

# A fragile connection: the artist's frame for a work on paper

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## ABSTRACT

A frame and the artwork it encloses have a fragile connection. A frame is easily removed from the artwork and once removed may be discarded and information attached to that frame or the backing board may also be lost.

Especially fragile in their connection are frames designed and made by artists for their own work. Some Australian modern artists made their own frames by hand from found materials or timber from the hardware store. These frames can have a very handmade, or rough, appearance that can jar visually with the aesthetic of a seamless white gallery space. What do we lose when these frames are removed? Should we preserve an artist's frame if the frame is removed because storage concerns are paramount? In this paper I will focus on two Australian modern artists and their frame choices and offer a few solutions for the preservation of artist's frames.

**Keywords** Picture frame, Danila Vassilieff, Mike Brown, Peter Tyndall

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## INTRODUCTION

A picture frame protects an artwork but it is also a piece of decorative art in its own right. It may also carry information about the enclosed artwork. Unfortunately a frame and the artwork it encloses have a fragile connection. A frame is vulnerable to changes in taste and fashion. An owner can easily remove a frame and replace it with something more to their taste, or with a frame of more current fashion. The frame for a work on paper has an especially fragile connection to the artwork it encloses. Paper is a delicate material. It is vulnerable to damage from insects, environmental pollution and prolonged light exposure. To protect work on paper in a museum collection light exposure is kept to a minimum through low light levels, short exhibition periods and dark storage. Large format framed works on paper are kept in vertical dark storage and smaller works on paper are generally mounted in standard sizes and stored in solander boxes on shelves. Storage in a solander box is very space efficient; up to 20 mounted works can fit into one box. For these reasons most framed artwork entering a museum collection is removed from the frame and, if mounted, it is removed from the mount and remounted in rag board. When a work is to be exhibited it is removed from the solander box and fitted into a standard size frame. Generally each institution has a set of matching frames for the display of works on paper usually made in a deep, square profile, polished blackwood timber.

The use of standard size mounts and frames is a practical and cost effective solution but is also an aesthetic one and we have come to expect all works on paper in a museum to be displayed in matching frames. The use of standard size frames can result in the "undressing" of framed works on paper when they enter museum collections.

In the private art trade works on paper are generally undervalued. The collector base is smaller and the expected sale price relatively low compared with paintings. For these reasons when an artist or dealer frames a work on paper, cost

is an important consideration. The quality of mounting and hinging are sometimes lacking in high turnover commercial framing, so the deframing and remounting of a work on paper when it enters a museum collection may be necessary for the longevity of the artwork. Deframing though cuts the connection between a frame and the enclosed artwork.

In addition to the connection between the frame and the enclosed artwork one needs to consider the information attached to a frame. This information may be contained in gallery labels, inscriptions, auction house marks or notes on a mount or the back of a frame. This information may help to establish the provenance of the artwork. In a museum collection if the frame and backing had to be removed from an artwork frame labels would be preserved and information would be recorded. However, in the private sector this information is at risk if the public is not informed of its value. I will explore these issues through several case studies.

## CASE STUDIES: ARTIST MADE FRAMES

For philosophical or financial reasons some modern artists made their own frames. These frames can have a very handmade, sometimes rough, appearance that does not fit into the museum aesthetic of standardised frames for work on paper. Artist made frames sadly are most at risk of removal because of their handmade appearance.

### CASE STUDY OF DANILA VASSILIEFF

The artist Danila Vassilieff (b. Kagalnitskaya, South Russia 1897, d. Templestowe, Australia 1959) was born to a poor Cossack family. He studied mechanical engineering in St Petersburg but his course was interrupted by WWI in mid 1917 when he was assigned to fight with the Don Cossack Cavalry. He was subsequently wounded, captured and imprisoned during hostilities against the new Bolshevik regime in April 1920. He escaped by fleeing on a motorbike through Azerbaijan then worked as an engineer in Persia, Armenia and Shanghai before sailing to Townsville in 1923 (St John Moore 2012, pp.15-17).



Figure 1. Danila Vassiliev, *Sheep Thieves on the Murray*, 1957, Heide Museum of Modern Art, A. Morant donation.



Figure 4. Danila Vassiliev, *Mallee Switchbacks*, 1956, Heide Museum of Modern Art, A. Morant donation.



Figure 2. Corner detail of frame for *Sheep Thieves on the Murray*.



Figure 5. Detail of frame for *Mallee Switchbacks*.



Figure 3. Detail of frame joint for *Sheep Thieves on the Murray*.



Figure 6. Detail of frame rebate for *Mallee Switchbacks*.

