

“Vellum Naval Diploma”

Having a purpose behind framing design elements

In PFM “Vellum, Parchment and Paper” the origin, similarities, differences and uses of vellum and parchment were discussed as well as the basic concept of attempting to flatten a cockled skin. This follow-up article will discuss the design decisions and technique for the framing of an actual antique diploma.

Design Considerations

Every design element used in a frame design should have a specific purpose. The best way to select the right moulding is to attempt to replicate a design, pattern, texture or shape that exists in the art. This diploma has intricate drawings, angular and gothic typefaces featuring highly ornate capitals with sea creatures for both the A and Y in Academy, making it difficult to read. The certificate is already fairly large and demands its own attention. A proportion decision was made to only use 3” wide mats because wider borders felt distracting, so the frame OD ended up 21” x 28-1/2”.

The moulding profile was selected to emulate the slanted angular designs of the United States Naval Academy heading typeface, as well as the blue-black color and rippled surface texture worked with the concept of water and the naval colors. This is a perfect example of



the use of rhythm/repetition in design. There is a delicate, worn, flattened gold notary seal at the bottom left corner, but it was decided not to emphasize it in the design.

Because of this being a traditional neutral colored diploma we opted for Crescent 5522 Navy Blue linen top mat and Crescent 7551 Flax linen liner mat to represent the naval colors and the canvas concept of old ship sails.

Completed frame design used line, color, texture, intensity, and rhythm/repetition.



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.



This diploma is designed with intricate drawings, angular and gothic typefaces featuring highly ornate capitals with sea creatures for both the A and Y in Academy.

Linen was selected because canvas mats felt too heavy and bulky for the design. The top mat is only 2-1/2" wide top mat with a 3" wide bottom mat, allowing for a 1/2" reveal. Then a rag spacer was added between them to enhance the dimensionality introducing the element of intensity through shadows.

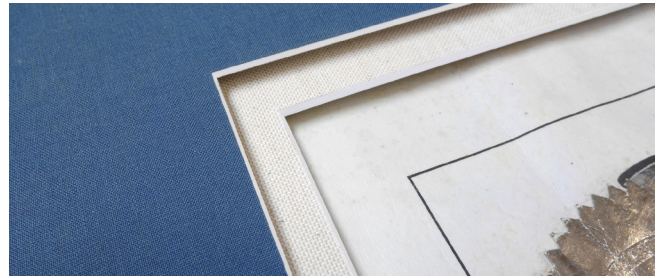
Diploma Condition

The light beige coloring and weight of this document points toward it being calf vellum rather than whiter sheep parchment. At first examination there are two things visually impacting this document, curling/cockling and foxing. Foxing occurs in paper documents, parchment, and vellum as an ageing process resulting from chemical reactions on skin melanin. They appear as yellow to reddish brown blemishes or stains, and although they visually distress the document foxing does not affect the actual integrity of the document. The foxing in the lower left quarter has occurred because of moisture during storage, but most will be covered with matting, and the client was not concerned about it.

The vellum diploma from the United States Naval Academy dated June 2, 1929 had been stored rolled in a tube since then. Though badly curled when first brought in it has been



Black moulding was selected to emulate the angular designs of the United States Naval Academy heading font, a perfect example of the use of rhythm in design.



Navy Blue linen top mat and Flax linen liner mat are to represent the naval colors and the canvas of old ship sails. Spacers were also to be used between the mats as well as between the mat unit and the diploma.

stored flat under a weight. Because of the condition, heat flattening was not an option because although it will tolerate heat, it will also likely increase the buckling in other areas.

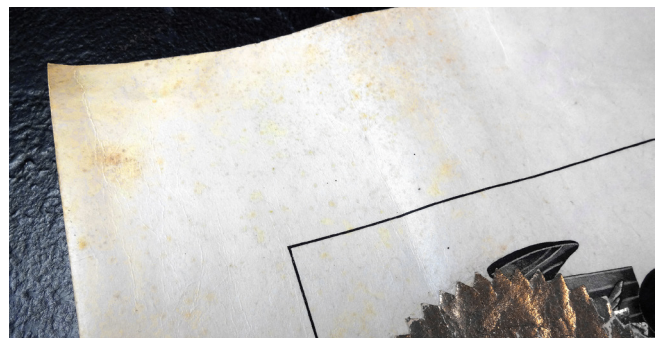
Irreplaceable Art

Buckling often occurs with animal skin documents because they are dried skins that will continue to react to changes in temperature and humidity. Therefore a little client education comes in handy when discussing mounting options teaching that the buckling is the "nature of the beast" with real skins and mounting flat to a backing is ill-advised for an irreplaceable original.

