

Works on paper and their frames: research, collaboration and documentation

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Abstract

The practice of standard framing in art galleries and museums does not always allow for the individual qualities of an artwork and the decisions an artist may have made about how their work is to be presented. Information about framing styles from past eras and the history of particular artworks and their display can be lost if old frames and mounts are not retained. Using a number of case studies this paper will look at some of the decisions made at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) regarding the framing of different works on paper and will discuss some of the issues considered in making such decisions. Documentation of these decisions is important to record the presentation history of the works and to provide future staff members with as much information as possible to inform the decisions they will make.

Introduction

The display of mounted works on paper in standard frames and their storage in Solander boxes are museum practices that are grounded in practical considerations. For display, standard frames provide a uniform presentation. For storage, standard mounts save space, keep the works protected from light and make the works easy to store and handle. While this approach can be practical it does not always allow for the individual qualities of an artwork and the decisions an artist may have made about how the work is to be presented.

Information about framing styles from past eras and the history of particular artworks and their display can be lost if old frames and mounts are not retained. In addition, some works are an odd size or too big to fit into a standard size frame. For these reasons it is often decided that works should be kept framed or that frames should be made for them. Such decisions are made collaboratively, with the curator, artist, paper conservators, frame conservators and frame makers all contributing their expertise.

The decision to keep or remove a frame from a work on paper takes into account a number of factors: is the frame original; is the frame aesthetically appropriate; does the frame adequately protect the work from damage; what is the historical value of the frame; and is the frame suitable in terms of the expected use of the work as part of the gallery's collection? All of these questions are important for every work of art but each question might be of more or less importance depending on the needs of a particular work. As a result, the process of deciding the framing

requirements of any one work is complex. Added to this mix is the inevitable subjectivity associated with questions like the aesthetic appropriateness of a frame. Using a number of case studies I will look at some of the decisions made at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) regarding the framing of different works on paper and will discuss some of the issues associated with making such decisions.

Documentation of these decisions is important to record the presentation history of the works and to provide future staff members with as much information as possible to inform the decisions they will make. Documentation processes now record the manner in which works were framed at the time of acquisition as well as any changes made to their presentation and the reasons for these changes.

Is the frame original?

A starting point for any investigation into the framing of a work on paper is often to determine if the existing frame is original. An original frame is defined, for these purposes, as an acquisition frame that was chosen by the artist or a frame that is contemporary with the work of art. But records to show whether or not a frame is original are sometimes scarce. If a work was made in 1920 and acquired framed by AGNSW in 1921 then we can say that this frame fits the definition of an original frame. But can we be sure that the frame it is now in is the acquisition frame? Sometimes records exist to confirm this, other times not. Physical examination of the frame can often provide important information. Does it appear that the work has ever been removed from its frame? Is there more than one set of holes for nails or other

fixing devices? Do the fixing devices look like they are contemporary with the work? Similarly, a work made in 1920, but not acquired until 2005, may or may not be in its original frame. Research into the artist's intentions and practice, and the style and provenance of the work and frame, may be required to determine whether the frame is likely to be original.



Figure 1: Thea Proctor (*Flowers in a green vase with red ribbon*), unknown date, watercolour on silk on cardboard. 36.5 x 31.0 cm. Gift of Thea Waddell 2002; Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales. ©AGNSW, Photographed by Diana Panuccio, AGNSW.

Sometimes, although the acquisition frame is known to be original, other issues put the suitability of the frame in doubt. (*Flowers in a Green Vase with Red Ribbon*) by Thea Proctor (Figure 1) was acquired, framed, by AGNSW in 2002 from Thea Proctor's niece, who had been given the framed work by Thea Proctor (1879-1966). The frame (Figure 2) is possibly by S.A. Parker. Proctor lived and worked in the same building as Parker's picture framing business (Sayers et al. 2005) and is known to have patronised it (Dredge 2001).



Figure 2: Detail of acquisition frame, Thea Proctor (*Flowers in a green vase with red ribbon*). ©AGNSW, Photographed by Carolyn Murphy, AGNSW.

On the back of the frame, evidence of inscriptions was noted when the work was assessed upon acquisition. The layer of brown paper tape covering the inscriptions was removed to reveal a number of interesting details. The inscriptions indicate that the frame has been cut down from a larger size to its current size and that the surface was repainted, as indicated by the inscription "reduco to pale ivory". The use of the term 'duco' dates the modification of the frame (and possibly also the artwork) after 1923 and probably more likely in the 1930s (Standeven 2006). Even though it seems likely that the frame is original, there was considerable discussion as to whether the frame could adequately protect the work from damage.

