

Mastering Mounting



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Mounting Paintings on Exotic Materials

As Americans travel and purchase art from around the globe, corner frame shops and galleries are faced with many types of art they may not have ever seen before. It's one thing to read about thangkas or bo leaf paintings; it's another when one is brought in to be framed. These are not traditional paintings but collectibles that include such exotic materials as Mexican amate bark, Egyptian papyrus, and Tahitian tapa cloth paintings.



Photo 1: Amate tree bark (left and center) produced dark coffee and creamy beige colors, and mulberry bark produced the silvery beige-gray (right).

Identification First

As with any art, correct identification of the project is the first stage of design, known as definition.

In the case of painted art, knowing both the medium and the substrate greatly helps in determining how to mount and frame that art. If the medium is waterproof, such as oils or acrylics, then the art may be left unglazed. If the paint is egg tempera or watercolor, it must be protected with acrylic or glass. Not all shiny pigments are oils or acrylics and not all dull, flat pigments are tempera. European watercolors are translucent by nature, but an opaque watercolor called gouache is not and looks very much like tempera. The substrate must also be understood to know whether mounting or stretching would be best.

Amate Bark

Amate bark from Mexico is made by the Otomi Indians from the amate or jonote tree, mulberry tree, or xalama limon. The bark selected determines the color of the paper. Amate is a dark coffee color; Mulberry is silvery beige; and Xalama is white. All carry a very unique texture and mottled surface (Photo 1). Amate paper is dominantly used to create cutout figures for Otomi religious ceremonies, but sheets are also sold to artisans for paintings that depict pastoral scenes, festivals, and celebrations. Generally very inexpensive, low quality paints are used for painting these, and all such art should be glazed (Photo 2).

Tapa Cloth

Tapa, or tapa cloth, is also made of bark but originates from the islands of the South Pacific, including Tonga, Samoa, New Guinea, and Hawaii. Called tapa in Tahiti; saipo in Samoa; and kapa in Hawaii, it has been traditionally used for clothing. Today it is used mostly for painting and special ceremonial dress. Sheets are made by stripping outer bark from the inner bark of a tree. Then the inner bark is dried in the sun prior to soaking. After that, it is beaten by hand into thin strips, which are placed at perpendicular directions to each other and beaten into a sheet, not unlike papyrus paper (Photo 3).

Painted patterns form grid squares of repetitive geometrical motifs and are colored with traditional dyes of black and rust brown. Unlike the surface painting on amate bark,

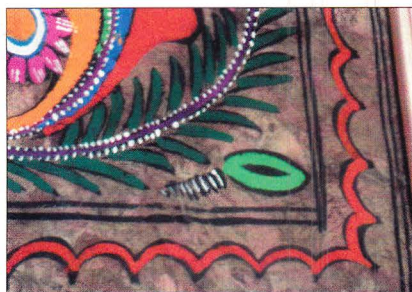


Photo 2: The paints used on this coffee-colored amate bark are probably egg tempera. Though lightfast, the painting is water-soluble and requires glazing.



Photo 3: This sample of papyrus clearly shows the crosshatched placement of bark strips that have been beaten together to create a sheet for painting. This format is used for both tapa and papyrus.



Photo 4: Dry papyri sheets are used for paintings made with oil pigments, opaque gouache, or ink. This sample looks and smells like gouache.



Photo 6: Heavyweight rice paper has a toothy surface and the perfect absorbency. Notice the tiny flecks of bark remaining in the paper surface.



Photo 7: Matte finish opaque watercolors called gouache are often a pigment of choice. These are Marie's Gouache that are manufactured in Beijing and are used by most village artists.

Photo 5: Contemporary paintings are often uneven at the edges or out of square. They may be floated or matted using Japanese hinges, edge strips, or corner pockets.

tapa patterns are imprinted on the surface of the sheet by placing a raised carved pattern behind it. Colored dye is then rubbed onto the tapa surface, picking up the textured pattern placed beneath it like a stone rubbing. Though the finished image is relatively durable, the sheets lose strength and fall apart if wet. Hinging would be best for these, and glazing is an optional consideration.

Papyrus

Along the same line of beaten tapa is papyrus. The word "paper" is derived from papyrus, though it is nothing like it. Paper is produced from individual fibers screen sieved to make a full sheet, while papyrus is made by pounding together narrowly cut strips from the stalk of the Cyprus papyrus plant.

