

Preservation of Watercolour Paintings

Watercolour is a medium that dissolves in water. While it is relatively young compared to oils, watercolour still has a history of about 600 years. Even now, vivid watercolour works by Durer (1471 - 1528) can still be admired. This shows that with proper protection watercolour works can last for centuries. Modern technology has made this much easier.

The conservation problems faced by collectors of watercolour works can be subverted with some framing and conservation knowledge. Common problems include:

- Colour damage due to contact with water
- Discolouring
- Foxing

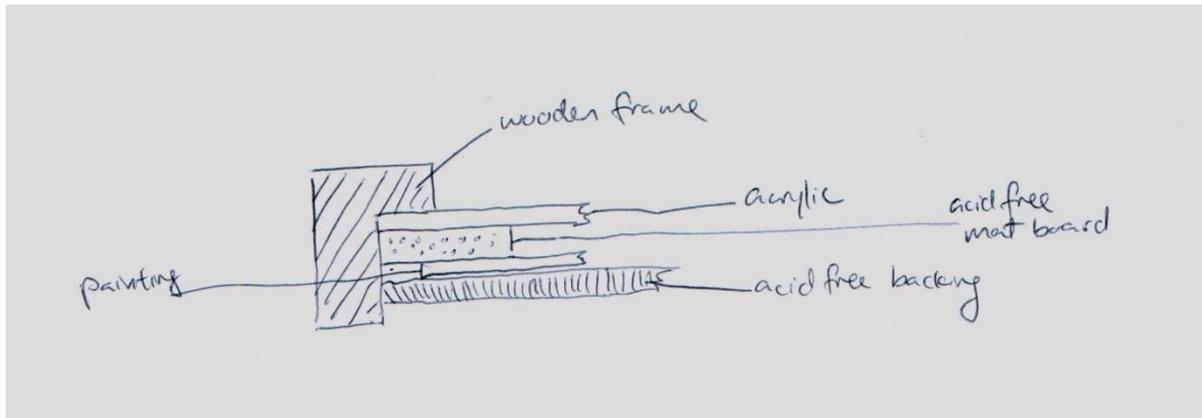


Fig 1. Schematic cutway for a typical watercolour painting

Water Damage

Although all mediums are susceptible to some form of water damage, watercolour suffers the most as it is soluble in water. When in contact with water, the colours dissolve and run, ruining the picture. Naturally, the course of action to take is to segregate the painting from moisture. This is done in two ways:

- 1) Covering the painting with a sheet of acrylic. By covering up the painting, the chances of foreign water coming into contact with the painting reduce significantly. In the event of condensation, water droplets that formed on the inside of the cover may come into contact with the painting. Therefore, care must be taken to form a gap between the painting and the cover. This can be remedied by use a mat board to prop up the cover a distance away from the painting, or using foam to create a gap in absence of a mat board. Also, acrylic is less susceptible to condensation compared to glass as glass is a good conductor of heat, encouraging water droplets to form through condensation. Thus, acrylic is the preferred medium, over glass.
- 2) When choosing a spot to hang the painting, it is recommended to hang away from wall with piping, near the bathroom and kitchen, and away from air conditioners. Fluctuations of the temperature are greatest in close proximity to the air-conditioner, making it prone to condensation. There is also the added risk of a leaking air-conditioner.

Discolouring

As with all mediums, watercolour can encounter discolouring. Discolouring occurs mainly due to exposure to light, in particular UV rays in sunlight. While this is a natural process (all paintings will encounter a degree of discolouring), measures can be taken to delay the process.

- 1) Direct sunlight is a major reason for the diminishing vibrancy of watercolour works. Situating the painting away from direct sunlight would extend the life of the painting significantly. Displaying the painting with normal room lighting would not cause any significant damage.
- 2) Modern paints are usually lightfast (withstands discolourisation through light). The buyer should always ensure that the artist uses artist grade paints as student grade paints are of inferior quality and may not be lightfast.

Foxing

Foxing is the growth of yellow/brown spots (fungus) on the paper that defaces the painting. Foxing occurs due to a number of reasons, including high humidity and acidic environments. The following measures may be taken:

- 1) Non-acidic materials are to be used when framing, namely the mat board and backing. For the backing, double-sided laminated wood or museum grade corrugated boards are recommended
- 2) The mat board should be changed every 5-10 years as foxing usually starts with the mat board rather than the painting itself.
- 3) When foxing does occur, it is possible for the painting to be restored to some degree by professional restorers. In comparison, the cracking of oils and canvas are relatively irreversible.

Conclusion

The preservation of watercolours is not as difficult or impossible as most would think, especially with the aid of modern technology and materials. Minor maintenance every 5-10 years should suffice. In contrast, oil works need to be re-varnished every 5-10 years as well. Problems in oil works may only surface after 40-50 years. In comparison to watercolours which can be repaired, the issues with oil paintings are usually irreversible.