Vassiliev worked as an engineer and farmer in the Northern Territory and was naturalised in 1929. Restless, he sailed back to Shanghai where he met an artist who inspired Vassiliev to study painting. This prolonged period of study, painting and exhibitions took place in France, Brazil, the West Indies, British Guiana, England, Spain and Portugal. He finally returned to Australia in 1935, a committed artist (St John Moore 2012, pp.18-30). Vassiliev's early years in Australia were especially tough. He lived in great poverty and once stated, "I...live poorly, very poorly". (St John Moore 2012, p.36) His incredible range of skills, physical strength and industrious determined nature helped him push through these challenges.

An example of his financially and culturally influenced aesthetic and his total absorption in art was his 1937

George St Fitzroy home. Vassiliev made the furniture himself out of packing cases including a bed, tables, chairs, sofa and a wardrobe which he painted yellow with sunflowers on the doors. He covered the floor with Hessian and also painted it. Thereafter he set about painting the neighbours and the neighbourhood, also on packing cases, using the panels for supports and the armatures for stretchers and frames. (St John Moore 2012, pp.42-43)

He made frames for his exhibitions as well. Visitors to his 1936 exhibition "were astounded by the vitality and rawness of the work, and the unusual manner of presentation – in home-made frames painted in tone or covered with combed plaster, fabric or wallpaper". (St John Moore 2012, p.36). In 1939 Vassiliev was offered the position of art teacher at a proposed

experimental school in Warrandyte, a challenge he took up with gusto. After helping to build the school Vassiliev quarried stone to build a home for himself. Again he made the furniture for the home and the frames to house his artwork. Vassiliev's frame-making practice is noted again in relation to his work as a children's art teacher. He used the school wood shop where he "framed his work in woodwork lessons, instructing his students to do the same" (St John Moore 2012, p.153).

The Heide Museum of Modern Art holds a large collection of work on paper by Vassiliev, several housed in sturdy frames made in a chunky, square, profile with a textured off-white painted finish. Two works, *Sheep Thieves on the Murray* (Figures 1-3) and *Mallee Switchbacks* (Figures 4-6), have been removed from the original frames and remounted in standard size mounts to match other mounted works for an exhibition. The evidence that Vassiliev made his own frames suggests that the artist made the frames specifically for these drawings. The frames will be preserved and will hopefully be re-united with the original artworks.

### CASE STUDY OF MIKE BROWN

Artist Mike Brown, (b. Sydney 1938, d. Melbourne 1997), was a non-conforming artist who explored the themes of society, politics and sex through a wide variety of media including painting, collage, assemblage, printmaking, installation, needlework and later computer based art. Brown had a complex personality, was timid and slow to speak but fiercely intelligent. He struggled with anxiety and depression, self-medicating with caffeine, tobacco, alcohol and drugs. He worked like a demon in his art practice and balanced his life through a lifelong exploration of Buddhism. He was a key and founding member of the Annandale Imitation Realists with Ross Crothall and Colin Lanceley. The words imitation and realism combined have a contradictory dada-like flavour. By embracing the word "imitation," still used in the art world as an insult against an artist's work, seems to mock the aim of artists to break ground with work that is truly original. The word "Realism" reveals a rejection of abstraction, the dominant movement in the contemporary art world of the early 1960s. The first Imitation Realists exhibition was a huge, chaotic, installation containing many works produced in collaboration, incorporating found objects and salvaged supports. Brown's concerns for the environment and his dislike of disposable consumerism drove a find-and-recycle art making method. Brown also lived through periods of great poverty only achieving relative financial comfort in the last few years of his life. His beliefs, aesthetics and financial situation influenced his methods of exhibiting art.

Art historian Richard Haese explains the shift in the concept of the art object that took place during Browns early career,

Attributes such as an artwork's visibility, its materiality, originality, uniqueness, permanence, compactness, and elevation above ordinary everyday things - all were now structurally related within an ideological and sociological framework. The new artwork was not to be found within a conventional picture frame or elevated on a pedestal; less physically substantial (it might even be non-physical), it was likely to require an audience contribution or have no existence independent of the artist's performance (Haese 2011, p.159).

Brown wrote on the exhibition flyer for "Shaped Pictures" at Watters Gallery,

Look, I'm sick to bloody death of seeing paintings done on rectangular canvas-stretcher! By the time the stupid dumb things are framed, they are heavy, slab-like over-engineered contraptions with no sculptural elegance as objects: as blandly impersonal as cigarette-packets, which they resemble. In this exhibition called "SHAPED PICTURES" I've abolished those outmoded monstrosities forever. Over a number of years I've devised two technologically-minimal solutions to the problem of 'something to paint on': plywood boards that can be cut to any shape - and canvas stretched on dowel-rod frames which can be rectangular or any simple straight-sided shape. Both types of construction are lightweight, elegant and inexpensive ... and I've found their use artistically liberating. (Brown 1992).