After the stalks are split, soaked, and become pliable, they are cross-hatched to form sheets that are placed

between two hard absorbent barriers and pressed to dry in the sun. Every eight hours for three or four days the absorbent layers are replaced until all the strips are thoroughly dry. The dry papyri sheets are then used for paintings, letters, and recording events using oils, gouache, or ink (photo 4).

Although ancient papyri may be pressed between sheets of glass for museum presentation and storage, it is ill advised for a framer to do likewise. For old, brittle, or fragmented sheets, Mylar or acrylic glazing may create too much static and could increase potential fiber damage. Contemporary paintings are easily obtained, and in most cases inexpensive tourist art that may be floated or matted using Japanese hinges, edge strips, or corners (photo 5).

Mulberry Paper

A surface commonly used for painting in Asia is mulberry paper. Though

Chinese papers are made dominantly from mulberry bark fibers, other common fibers include rice, bamboo, and kapok. These other fibers are often added to expand upon the properties of the basic paper fibers, such as adding strength, weight, or texture. Papers that create more interesting textures are frequently made from linen and hemp (Photo 6).

Asian artists love mulberry papers because of their toothy surface and perfect absorbency level for gouache (Photo 7). The fine art painting shown here was painted as a 14"x21" image on a sheet of 17" x24" heavyweight, handmade rice paper (Photo 8). Since most Asian pigments are inks or watercolors, the paper substrate must handle paint moisture and have a desirable surface tooth for painting. Even on heavyweight papers the pigments may soak well into the



Photo 8: This fine art painting by Mr. Liao from Kaili, China, was painted as a 14"x21" image on a sheet of 17"x24" heavyweight handmade rice paper using gouache.

paper surface and nearly bleed through to the back (Photo 9).

Care should be taken when mounting fine art like this because of its high moisture absorption. Hinges and corner pockets should be considered first over dry or wet mounting. Soaked adhesives could easily saturate into the paper as the paint did and alter the original pigment colors on the face of the art.

Sacred Fig Leaf

Another natural substrate popular for painting is the leaf from the ficus religiosa, a fig tree that is part of the mulberry family. Common names for this tree include bodhi, bo, pipal [peepal], ashwattha and sacred fig tree. It is considered a sacred tree in Hinduism and Buddhism because it is said Buddha meditated under it while searching for enlightenment. The tree is native to India, southwestern China, and Indochina to Vietnam.

The leaves are used as a substrate and are often painted on, depicting mythical stories, rural village scenes, or religious themes (Photo 10). They



Photo 9: The pigment here has saturated into and almost through the mulberry paper. Adhesives will saturate as well and may alter the original pigment colors.

are often attached to a backing and covered with tissue to protect them from damage during storage, sale, or general handling. The leaves are large, about the size of a hand, and somewhat spade-shaped with a long tail. They are quite delicate and lacy (Photo 11).

Framing Painted Art

Once the medium of painted art and the material it been painted on have been identified, deciding how to creatively frame it while respecting its uniqueness is the next stage. When framing a sacred bo leaf, for example, there are a few options. The two most obvious are to leave it mounted to its thin backing or to remove it from that backing and remount it.

Removal from Backing

If removal and remounting is chosen, then the leaf must first be carefully removed from the backing (Photo 12). It typically is been glued in a few spots along the central stem and will need to be separated with extreme care. The leaf is supple yet delicately brittle and may easily split or tear. Since the paint is not known, it may not be safe to use water to soften the adhesive to release the leaf from the backing. Aggressively pulling it may easily damage it. A small 1/2" tear occurred towards the pointed end of



Photo 10: Bo leaves are often used as a painting substrate depicting mythical or religious themes. These have been glued by their stems to a black backing and covered with glassine to protect them from damage.



Photo 12: If removal and remounting is chosen, then a leaf must first be carefully removed from its backing. This one has been glued in a few spots along the central stem and will need to be separated.

the leaf during this removal by pulling the leaf from the backing by grasping only the larger stem end (Photo 13). It is always much safer to remove the backing from the leaf by laying the leaf face down on a soft surface and pulling the disposable backing from it, supporting the stem as you go. Once the leaf is removed from the backing, the few glue spots may easily be seen when the leaf is laying face down (Photo 14). These may or may not be easy to remove, and perhaps leaving slight bits of residue is the best solution.

When the removed bo leaf is turned face up, it is time to select appropriate framing materials to enhance and protect the art. It was most likely purchased on a trip to India or Indonesia. While it may not have a high intrinsic value, it will no doubt be emotionally valuable to a customer.



