

# Alternative method of mounting posters at the Australian War Memorial

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## **Abstract**

The Australian War Memorial (AWM) has a large collection of posters from a range of periods dating from the Boer War (1899–1902) to recent conflicts in the Middle East. For exhibitions in the past the posters were usually matted and framed as works of art on paper. However, for an exhibition of 78 posters from Britain, France and Germany at the AWM in 1992 the curator wanted to have the posters displayed as posters, i.e. as they were meant to be on a wall or a noticeboard, rather than matted and framed as artwork.

This paper describes the alternative method for the mounting and framing of posters proposed by conservators and accepted by art curators at the AWM. Since the early 1990s this has been the method adopted at the AWM for the conservation preparation of posters for exhibitions.

## **Introduction**

The art of the poster is the art of visual communication. This communication is direct and usually with a single purpose – an aim to persuade, tell of a coming event, advertise goods or services, spread propaganda etc. In peacetime posters are used mainly for the former purposes, but in wartime propaganda is usually the main purpose for creating a poster. These propaganda purposes include encouraging men to enlist, selling war bonds to raise money to support the troops, showing the activities of the services and of the home front and of course demonising the enemy. Posters have been used for propaganda purposes by both sides, in past as

well as recent conflicts.

The development of lithography in the late 19th century led to the widespread use of this technique by the advertising industry in Europe. When the First World War broke out people were already used to seeing posters as part of their cityscapes, perhaps on billboards or pasted on walls. The early development of posters in Australia followed the European tradition.

The use of posters as a medium for mass communication became very popular during the First World War. Various governments used posters for their propaganda because they were cheap to produce, easy to distribute and easy to comprehend. In wartime posters became the weapons on the walls.

### **The poster collection at the Australian War Memorial**

There are some 28,000 works on paper, such as prints, drawings, illustrations and sketchbooks, in the AWM collection. The collection includes almost 10,000 posters of Australian and international origin covering all major conflicts from the Boer War and the First and Second World Wars, through to the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The collection also includes posters from the many peacekeeping operations that Australian troops have been involved in.

While some posters may be in black and white, of simple design and on small pieces of paper, other posters are large and colourful with designs varying from the ordinary to those designed and drawn by distinguished artists of the day.

The breakdown of the number of posters is as follows:

- First World War – 1,909
- Second World War – 5,733
- Vietnam War – 291
- Other – approx. 1,500

The messages of the posters in the collection cover both political and social issues, such as war propaganda and home-front issues. The messages and the images are not always serious. Some are humorous or light-hearted.

Most of the posters from the First World War were acquired under

the collection policy of the Australian War Records Office in London in the later years of the war. Most of the rest of the collection was donated by private donors, government departments, foreign governments or acquired through official transfers.

### **General condition of the AWM poster collection**

The condition of the posters ranges from fragile to near-new and unused condition. Most of the First World War posters are pasted onto acidic backing boards that are now deteriorated and brittle. Although the acidic backing boards give support to the posters, they also cause problems in storage and handling. In addition they are bulky and difficult to handle. Some posters are lined with muslin cloth as backing.

Most of the posters are made of wood pulp, which becomes acidic and brittle with age. Many are in bad condition, with tears and losses, and have been repaired with sticky tapes or masking tapes. Some of the donated posters are in bad condition due to having been stored in poor environments such as in damp garages, and many have been rolled, folded and damaged.

### **Previous conservation treatment**

In the early 1980s AWM started a project to conserve posters from the collection. The treatment included the removal of backings, washing and deacidification. Some of the posters were lined with M-tissue or mended and encapsulated in Mylar™ for storage.

### **Display techniques**

The British poster artist 'Fougasse' defined posters as "anything stuck up on a wall with the object of persuading the passer-by" (Stanley 1983: p7). Posters were originally intended as a tool for commerce and industry but later became established as decorative art.

'Stuck up on a wall' is indeed how the posters were meant to be displayed. It was only when they became part of art collections that they began to be treated in a similar manner to other artworks on paper and matted and framed in the same way.

In 1992 there was a First World War poster exhibition at the AWM

titled *Poster Art 1914–20 in Britain, France and Germany* (McAuslan and Forrester 1992). Almost 80 posters were selected, many of which were very large or very long. To mount the posters in a traditional way, the mats had to be joined to get the appropriate length. With this in mind, paper conservators discussed alternative methods of mounting and framing for the exhibition with curators. It was then suggested that the posters could be mounted to appear as they were meant to be shown, that is without a window mount, similar to being pasted onto the wall. Float mounting was considered but did not capture the ‘stuck down’ look of the posters as originally displayed. As a result the alternative mounting method described here was developed.

In this method the poster is first lined with Japanese tissue paper. It is then wrapped on a board, leaving a margin around the poster. A slip is added to the frame to give depth.

#### **Factors in developing the alternative mounting method**

1. It was requested that posters were mounted with no window mats so that they appeared to be ‘stuck on the wall’.
2. Many posters selected for the 1992 AWM poster exhibition were larger than standard mat board and so could not be matted conventionally. On the other hand, the lining technique could be used for posters of all sizes.
3. In earlier treatment, a few hundred of the posters in the AWM collection had already been lined with M-tissue.
4. Tears and damage to the posters did not need individual mending as the lining would also support them.
5. The standard frames already in the collection could be used for poster framing, with the addition of spacers. The spacers are used to keep the poster away from the glazing and the depth gives more of a ‘billboard’ appearance.