Revealing more on his opinion of supports and frames Brown wrote, "if art is to live and breathe, it *must* be freed from whatever unnecessarily encumbers it' (Haese 2011, p.252). Art historian Richard Haese explains, "[Brown's] own preference was for the minimal qualities of irregular-shaped plywood boards devoid of framing devices and the 'warp-proof, light, cheap' wooden dowel rod and canvas constructions (with their origins in the *Kite* three decades earlier) that featured in the new exhibition. He believed that it was impossible to paint a good picture on a bad surface, and here was the simplest and most elegant solution to the problem of displaying images as objects, quite unlike the over-Engineered contraptions found in most art galleries" (Haese 2011, p.252).

Brown's Melbourne based art dealer Charles Nodrum recalled helping Brown with last minute preparation of frames for an exhibition, 'working on the frames - Mike fixing the colours, me painting and hanging them out on the back fence to dry-wondering if anything would be ready on time.'(Haese 2011, p.239). The frame for *Mountain of Love III* (Figure 7) was painted by Nodrum who also fitted the collage into the frame in preparation for an exhibition. (Nodrum 2014)



Figure 7. Mike Brown, *Mountain of Love III*, c. 1987.

The collage, *Such a Night* (Figure 8) is in a hand crafted shaped Perspex frame chosen and possibly made by the artist. These frames are integral to the artworks; to remove the frames and remount the collages in standard mounts would destroy an important component of the artwork.



Figure 8. Mike Brown, *Such a Night*, 1979 - 1986.

## CONCLUSION

How do we ensure that these important issues are considered? How do we preserve the connection between an original frame and the enclosed work on paper? How do we respect an artist's intent in the display of a work on paper? How do we preserve the information on mounts and backings of original frames? We can do this by recording and sharing information.

## FRAME POLICY AND ARTIST'S INTENT

Many of these issues would be covered by the framing policy of the collecting institution. Where an artist has a strong opinion in regard to the framing and display of their art this could be recorded in an artist's intent statement. One artist with a precise concept for the display of his works on paper is Peter Tyndall. Tyndall has a very specific way that he likes his prints and drawings displayed and has written guidelines (Figure 9) to ensure his instructions are followed. The illustrated information was passed on to me by the purchaser of a drawing by Tyndall and is reproduced here with the artist's permission.

## RAISING PUBLIC AWARENESS

Wall texts in museums that include frame information are an effective way to raise awareness with the public about original frames. Articles about frames and frame conservation in museum members' magazines and on websites inspire viewers to look more closely at a frame. Less frequent is the public lecture on the history, treatment or conservation of a frame but in my experience these lectures are very popular with the public. Another solution may be for the AICCM conservation framers special interest group to prepare information on original and artists' frames, frame labels and frame backing boards. This information would then be accessible to the public via the AICCM website.

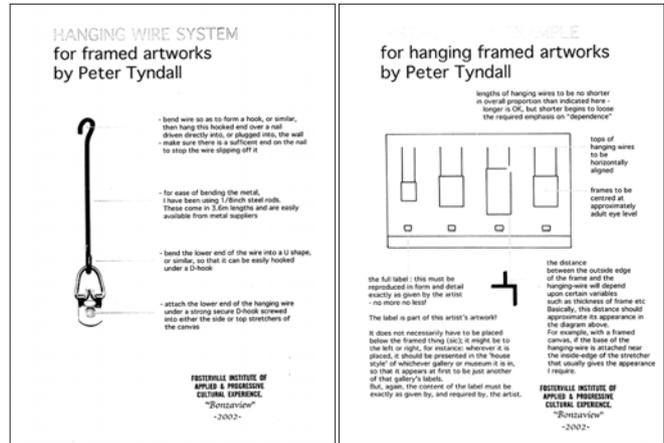


Figure 9. Peter Tyndall, instructions for display, 2007.

## A FRAME DATABASE

A long-term solution worth consideration is the establishment of an online database for Australian frames. This can start small, focusing on one period of Australian frames and then later expand the database to include important frames in national collections. This database might include the frame profile drawing, photos of the frame and frame label and information on frame maker, provenance and original mount, for example a hand gilded or decorated mount for a work on paper. Ideally this information would be accessible to the public and picture framers because many original frames are held in private collections and access to information may prevent the loss of the frame or the frame label.

While we cannot prevent the loss of all original and artist made frames, by raising awareness and sharing information, we may help to keep a few original frames with their enclosed artworks.

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