Photo 13: The leaf is soft and supple yet delicately brittle and may easily tear during removal. A 1/2" tear towards the pointed end of the leaf occurred during this removal.

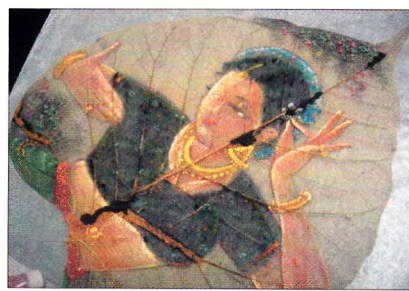


Photo 14: The black glue spots that held the leaf in place may be easily seen once a leaf has been removed and is lying face down. These may or may not be easy to remove. Perhaps leaving slight bits of residue is the best solution.

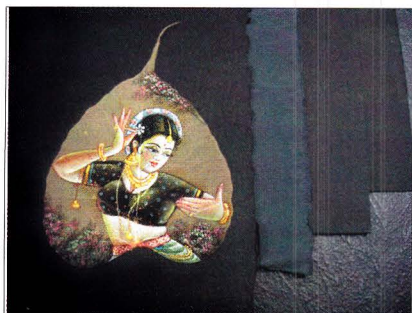


Photo 16: Test the leaf over assorted black backgrounds, checking for color and texture tolerance. (Left to right: Columbe, heavily textured handmade paper; Sennelier pastel paper with toothy but smooth surface and cooler black color; Bainbridge #8663 AlphaRag four-ply matboard, smooth surfaced; and Strathmore AF Charcoal paper, lightweight with laid line texture.

Color and Texture

Since the leaf is lacy and may be seen through, the choice of backing color and texture is very important to the final frame design. Selecting a dark, probably black, background will best showcase the delicacy of the leaf and keep the painted colors from washing out by color ghosting. When the leaf is placed over black matboard, the colors stay crisp and the leaf easily outlined. When placed over a cream matboard, the light color bleeds through and washes out the painting (Photo 15).

Once black is the chosen color, then assorted other issues come into play. What shade of black should be used? Should it have a texture or be smooth? And how will it be attached to the new backing? All blacks are



Photo 17: The leaf has been spot wet-mounted down its stem to Columbe paper and matted with a deep bevel, linen-wrapped, free form window mat.

not created equal. There are warm blacks and cool blacks. There are lightfast colors and those that will fade away by visible light even with UV glazing.

The four blacks selected here for this project were Columbe, a 400# handmade, pigmented, lightfast, rough and knobby textured paper from Spain; Sennelier Pastel Paper, a 300# handmade pigmented, lightfast, medium textured toothy surfaced cool black paper from France; Bainbridge #8663 AlphaRag, pigmented, relatively lightfast, four-ply matboard; and 60# Strathmore acid-free, machine-made charcoal paper that is pigmented, lightfast, and lightly textured. All were pigmented, neutral pH, lightfast, and high quality papers.

The paper backing chosen for this project was the beautifully knobby Columbe Spanish handmade paper. The leaf was spot mounted to

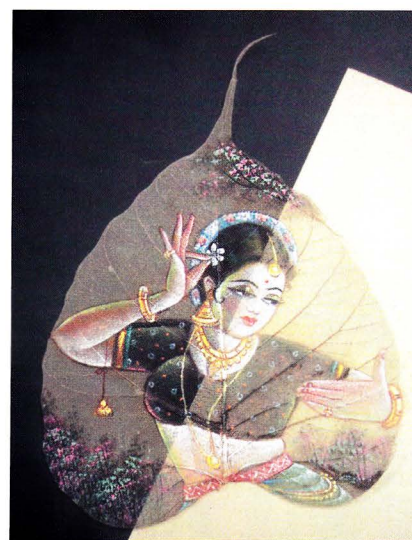


Photo 15: The left half of the leaf is placed over a black matboard while the right half is placed over cream matboard, which bleeds through and washes out the painting.

the paper with Lineco neutral pH adhesive using a toothpick and was matted with a deep bevel, fabric-wrapped, free form window mat covered with black linen (Photo 17).

The problems surrounding the mounting of painted art can be minimized once the media and substrate have been identified. A customer may help you by knowing what they have and where it was acquired. Don't hesitate to ask the questions so you can do your job, such as, "What is this?" And don't forget that the Internet can be a great resource for researching any project involving unusual art materials like these. ■

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