Does the frame adequately protect the work from damage?

One of the primary purposes of a frame is to protect an artwork from handling and environmental factors such as humidity and dust. For these purposes the frame should have adequate space inside it to accommodate the artwork and should also be structurally sound. Where possible a margin of space around the edges of a work allows room for the paper to expand and contract in response to changes in relative humidity. Sometimes, however, a work is close-mounted which means that the rebate of the frame covers the edges of the work. In this case there is only a minimal margin between the work and the frame and care must be taken to position the work accurately to minimise risk to the edges of the work. The depth of a frame should be sufficient to allow space for glazing, a window mount, slip or spacer, the artwork, an auxiliary support and a backing board. If the work is large a back frame or sub frame may also be used to give the framed work more structural stability. Reproduction

frames can generally be made deep enough to accommodate these layers, but existing frames may require modification. Modification of an original frame is only undertaken if it is necessary to protect a work from damage and care is taken to ensure that modifications do not significantly impact on the appearance of the frame and work when on display.

(*Flowers in a Green Vase with Red Ribbon*), a watercolour on silk, was wrapped around a cardboard support and pinned along the edges. There were numerous tears and areas of loss at the edges and extending into the image area. It was agreed that the wrapping and pinning was contributing to the deterioration of the silk. The work was removed from its auxiliary support to allow treatment to stabilise the tears and losses. The work was lined with paper (Figure 3) by Sun Yu, AGNSW's Asian Art Conservator who has extensive experience in the treatment and lining of Asian paintings on silk and has lined a number of works on silk by Thea Proctor.



Figure 3: Unframed after lining, showing the margins, Thea Proctor (*Flowers in a green vase with red ribbon*). ©AGNSW, Photographed by Carolyn Murphy, AGNSW.

Framing in a frame large enough to allow the silk to remain flat would have best protected the treated silk. A reproduction frame, in the same style as the original but larger, and with a mount or wooden flat to allow space for the unfolded edges of the work, was considered. Despite the potential risk to the silk support, however, it was felt that the

original presentation was integral to the preservation of the work as a whole. This seemed especially important when considering the work of a modernist artist like Thea Proctor who was very conscious of style and presentation. The very fact that the frame was known to have been cut down suggested that the size and style was chosen specifically for the work. The watercolour was, therefore, wrapped around a new auxiliary support and reframed in the original frame with spacers added, care being taken to preserve the inscriptions on the back of the frame. Pins were not used to secure the work to the auxiliary support as the lined silk did not require them and it was felt that the pins may have contributed to the previous damage.

Is the frame aesthetically appropriate?

At other times, even though the original frame may adequately protect the work from damage, it may still be decided that it is not suitable. A frame that has been added to a work by a previous owner or dealer, for example, might not be kept if it is felt that the frame is not aesthetically appropriate, or if the connection between the frame and the work is considered incidental rather than significant. Such frames might also be removed because other works in the collection by the same artist are in standard mounts and frames. In this case it is argued that a uniform mode of presentation is more appropriate. At other times, a cheap or poor quality frame might be removed on the grounds that the frame is not aesthetically appropriate and was only chosen by the artist because of financial constraints. Hendrik Kolenberg, Senior Curator of Australian Prints, Drawings and Watercolours at AGNSW, sees these aesthetic decisions, made in consultation with the artist when possible, as an inevitable part of the work of a gallery but concedes that future custodians may not agree with our choices and may then make other changes. In disposing of these frames, however, a frame considered suitable for a work by the previous owner or dealer, or sometimes by the artist, is lost. These frames are also evidence of framing styles considered suitable for that type of artwork, at the time it was framed, and therefore form part of a history of taste in framing.

The role of the museum or gallery in making these aesthetic decisions is not an unimportant one. There are numerous historical examples of original frames being removed to make way for an updated

presentation. In his book, *Exhibiting Authenticity*, David Philips writes:

In all three of the pioneering galleries of late eighteenth-century Europe in which the taxonomic approach to authorship, that Bal and Bryson call enframement, became dominant, Dusseldorf, Vienna and the Louvre in Paris, the new approach was signalled by campaigns of reframing. As Andrew McClellan explains in his study of the establishment of the Louvre as a museum, in each case, uniformity and simplicity of framing was the key, to emphasise the systematic approach within which the new ordering of authorship was to be understood...

