

# **Tips for Handling and Storing Works on Paper**

**Melissa Potter**

**Paper Conservator, San Francisco, CA**

## **Good Handling Habits**

- ◆ Look before handling. It is important to know what you are handling and the requirements of the work.
- ◆ If you see something that you think may have a condition problem let your supervisor or a conservator know.
- ◆ If you are unsure about how to handle something ask a conservator or someone with more experience.
- ◆ Remove or secure jewelry and badges.
- ◆ Only use graphite pencils.
- ◆ Use a cart even for short distances. An A-frame can be used for framed works.
- ◆ Wear cotton gloves or purple nitrile gloves whenever possible. Wearing gloves when handling matted works keeps the mats clean. Glove use may vary from institution to institution, so follow your institution's policy. Gloves are imperative for photographs and gilded frames.
- ◆ Make sure your hands are clean, even if wearing gloves.
- ◆ Determine your route and ensure that it is clear and safe before traveling it. Talk or walk through the route if necessary.
- ◆ Minimize chatting and take your time.
- ◆ If an accident happens tell your supervisor or a conservator as soon as possible.
- ◆ Use common sense!

## **Single Sheets and Folders**

- ◆ Best practice is to store works on paper in a protective enclosure and to transport them on a cart. Try to avoid handling a sheet without a sufficient protective enclosure.
- ◆ To lift a single sheet, use a spatula or a slip of paper to lift the edge of the work. Hold by opposite corners and with some slack.

- ◆ Check what is inside the folder before moving it. Move by holding opposite corners and be sure to grasp both the front and back.
- ◆ Move artworks and folders individually.
- ◆ Some works on paper need a rigid support while being moved. These include, but are not limited to works that:
  - have media that is applied to the edge of support.
  - have thickly applied paint layers, e.g. gouache, acrylics, poster paints, etc.
  - are in poor condition, e.g. embrittled or very fragile paper, flaking paint, etc.
  - are moderately oversized.
- ◆ It's a good idea to move all works on paper with a rigid support or carry board. Gatorboard cut to standard sizes works well. Transport boxes and museum board are also good.
- ◆ Folders and Mylar enclosures can be a space efficient and relatively inexpensive storage solution. Best practice is to store one work per folder. Interleave individual works with tissue or paper if storing more than one work per folder. Store similar sizes together. Isolate chemically unstable works, e.g. felt tip pen, acids from poor quality paper, etc.
- ◆ Storage in folders or Mylar enclosures is not appropriate for works on paper that have a delicate surface, such as pastels and chalks and works with a lot of dimensionality. In addition, Mylar generates static and is not appropriate for very fragile papers.
- ◆ The rate of deterioration is increased by encapsulating very acidic objects in Mylar.

## **Matting Basics**

- ◆ Use at least 4-ply mat board to provide rigidity. A proper mat has a back-mat, a window and is hinged along long side with cloth or Tyvek tape. If the work is framed, the package will include glazing and a backing board.
- ◆ The art work is hinged to the back-mat generally with T-hinges or V-hinges using Japanese paper adhered with wheat starch paste. Tape of any sort should never be used directly on art.
- ◆ Be aware that the bottom corners of the work may be hinged along the sides or lower edge. Best practice is to indicate on the inside of the back-mat the hinge locations with arrows.
- ◆ Cut a cover sheet to slightly smaller than the standard mat size and make sure it covers the art by an ample margin.
- ◆ Good cover tissues and papers are non-buffered (pH neutral), or buffered (alkaline reserve), lignin-free and have a high alpha cellulose content.
- ◆ Avoid using acidic or unknown tissues and papers. Crumpled, creased, torn, folded and undersized tissues and papers should be discarded.

- ◆ To remove the cover sheet open the mat slowly and lift the cover sheet using a spatula or slip of paper. Avoid dragging the cover sheet over the art as this can smudge and abrade it.
- ◆ Stack mats in short stacks of the same or similar size. Even though mats provide a small airspace, the compression in tall stacks may cause a back-mat to contact the artwork below it, which can be damaging.
- ◆ When it is necessary to stack different sizes of mats, stack the smaller mats on the bottom. The window of the smaller mats provides support for the larger ones.

## **Boxes**

- ◆ Use standard sizes of mats and boxes. Place all mat openings in the same direction. Store an appropriate number of works per box so that the air space between objects is maintained when the lid is shut.
- ◆ Clear labels and finding aids are faster and reduce handling and thus the possibility of damage.
- ◆ Move large and heavy boxes with two people. Keep boxes level.

## **Framed Works on Paper**

- ◆ Support frames with one hand on the bottom, and the other on the leading side. The glazing should be facing the handler and the top of the artwork pointing up. Never turn a framed work on its side or point the top down. Grasping a frame by the top member or hanging wire may cause damage both to the frame and the artwork.
- ◆ Use foam blocks or padding rather than placing the frame directly on the floor.
- ◆ When storing or transporting more than one frame vertically they should be oriented face to face and back to back, provided the frames can withstand this and are of similar sizes. Using a rigid support between each frame offers more protection and allows for different sizes to be stored or transported together.

## **Oversize Works on Paper**

- ◆ Use a lignin-free tube at least 4 inches in diameter. A larger tube is preferred. Polyethylene plastic secured around the tube with #415 double sided tape can be used if a lignin-free tube is not available. Make sure the double sided tape is under the plastic!
- ◆ A flange or support sheet under the art should be used to start the roll. Use one sheet of interleaving over the art rather than small pieced sheets. Cover the rolled work with protective paper or polyethylene. Secure the package by wrapping wide strips of thick paper or folder stock

around the rolled work. Attach these strips snugly to themselves with tape, twill tape, or velcro, as appropriate for the work.

- ◆ Generally works on paper are rolled face in. This avoids having to flip it. Roll straight along the edges and avoid rolling with too much tension or too little tension.
- ◆ Store horizontally.

## **Books**

- ◆ The most fragile area of a book is the spine and the beginning and end of the text block.
- ◆ Open only as far as the book easily allows. Forcing tightly bound books too far open can cause the binding to break.
- ◆ Support open books at an angle appropriate for the opening. Commercial book supports, fabric covered foam wedges, or bean bags can be used.
- ◆ Transport horizontally and on a cart. Avoid storing and transporting books with the fore-edge pointing down as this places stress on the text block.

## **Photographs**

- ◆ Wear purple nitrile gloves, which are sulfur-free. Sulfur tarnishes the silver-based image found in many photographs. Fingerprints can be very damaging to all types of photographs.
- ◆ Handle cased objects like a book. Be aware that some components including the glass may be broken or loose in the case.
- ◆ Avoid placing tags or ID cards between or inside the case.
- ◆ Use non-buffered or pH neutral materials for storage. Gelatin, which is found in many photographs, is a protein and is degraded by alkaline environments.