#### **Method of lining and wrapping posters**

Each poster is lined with tissue (Japanese or M-tissue). Large posters that come in several pieces can be joined on the lining tissue. If the lining tissue is not large enough for the required size then it can be joined to give

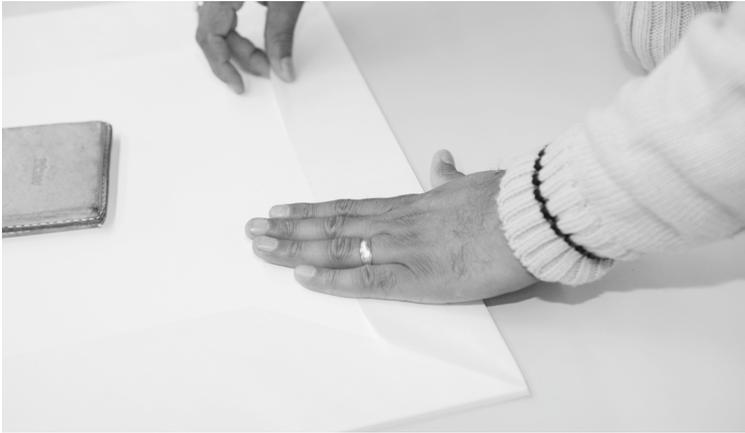


Figure 1. Wrapping the lined poster on foamboard.

the required width and length. It's essential to have a border of supporting tissue around the item and about 80 mm extra width to the border to wrap around the foamboard.

The best method for drying after lining is the tension drying method on a *karibari* board. This method ensures that both the poster and the surrounding lining paper are as flat as possible. Because of the different weights of the paper and tissue, a lined poster dried under weight does not give such a satisfactory result.

To wrap the poster the four corners of the lining tissue are cut off at a 45° angle and double-sided tape is put on all edges for adhering onto the back of the board. The 6 mm thick foamboard is used for normal-sized posters. With larger posters, thicker board, such as 12 mm Gatorboard, is used. The thicker board provides rigidity without too much weight.

### **Framing**

The wrapped posters are framed in AWM standard timber frames. These frames have a narrow straight profile, 45 mm deep, combined with acrylic-sheet glazing for protection. The frames can be used either in portrait or landscape format.



Figure 2. Attaching spacers to the frame.

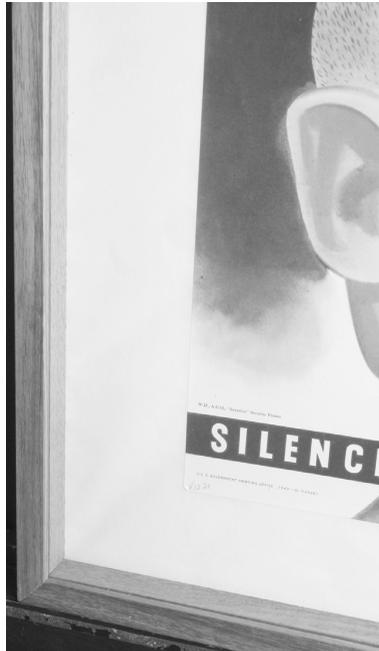


Figure 3. Corner of framed poster showing the wrapped poster behind the spacer.

Glazing 3 mm thick is used for the AWM standard frames up to the size 900 × 1100 mm. For larger frames the glazing is 5–6 mm thick. The 45 mm depth of the standard frame allows enough room to insert spacers behind the glazing. The spacers are 6 mm wide, and 16 or 19 mm high depending on the size of the frames. Larger frames generally have a deeper profile for strength and consequently have larger spacers. Spacers are stained to the same colour as the frame and are stuck to the frame with double-sided tape for temporary exhibition, or nailed for longer or travelling exhibition.

The wrapped poster is placed against the spacers and backed with foamboard for protection. Tape around the edges seals the back of the frame and, together with metal corner braces, holds the assembly in place. Timber or metal cross-braces can be added at the back to give more strength and rigidity to the frame.

### **Conclusion**

Posters are created for a different purpose to works of art on paper. Posters are mostly used for advertising, as a tool of the trade, to be seen inside and outside a building, on a wall or a billboard. For this reason it was decided that the alternative method for preparing and mounting the posters would allow them to be presented as they were intended to be viewed. A poster adhered to a lining and displayed without the window mount looks the same as if it were 'stuck on' to a wall.

This is not to say that posters should not be mounted in other ways. They can be float mounted or even hinged and framed with window mats in the traditional way. However, the method described above for an alternate method of mounting and framing was found to be very effective and pleasing, and differentiated the posters from the artworks. The use of similar type of frames would still give a unifying effect to the overall look of the exhibition.

### **References**

- McAuslan, J., and Forrester, S. 1992. *Poster Art 1914–20 in Britain, France and Germany*. Exhibition catalogue, Australian War Memorial
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