

Paschke Online

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by Chris A Paschke, CPF GCF, June 2026

"Wet Mounting: Traditional vs. Commercial"

Chinese mounting and conservation techniques are considered a craft, believed to have developed around 2,000 years ago, and scroll mounting is embraced as an art unto itself. Careful attention is paid to ensure the quality of the silk and Asian papers used for the mount that will properly protect while giving form, structure, and support to the art.

Scroll mounters go through a lengthy process of backing the mounting silks with paper using paste before creating the borders for a scroll. Afterwards, the whole scroll is backed before the roller rods and fittings are attached at top and bottom. The whole process can take two weeks to nine months depending on how long the scroll is left on the wall to dry after mounting before finishing by polishing the back with Chinese wax and installing the rod and roller at either end. This original process is referred to as 'wet mounting' due to the use of wet paste in the process.

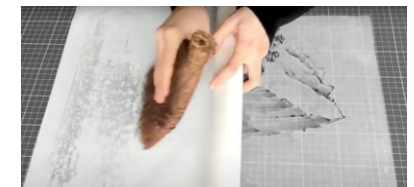
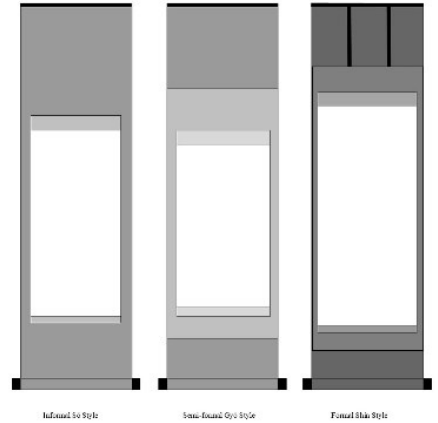
Historically, Asian scrolls were texts written on bamboo strips and silk banners across ancient China, with the earliest hanging scrolls dating back to the Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE). The tradition of mounting paintings has a long history in Asia. Initially, the practice was restricted to Buddhist paintings, but over time, subjects grew to include not only portraits but calligraphy, landscapes, flowers, and birds. Chinese mounting techniques were introduced into Japan during the sixth century, and by the 16th century Japan had established three basic hanging scroll styles: Shin, Gyō, and Sō. The formal Shin style was used only for religious Buddhist paintings, the semi-formal Gyō style was the most common of mountings used for colored paintings of birds and flowers, and the informal Sō style is used mostly in tea ceremony. **(Diagram/Photo 1)**

Notice in all three styles the silk represents Heaven 2/3 above and Earth 1/3 below the painting. The vertical pieces divide the Heaven into 1/3s at the top. Though historically favored for religious paintings they are seen as decorative additions today.

Traditional Mounting

Today when wet mounting is mentioned, few people think of the ancient Chinese methods of cooked starch paste that were used to layer rice paper paintings onto silk scrolls for preservation. Thin Sumi ink paintings become crinkled when dry because of the large areas of paint saturation, due to the nature of Sumi colors and lightweight papers. Contemporary Asian artists still have these paintings traditionally mounted to a backing paper which both intensifies the colors and preserves the traditional look.

Though the basics of wet mounting a rice paper painting are rather simple, the technique is an acquired skill. Even in Japan most artists take their paintings to specialty framers rather than attempt to wet mount their paintings themselves. There are conservators who specialize in large paper mounting using cooked starch pastes. Always consider all the options and don't attempt to overextend if not familiar with traditional techniques and processes. If you feel brave enough to attempt yourself, the basic steps follow below.



Traditional Technique

When wet mounting a thin rice paper, use an inexpensive Japanese or Chinese paper as a backing stiffener (substrate) that is 2" larger all around the painting's edges. Do not use Western papers, which often have a high glue content. Traditional Asian wet mounting requires tools and materials not found in every custom frame shop. Numerous 5" to 6" wide brushes will be needed for this process. A wide deer hair water brush is used to moisten the back of the painting prior to mounting, a paste brush made of goat or horsehair bristles to apply paste to backing materials, and a harder bristled smoothing brush, and pounding brush, are made from hemp. **(Photo 2)** The paste itself is made from wheat or rice starch, cooked, strained, and readied for spreading.

Brush Application

Place the print face down on a hard surface and spray, or lightly brush, the back of the painting to moisten it. Too much moisture will ripple the paper and may cause the ink to run. With the glue brush, apply cooked paste to the back of the moistened painting, beginning at the center and working to the outer edges in a + format. Then corner to corner in an x format. Make certain there is no air remaining beneath the pasted art after spreading the glue. **(Photo 3)**

To glue the support paper to the back of the painting, smooth it onto the back of the still face down art with a brush as it is gently unrolled on top following with the hemp brush to insure no air remains, brushing center to edges. **(Photo 4)** Apply paste to the unglued back outer 2" edges of the new backing paper, then gently lift the glued backing--with art attached--from the table and transfer it, still face-down, to a hard, smooth drying surface—glass, window, door. Beginning at the top edge, paste down with hemp brush only the outer edges leaving one small gap. **(Photo 5)** Insert a drinking straw and blow air beneath the glued art. This ensures the art will not stick to the board during drying. The art will flatten as it dries over a few days.