The aspiration was also that uniformity should reduce the effect of framing, so that the museum context should not intrude, but that was not at all the effect achieved. (Philips 1997: 207-8)

In another more recent example, the Director of the Stedelijk Museum in the 1960s ordered that the original frames on their Van Gogh collection be removed and replaced with modern frames that he saw as more indicative of the “artist’s role as the great precursor of the avant-garde” (Massoni 1995: 1). In this case the original frames, ordered by Van Gogh, were thrown away. Massoni notes that in 1995 when she wrote on the subject, the Museum, in the absence of any documentation of the original frames, was planning to commission another artist to make new frames and that the Van Gogh Museum who had also destroyed original Van Gogh frames were making “new frames to a design as close as possible to that of the originals” (Massoni 1995: 1).

Similarly, Martin Hardie in 1935, then Keeper, Department of Engraving, Illustration, and Design, and of Paintings at the Victoria and Albert Museum wrote on Whistler’s approach to the framing of his watercolours:

When [Whistler]... took to water-colour he knew well that his small pictures – dainty and refined to a degree – were precious things, but he made them “precious” in a wrong sense by enshrining them in the heavy gold frames which he used to the day of his death in 1903.

Hardie goes on to say that, since he became Keeper at the Victoria and Albert Museum,

...with the approval of two successive Directors, Sir Cecil Harcourt-Smith and Sir Eric Maclagan, a gradual attempt has been made to get rid of all the gold mounts and to change what a recent writer has described as “serried ranks of plummy Victorian pieces in heavy frames and broad gold mounts” into a more orderly arrangement of

water-colours, shown in historical sequence, in simple frames with mounts of white or cream with bordering lines and washes (Hardie 1935: 225).

At AGNSW, works on paper have only been transferred into Solander boxes and standard frames since the 1970s. Prior to this time works were framed in their original or acquisition frames, or were framed in-house. According to Hendrik Kolenberg, many Australian art galleries first began using Solander boxes and standard frames around this time in an attempt to provide a uniform presentation for display.

What is the historical value of the frame?

With such campaigns of reframing, the potential for a frame to have been changed, perhaps many times, in the history of an artwork makes the question of what frame to use more complex. What, for example, is the historical value of a frame made by the AGNSW? It too was chosen for the work at a particular time in the work’s history. If a work is acquired in a frame from a different historical period, is the frame necessarily unsuitable? Such frames may still be aesthetically appropriate and tell us something about the history of ownership and/or use, and about the history of tastes in frames. In an article on the framing of works on paper in the historic houses of the National Trust of the United Kingdom, Andrew Bush writes:

... we might actively want to replace ‘historically’ inappropriate window mounts, such as those that might have been added in the mid-20th century to 18th century portrait prints. But is too much historical correctness also a misrepresentation of the collections? It may well be, and there are occasions when one of the aims of treatment might be to retain this more recent style of mounting as a now significant part of the presentation (Bush 2005:22).

The historical value of such mounts and frames is evaluated in the light of research into the history of the work, the frame, and the type of frame the artist was known to have used and also against the perceived aesthetic suitability of the frame.

Questions addressing the historical value of a frame become particularly important when considering whether a reproduction frame should replace an existing frame. Margaret Sawicki (2007: 45) writes:

The intention of a reproduction frame is to reproduce the original presentation of the work of

art as closely as possible. Many factors are taken into account in the design of an appropriate reproduction frame, such as an artist's intentions, influences, year and circumstances associated with creation of the painting, subject of the painting, its palette and style, historical association, custodian's taste, and the designated space for the painting including both historical references to the environment/architecture for which the frame was originally designed and the current surroundings for display.

A reproduction frame is generally only made when research indicates that a reproduction frame will be more suitable for the work than the existing frame, taking into account the many factors listed previously. A watercolour by JMW Turner, *High Force, Fall of the Tees, Yorkshire*, 1816, was recently prepared for loan to the 2008 exhibition, *The Triumph of Landscape: Turner to Monet* at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA). The work itself did not require treatment but it was decided that this loan was a good opportunity to review the work's presentation. The work was framed in a plain bronze-painted wooden frame (Figure 4) with a line wash window mount that dated from 1970. The work had been acquired in 1947 from a London commercial gallery with a clear provenance back to Turner (1775-1851). AGNSW records mention only that the work was mounted when it was acquired. According to Bill Lamont, a previous mount cutter at AGNSW, the frame dates from before 1963 when he began work at AGNSW and the 1970 mount was copied from the acquisition mount.



