom.

in Japanese homes. The six-paneled byōbu were the most common in the Nara period; they were covered in silk and connected with leather or silk cords. The painting on each panel was framed by a silk brocade, and the panel was bound with a wood frame.

The reinforced paper hinges, although quite strong, required that the panel infrastructure be as light as possible. Softwood lattices were constructed using special bamboo nails that allowed for the lattice to be sanded along its edges to be straight, square, and the same size as the other panels of the screen. The lattices were coated with one or more layers of paper stretched across the lattice surface like a drum head to provide a flat, strong backing for the paintings that would be later mounted to it. The resulting structure was lightweight and durable, yet delicate.

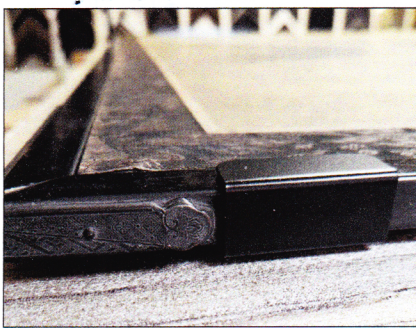
After the paintings and brocade were attached, a lacquered black or red wood frame was applied to protect the outer perimeter of the panels with intricately decorated metal hardware strips, right angles, and studs



Back of the client's screen, showing hinge construction.



Chris A. Paschke, owner of Designs Ink in Tehachapi, CA, is a professional picture framer with over four decades of experience. She is an artist, a National Conference educator, has authored numerous magazine series, including *The Essence of Design*, *Design Concepts*, and *Digital Directions* for PFM, and has four self-published books on mounting. She currently writes the *Mastering Mounting* column for PFM and is a contributing writer to *The Artist's Magazine*, *The Pastel Journal*, and *Watercolor Artist Magazine*. She was honored with the PPFA Award of Distinction for Leadership 2008, the Vivian Kistler Recognition for Innovation Award 2010, and the PMA Distinguished Service Award 2012.



Decorative hardware at corners (left) with new 2" bracket (right).

at the corners. Hardware fittings are primarily decorative, but they do serve to protect the exterior frame corners when the screen stands or is open. Fittings are uniquely created as sets, and a piece lost is irreplaceable; thus, condition reports should indicate the presence or absence of these elements.

Handling

Nitrile gloves should be worn when handling screens as they provide a firm grip and prevent skin oils from damaging lacquered frames. One must be alert to the hollow screen structure that makes these panels vulnerable to puncturing. Screens should be closed when moving to avoid stress on the hinges. When lifting, one hand is placed at the middle of the folded edge and one at the middle of the frame edge, holding them as if pressing the palms of



Two-panel byōbu, standing, after being removed from the acrylic and MDF box.

the hands together. A closed screen should not be left unsupported, as it may fall over. Reading about how to handle and frame a folding screen is good knowledge, but the actual creation of a 3 1/4" deep shadowbox for one is priceless education.

Family History

A recent client proposed the installation of a family heirloom two-panel byōbu of his mother's as an installation in the staircase of his renovated home. When I went to review the

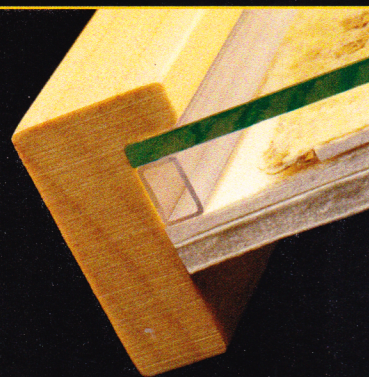


Original MDF raw, unsealed backing board and 4" wide brittle broken strips of 1/4" acrylic.

project, I discovered the screen was in delicate shape—flaking, faded and unsecured—sitting at the bottom of a 4" deep acrylic box with 1/2" thick particle board backing also no longer attached to the acrylic, making this screen a candidate for reframing prior to installation.