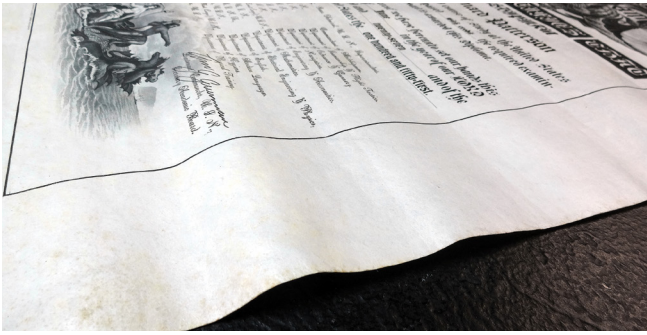
Diplomas are documents that must be treated as original fine art. Real skins should touch only unbuffered rag materials, and approved museum mounting methods are cooked starch hinging, archival corner pockets or mounting strips, and in some cases sink mounting might be recommended. Dry mounting of any kind is not advised and is never considered reversible.

Flattening

If a cracked, wrinkled, or rolled document has been brought in and needs to be made flat, the best advice for the framer is to be very careful. Moistening and flattening procedures on this type of project should be contracted to a book or paper conservator in your area. Since vellums are original-



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The vellum diploma dated June 2, 1929 had been stored rolled in a tube since then. Badly curled when first brought in it has been stored flat under a weight but no flattening has actually been done.

ly dried on frames, once dampened if left to dry under no restraints they will cockle and warp, attempting to revert to the original shape of the animal as they dry. To properly re-flatten vellum, it must be dampened and dried under even tension or pressure, such as plate glass weight which must cover the entire size of the document. But even flattened skins will buckle again with increased relative humidity.

It could take a day or two to fully humidify the document and then the drying process could take days or a week. Stack the drying package--bottom to top--scrap 4 ply matboard, dry blotter, Pellon, skin (document), Pellon, dry blotter, 4 ply matboard, plate glass weight. Old shelving is perfect because it is much heavier than framing glass and is tempered so it won't easily break.

Blotters may be saturated enough to require new dry ones in an hour or less. Total drying/flattening time depends on the amount of moisture absorbed into the document and how often you change the damp for dry blotters. Art must be fully dry prior to framing. Change the blotters as needed for them to remain dry until document is completely dry. Do not leave damp blotters in contact for extended periods to the skin as it promotes mold growth. Most skins will water stain--some worse than others--so spot dampening vellum should always be avoided, and parchment will definitely want to curl.

Conservation Comments

Though dry mounting is never advised for original documents, vellum does tolerate greater temperature and moisture abuse than parchment. Applying heat alone to skins does not radically affect them as long as it is not too hot. Tests show that temperatures of 180°F for up to 5 minutes may not damage either vellum or parchment samples, although a tendency toward brittleness does begin to occur, which is not preservation treatment. Also heat flattening may cause forced creases to occur because of existing buck-

ling. Both stretched and mounted versions are unnatural for vellum and parchment. Archivaly hinged, skins should be placed 1/8" from the glazing for air circulation, which can easily be achieved by using multiple window mats and/or spacers.

When the window mat unit was pressed directly against the document after humidification and flattening, it brought additional attention to the remaining buckling at the edges, so it required a sink mount for best presentation which gave it room to move. Crescent 2297 Cream unbuffered solid core 100% cotton museum board was used as the backing and sink mount perimeter because skins require a low alkaline environment. Also the top buffered linen mat back was lined with aluminum backed liner tape to keep it from contacting the skin.

Finished Design

The completed design features preservation treatment of the 1929 diploma and every element of line, color, texture, intensity, and rhythm/repetition were used for a reason. Line is created by the 1/2" inner liner mat against the top mat and the white bevels, a lighter liner mat helps expand the image appearance. Color is established because there are two different color mats, chosen as a traditional Navy color and that of natural sails. Texture is identified by the smoother thread pattern of the top mat against the medium thread flax liner mat, both textures selected for the sails of old Navy ships. Linen was used over canvas because the canvas was too bulky for the size of this document. Intensity is the use of spacers between mats to allow for natural shadows and drama, while also lifting the glazing. Rhythm is the reintroduction of something from the art in the framing and the moulding does a nice job of picking up the angles in the typeface. All in all, the design is unified and the materials and techniques were perfect for the art. **PFM**

Images shown courtesy of Lawrence Patterson, Tehachapi CA.



Humidified and re-flattened, the document still required a sink mount for best presentation.