Figure 4: Existing mount and frame, JMW Turner *High force, Fall of the Tees, Yorkshire*, 1816, watercolour and scraping out. 28.3 x 40.3 cm sheet. Purchased 1947; Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales. Photographed by Carolyn Murphy, AGNSW

Research into the framing choices made by Turner soon made it clear that the existing frame was of a

type that Turner would probably not have chosen. In a letter he wrote in 1819, just three years after *High Force, Fall of the Tees, Yorkshire* was painted, Turner indicates his preference for 'close mounting' in gilded frames and includes a small sketch of a scotia frame with decoration, a double taenia at the top moulding and a gilt flat (reproduced in van Breda 1999: 138-9). Another watercolour by Turner known to be framed in its original frame is *St. Hughes denouncing vengeance on the Shepherd of Cormayer in the Valley of d'Aoust* in the Sir John Soane's Museum, London. A detail of the close mounted gilded frame, a scotia frame with acanthus leaves decoration, egg and dart moulding, knulled top edge and a gilt flat, gives a clear idea of the type of frame that Turner preferred for his watercolours (reproduced in Mitchell & Roberts 1998: 329).

We cannot be certain, however, that Turner would have framed *High Force, Fall of the Tees, Yorkshire* in this way or even if he would have considered the work suitable for public display at all. It is known that many works by Turner that are now considered worthy of exhibition would have been considered 'unfinished' by Turner (Vaughan 1990). Upon Turner's death in 1851 the full contents of his studio entered the English National collection, due to confusion over the terms of his will, even though it appeared that he intended to bequeath only 'finished' works. The initial cataloguing of the works from his studio maintained this distinction between finished and unfinished works with many works not accessioned at all. Over the following century, however, as modern tastes in art developed, Turner's work came to be seen in a new light and gradually all of the works from his studio were accessioned. Vaughan notes that "In other words, it is only in the twentieth century that many of the works that we regard as major productions by Turner actually became regarded officially as being pictures" (Vaughan 1990: 85).

High Force, Fall of the Tees, Yorkshire was originally commissioned from Turner in 1816 as one of a series intended as an engraved illustration for a *History of Richmondshire* by the Rev. Thomas Dunham Whitaker. The work was subsequently given or sold to Walter Fawkes who was a good friend of Turner, and with whom Turner stayed when he created this and other works in the series. Fawkes exhibited many watercolours from his personal collection at his home in London in 1819 and included in the exhibition a room of Turner watercolours, including *High Force, Fall of the Tees, Yorkshire* (Fawkes 1819). Peter Raissis, the AGNSW's

Curator of European Prints, Drawings and Watercolours, believes that although Turner gave or sold this work to his friend and although it was included in the 1819 exhibition, Turner would not have considered this work a finished watercolour. In Raissis' view, Turner would have intended *High Force, Fall of the Tees, Yorkshire* to be valued and kept but more likely in a portfolio rather than framed. The small size of the watercolour, the fact that it is not signed and the fact that it is not executed in the more grand style of an exhibition watercolour all lend weight to this view.



Figure 5: Reproduction frame 2008, JMW Turner *High force, Fall of the Tees, Yorkshire*. Photographed by Jenni Carter, AGNSW.



Figure 6: Detail of reproduction frame 2008, JMW Turner *High force, Fall of the Tees, Yorkshire*. Photographed by Carolyn Murphy, AGNSW.

Despite this, however, the only historical evidence we have supports the creation of a reproduction frame. For although Turner may not have considered this work a finished watercolour, we do

know that it was framed in a gilt frame, of a style Turner approved (Gage 1969), and was exhibited, albeit in a domestic setting, in Turner's lifetime. The work, therefore, was reframed in a gilded reproduction frame (Figures 5 and 6) made by David Butler, the AGNSW's Reproduction Frame Maker, according to the specifications developed from the historical examples mentioned previously. In its new frame, *High Force, Fall of the Tees, Yorkshire* looks quite different to its previous incarnation and seems to bear out the view of one of Turner's acquaintances who wrote after Turner's death:

I believe Turner always contemplated the union of the gold of his colour with the gold of the frame, and I know he enjoyed it, and used to urge the hanging of frames containing his drawings in groups, without intervals between the frames, so that nothing but gold might be seen in connection with the drawing (quoted in van Breda 1999: 140).