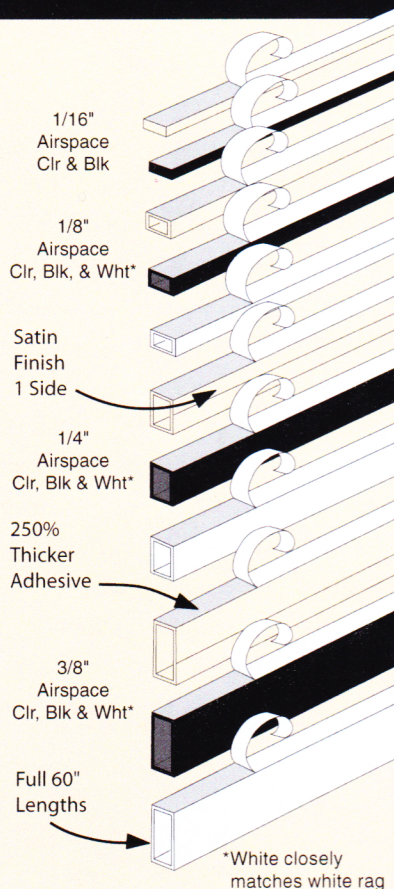
Though American, the client's family lived in Japan much of his life as his parents worked there with he and his brother—either for business or the government—and when his father died, Mom stayed and worked until she died. This byōbu was initially used as a privacy screen in their apartment as a window covering and decades later simply became a treasured family heirloom displayed only as art. It was orig-

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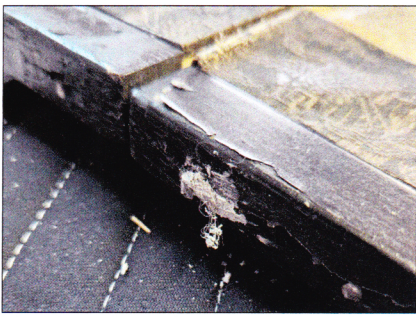


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Flaking, as noted on the condition report.

inally framed in Japan, and along with many other pieces of their Asian art collection, it was shipped home after his mother's death.

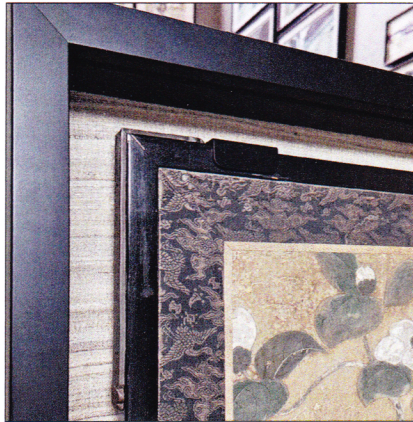
Condition Report

When any valuable item or heirloom is brought in for custom framing, it needs to be assessed in front of the customer and noted as to its basic condition. Picture framers are liable for any damage or changes that occur during their possession of the art, and at times a customer may not have noticed a crease or dirt spot unless pointed out to them. Documenting the condition of the art should be a routine part of the design process regardless of its potential value. This report also stands as proof of the item if damage does occur and there is an insurance claim.

Official condition reports should not be a small sidebar note on the sales ticket, but an actual report to the client that is verified and signed by said client before proceeding. Since the inside structure and condition of the original framing remained unknown until it

was in the workshop, the condition report was actually concluded after the screen was transported to my studio and disassembled in a protected environment after transport.

The gold-leafed crane byōbu was reported as an unsupported screen in a frame with metal seamed 72 5/8" x 66 3/8" raw 1/2" thick MDF, unattached to the 4" deep, cracked acrylic box. The screen itself was a hinged two-panel unit 72" x 65 1/2" with corner decorative support brackets, showing wear and aging, cracked and flaking lacquer paint, and separation around the edges of the top layers of silk to the backing and support. Since the client did not want professional conservation treat-



Custom 2" metal bracket at each corner, top and bottom.

ment or restoration but simply wanted it reframed and installed, photos were taken and a report was submitted as verification of condition. The report was signed, and the project began.

Framing Design

The new frame was a 1 1/8" wide x 3 1/8" deep, matte black lacquer stem frame sized 78" x 68 1/2"; heavy enough to support the weight and deep enough for all the layers and braces. It would be glazed with Tru Vue Optium Acrylic, over 100% silk mounted to a 1/2" Gatorboard support.

Since preservation methods were being followed as much as possible,

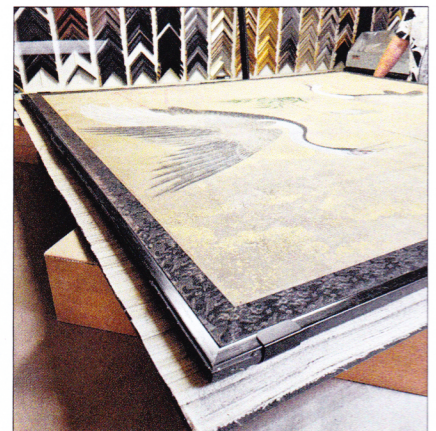


Custom metal bracket at center top and bottom, covering significant flaking.