Commercial Wet Mounting

Western wet mounting is a very different process. The papers and substrates are much thicker Asian rice papers and the process is rather reversed. The three elements of mounting to be controlled during wet mounting are time, pressure, and moisture. Temperature, the fourth element, only becomes a notable issue when you are attempting to apply adhesives in an extremely hot, humid, or cold environment. Working in any of these conditions might affect the flow and/or drying time of the selected adhesive. Thick paste or liquid adhesive is evenly applied to the print or substrate before positioning. Supplies include a soft rubber roller 4" to 5" wide or semi-stiff brush, commercial PVA or EVA adhesive, scrap glass, and two weights of 1/4" plate glass or metal. Optional use of a cold vacuum frame will expedite the initial setting and bond of a wet mounting.

Wet Mounting Basics

Like applying wallpaper, a paste is rolled onto the chosen backing board, artwork is placed onto the backing board, and pressure is applied. Drying time will be accelerated if a vacuum frame is used to bond. Wet mounting with commercial PVA is not recommended for high end art, originals, or valuables. Though EVA is considered removeable, it could still damage the art if not properly remoistened.

Wet mounting supplies include thick glue or paste, spray water bottle, soft 4-5" rubber or sponge roller, and a piece of scrap glass or acrylic. When using liquid fabric glue it is best to use a roller tray or a resealable plastic container.

(Photo 6)

- Apply adhesive to the substrate making sure moist glue is evenly applied and covers every square inch of board.
- Mist the back of the paper print to expand the fibers to match that of the prepared wet substrate.
- Align the print to the substrate across the top edge, gently sliding a hand from the top to the bottom, first down the center then to the edges respectively to tack the print.
- Check alignment to mount board, dwell time allows for corrections if necessary.
- Cover the print with a sheet of clean Kraft paper or dry mount release paper and gently spread from the center to the edges to eliminate air bubbles.
- Dry under an even weight for 4-24 hours.



Weighting Variations

After the art has been aligned, burnished, or rolled into position, it must be weighted during the drying process. Cover the print with a sheet of clean kraft paper and gently smooth the mounting from the center to the edges of the substrate by

mounting equal paper and moisture to it. If the adhesive was applied to the substrate, any exposed adhesive will stick to the kraft paper so it should be wiped with a damp rag. Release paper may be used as a cover sheet, but it will not absorb surplus adhesive, and prevents evaporation.

A common method for starch paste wet mount drying is to lay the substrate and artwork face up on sheet of 1/4" plate glass or smooth surface. Layer a sheet of spun nylon (Pelon), then a blotter on top of the art, and place a second sheet of 1/4" plate glass. The Pelon prevents the adhesive from sticking to the blotter, while the blotter absorbs wet adhesive moisture. The glass is both cool and heavy. Dry blotters should replace damp ones every hour or two for the first few hours, then morning and night the next day.

Why Wet Mount?

Choose a commercial wet glue or paste that allows a fairly long open time and is repositionable. A safe paste selection would be non-toxic, non-staining with age, and have long term bonding ability. Some commercial pastes available from major manufacturers are starch based, neutral pH, non-toxic, buffered, and water soluble for removal. The manual process of wet mounting, though economical, may be time consuming and messy if unfamiliar with the process. The permanency of successful wet mountings is directly equated to a framer's ability to properly apply an even layer of adhesive, allow for appropriate dwell time, and apply adequate weight during bonding.

Final Bond

When selecting a mounting method, think through the reasoning behind using a wet bonding process. Starch paste is the oldest form of adhesive, and every framer should have the skills to use starch paste and wet mounting. One of the big advantages of wet mounting is the ability to make minor repairs—such as replacing torn off pieces of an image, or corrections—such as flattening folds in the print, during mounting, assuming the damaged art is water tolerant. That said, the wet adhesive of choice could be anything from PVA to starch, or starch to EVA depending on the project and what is being mounted.

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Photo 1 - Three basic hanging scroll styles: Shin, Gyō, and Sō. The formal Shin style was used only for religious Buddhist paintings, the semi-formal Gyō style was the most common of mountings used for colored paintings of birds and flowers, and the informal Sō style is used mostly in tea ceremony.

Photo 2 - Paste brushes made of goat or horsehair bristles (R) are used to apply paste to backing materials, while a harder bristled smoothing/pounding brush are made of hemp (L).

Photo 3 - Apply cooked paste to the back of the moistened painting, beginning at the center and working to the outer edges top to bottom then center to the edges.

Photo 4 - Gently unroll following with the hemp brush to insure no air remains, brushing center to edges.

Photo 5 - Beginning at the top edge, paste down with hemp brush only the outer edges leaving one small gap.

Photo 6 - Make certain the glue is evenly applied and covers every square inch of board.

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