Reproduction frame or standard frame?

When a work has no frame, or the frame no longer exists, a decision has to be made as to whether the work should be framed in a new/reproduction frame or whether it should be mounted in a standard mount and stored in a Solander box. Sometimes the nature of the work (too big for standard mounting, an odd shape, media that would be better protected by framing) indicates that the work should be framed to give it adequate protection in storage. For other works, if no information about possible framing approaches exists, or we do not have time to investigate the possible options, then the decision to mount in a standard mount is fairly easy. This is also a decision that is easily reversed if new information ever comes to light.

Nymphex, 1966, by Stanislaus Ostojka-Kotkowski (Figure 7), a gelatin silver photograph mounted on Masonite was recently prepared for loan to the upcoming exhibition, *Modern Times*, opening August 2008 at the Powerhouse Museum. Ostojka-Kotkowski (1922-1994), a Polish artist who immigrated to Australia and settled in Adelaide in 1953 (Dutkiewicz 1994), was interested in technology and the use of light to create images. His work in the theatre had led him increasingly to use lighting instead of sets to create visual effects and this interest carried over into other artistic activities:

It was this working with light which led to my using light as my 'paint brush', and with the help of Philips Research Laboratory, Hendon, S.A., I have been able to conduct experiments by which one can control a source of light, its shapes and intensity, to produce an image with its own characteristics... (Porter 1968: 6).

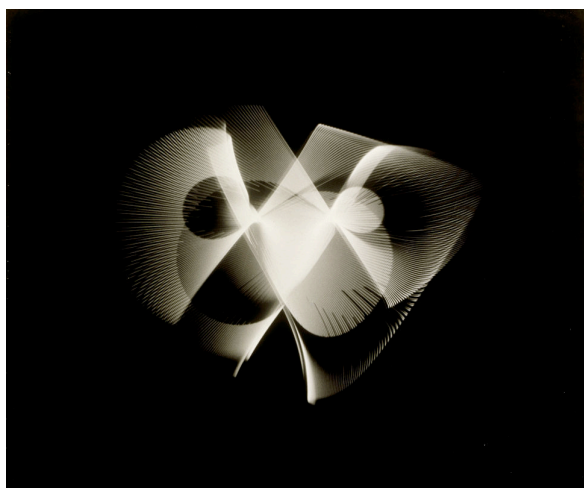


Figure 7: Stanislaus Ostoja-Kotkowski *Nymphex*, 1966, gelatin silver photograph from electronic image. 50.6 x 60.8cm image/sheet. Gift of Dr George Berger 1978; Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales. Photographed by Brenton McGeachie, AGNSW

These images were created on television screens and were then photographed. Although the edges of *Nymphex* showed evidence that the work was previously framed, there was no record of an acquisition frame or of the work being framed or exhibited since it was acquired in 1978. There was, however, a letter on file from the artist to Barry Pearce, Curator of Australian Art at AGNSW, dated 1979, with a small diagram of frame specifications for the work (Figure 8). In light of this, it seemed appropriate to try and create a frame according to these instructions. The fact that the work was adhered to Masonite and could not be easily removed was also a consideration since it was felt a frame would better protect the work than a standard mount.

A composite frame made from two commercially available aluminium frame mouldings and a plain black panel to go in the centre was the first prototype we considered and Jochen Letsch at Andersen Shaw and Associates created a sample. This construction, however, when placed next to the work, looked odd and unsuitable. The problem was that the aluminium looked too new with a shape and surface finish that did not complement

the aged and discoloured appearance of the photograph, with its blacks more a dark brown and its whites yellowish.

The initial choice of aluminium as a framing material was made because it was assumed that in writing aluminium Ostoja-Kotkowski meant the metal, not just the colour. But in rethinking the frame, it was decided that a wooden frame, painted matt black in the centre and gilded with aluminium, palladium, silver, or white gold, might be more sympathetic to the aged appearance of the work. A reproduction frame was made by David Butler and the colour of the gilding was chosen to complement the tones in the photograph.