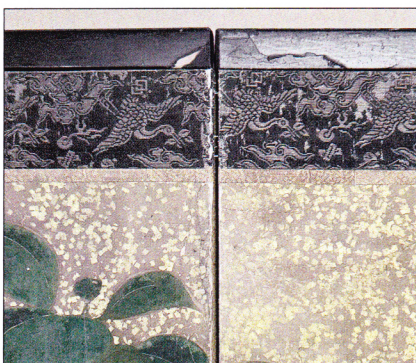
six custom metal brackets were created by their architect: two 6" for top and bottom at the center seam, and four 2" for outer top and bottom corners just inside the attached decorative corner brackets. Each bracket was designed to be 1" deep, which would cover most of the lacquer frame front and, in some cases, would also cover some of the worst flaking. Each was spray sealed with matte black enamel paint and then fully lined with black polyester felt so as not to do any additional damage to the screen edging.

Execution

Two sheets of Gatorboard were cut to size offsetting the seam from the center for optimum support. The sheets were bonded on each side with 2 1/4" wide, high-strength, pressure-sensitive adhesive polyethylene Tyvek tape—commonly used for hinging



The screen is aligned and brackets installed to hold it to the silk backing.



Flaking at center top hinge.



The frame is built to fit the acrylic, and spacers were cut to install to hold the acrylic apart from the backing.

window mats, reinforcing folder spines, performing book repairs, and strengthening hinges—from Talas.

I planned for a neutral cream slightly textured silk when making my proposal, but the client selected patterned Calcutta Natural 100% silk instead, featuring a lined horizontal pattern that would require a seam to accommodate the width. Since silk is easily saturated by wet adhesive, it was decided to use the wet/dry technique to prevent moisture. The fabric was cut to size with a 2" allowance for a clean edge trim after bonding. The Gatorboard was coated in both directions with Frank's Fabrics PVA using a 6" wide sponge roller for smooth texture. It is imperative to make sure the entire backing is evenly and completely coated each time, then fully dried.

Wet/dry mounting would be easiest in a 550 mechanical press, but I only have a 210M, so the bites are smaller, and the full inner coverage is limited; nonetheless, it is still achievable. The press was moved to a large 8' x 8' worktable, and the silk was aligned. Since the dry adhesive remains slightly tacky, it holds in place while mounting. Bites were made from the middle to the edges to keep the layers straight. Once all mounting was complete, a hand iron was used set below wool (which is over 225°) to bond the inner portion not reachable

by the press. Overlapping of all bites is required to make certain all segments of the backing have been activated.

Upon completion, the screen was aligned atop the silk backing and the brackets were installed. The brackets were created with bolts welded to the back of each holder with their tips left to easily punch through the backing; once in place, they were fitted with a washer and nut to hold. When done, the fully attached screen was moved upright and set aside to work on the frame.

Once the backing was completed, the frame was finally chopped and built, fitted to the cut-to-size acrylic as needed. Spacers were required to hold the acrylic away from the backing support, so four 1/4" x 1 1/2" strips were ripped from straight 1" x 2" clean pine, which were sanded and the edges slightly rounded and trimmed to size. They were coated with acrylic gesso, allowed to dry, sanded, and painted with matte black paint to match the frame. The paint was applied with a sponge roller to prevent brush lines.

Fortunately, we can order custom-cut Optima acrylic, so that was



First front view, checking the Optima for lint and smudges.



Completed installation, up split-level staircase, security-mounted to the wall.

perfect. The film was peeled from the acrylic edges both front and back to allow fitting and spacer installation. They were glued to the inner frame rabbet to support the acrylic, clamped, and allowed to dry before fully removing the surface films. The frame and backing with the screen were then fitted and temporarily held in place to view the front for the first time as a unit. Once all was clean and lint-free, it was finally fitted, and the back was sealed with black Tyvek dust cover.

The original acrylic box was hung from the center back using a 60" metal French cleat so the weight of the frame would be even across the back, but too low in the frame. I used the same cleat for our new frame attached to the reinforced top leg that had been double reinforced with corner brackets at top and bottom of each inner corner, plus additional bottom support.

Installation

It took three of us to maneuver the oversized shadowbox up the split staircase. It had been checked for clearance prior to delivery, but was still a challenge, with the frame needing to be angled and rotated to get it to the landing. The bottom security hangers were a great idea both for support and because of the client's grandchildren routinely charging up and down the stairs. **PFM**