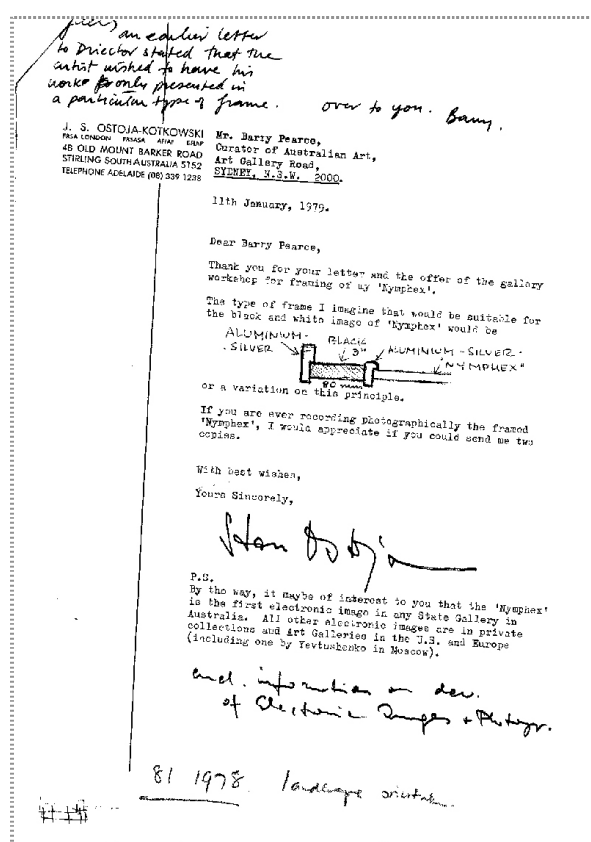


Figure 8: Letter from the artist Ostoja-Kotkowski, dated 11 January 1979 showing frame requirements for *Nymphex*, 1966. Photographed by Carolyn Murphy, AGNSW.

There was general agreement that none of us would have chosen Ostoja-Kotkowski's frame design in the absence of his indicated preference. Contemporary tastes for something simpler and plainer would probably have dictated our choice instead. The interest in this process has been this very issue of trying to create something we would not have designed ourselves, while at the same time achieving a framing solution that we think

works aesthetically for the photograph. The problem with the creation of any reproduction frame is that we are trying to create something that looks authentic from the distant perspective of the future. Have we created a caricature of a past style, a theatre prop, or a frame that adequately conveys something about the work it is intended to complement and enhance? In the absence of any better information we can only proceed with what we have to prepare the work for display.

The suitability of a frame within a collection

The suitability of a frame in terms of the expected use of a work in a gallery or museum collection is a pragmatic concern that might frequently be at odds with ideas about the importance of retaining original frames. The photographs in a work by Brenda Croft, *In My Father's House*, 1998, that includes nineteen photographs and six objects, were recently reframed in plain white 'museum' box frames and the original frames (Figures 9 and 10) chosen by the artist were discarded.



Figure 9: *Faith* in original frame from Brenda L Croft *In my Father's House*, 1998, three Ilfachrome colour photographs, three frosted mirrors, three prayer stools. Each photograph 49.0 x 74.0 cm sheet; each frame 66.0 x 93.0 cm. Gift of the artist 2007; Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales. ©Brenda L Croft. Licensed by Viscopy, Australia. Photographed by Diana Panuccio, AGNSW

The original intention of the artist, Brenda Croft, who is also Senior Curator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the NGA, was to frame this series of photographs to achieve an ecclesiastical appearance.



Figure 10: Detail of original frame for *Faith* from Brenda L Croft *In my Father's House*. ©Brenda L Croft. Licensed by Viscopy, Australia. Photographed by Carolyn Murphy, AGNSW.

A number of factors contributed to the AGNSW's curatorial decision, which was agreed to by the artist, to change the framing of these works to a more standard 'museum' style. These factors were largely practical ones related to the expected use of the works at AGNSW. It was expected, for example, that a selection of works from this series would sometimes be hung with other works from AGNSW's collection, including other works by Croft, and it was felt that plainer frames would help to integrate the different works. The Yiribana space where Aboriginal works are usually hung at AGNSW is a visually imposing space with comparatively low ceilings and columns at regular intervals that break up the space. It was felt that the more ornate frames would not look right in this imposing and busy space. Some of the works in the series were acquired unframed and it was perceived that it would be difficult to match the frames and mount colours. Croft said that although she had specifically chosen the framing when the work was first conceived she accepted that 'tastes change', and that museums need to consider other issues, such as those listed previously, in managing their collections.

Changing the framing of this large group of photographs was a costly exercise and the decision to proceed was not taken lightly. Hetti Perkins, Curator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at AGNSW said that she had some misgivings about removing the original frames since they had been specifically chosen by the artist but felt that there were enough arguments counterbalancing this for her to decide to reframe the works. Perkins said that if Croft had not been willing to proceed then AGNSW would have left the works in their original frames.

One problem with the new framing became evident when the works were recently displayed at AGNSW. Three of the photographs, *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity*, form part of an installation, each displayed with an ornately framed mirror and a prie-dieu, or prayer desk (Figure 11). Perkins and Croft both agreed that the white frames looked wrong against the dark brown painted wall with the ornate mirrors and prayer desks but still felt that the overall rationale for reframing was valid and the right decision. Perkins said that she planned to have the dark brown wall repainted white which would cause the mounts and frames to recede visually refocusing the viewers' attention on the photographs. In removing, and disposing of, the original frames the Conservation Department was acting according to curatorial instructions but equally it was with some misgivings that we proceeded with the reframing project.



Figure 11: Showing reproduction frames 2008, Brenda L Croft *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity* ©Brenda L Croft. Licensed by Viscopy, Australia. Photographed by Jenni Carter, AGNSW.

As already discussed, campaigns of reframing to meet the aesthetic and practical needs of a museum or gallery are not a new phenomenon. Greenberg (1986) sees reframing as an act of possession, laying claim to the object, and marking it in a way that makes it recognisable as the property of the owner or custodian. The 'neutrality' of any system of framing is identified by a number of authors (Philips 1997; Ward 1991) as anything but neutral. In her study of Impressionist installation and exhibition practices, Ward reminds us that the standard framing and installation practices of

today are no less imposing than the red walls and gilt frames of the late 19th century Salons that the Impressionists rejected in devising their own approaches to framing and installation (Ward 1991).

For some curators the historical specificity of an original or reproduction frame is seen, at least in certain circumstances, as problematic. In the early 1990s writer and critic, Dave Hickey, was asked by a representative from the Dallas Museum of Art to select and mount an exhibition from its permanent collection. Hickey put together

... an historical salon show comprising 60 paintings ranging from Paolini's 'Bacchic Concert' (1625-1630) to a Julian Schnabel collage from the late 1980s. ...[His] idea was to divide this selection into traditional subject categories (landscape, still life, portraiture, genre and history paintings) and hang the more complex and abstract works with paintings whose formats they most closely appropriated. (Hickey 2000: 40)

Hickey found that the disparate group of works did not work together as an exhibition until he came up with the solution of removing all the picture frames each of which "spoke of a specific historical provenance" and also by repainting the 'white cube' gallery spaces to a warm dark taupe. Having done this Hickey found that "All of the works seemed more alive, better organised and less familiar than they had before. They also spoke articulately to one another across the centuries...". Hickey "came away with a profound sense of how quickly the conventions of installation date themselves and, in doing so, become ideologically reactionary, dragging works of art with them into the remoteness of the past" (Hickey 2000: 40).

Similarly, in an exhibition of works by JMW Turner, *The Sun is God* at Tate Liverpool in 2000, all the works were displayed unframed and in natural light. The exhibition was billed as "an experiment in seeing Turner's work 'as new'" as they might have looked in the artist's studio. The role of the curator/museum in the design and installation of an exhibition is highlighted in these two examples. But for any exhibition the lighting, the wall colours, the arrangement of the space, the ordering and arrangement of the artworks and their presentation through framing or other methods are all elements managed by the curator in consultation with other staff. The impact of all these elements on how the works are perceived can be significant. James Hamilton, in reviewing *The Sun is God*, felt that without their frames the works lost "their three-dimensionality, their incursion

into the room, their ‘thinginess’... [In] the gloom of the top floor warehouse galleries in Liverpool we see the Turners not so much as confident public statements but as private whispers, hesitant, even uncertain” (Hamilton 2000: 34).

Documentation

In the past at AGNSW many frames have been removed from works at the time of acquisition, or subsequently, and very little if any documentation of these changes has been kept. In many cases there is no record at all of whether a work ever had a frame, let alone evidence of the nature of the frame. Equally, the origin of existing frames is often unclear. Acquisition records sometimes mention that a work was framed at the time of acquisition, but frequently they do not. Even when a frame is mentioned there is often very little detail, which makes it hard to confirm whether the existing frame is the acquisition frame or one added later by AGNSW. Old mount corners have sometimes been retained on the Conservation file for a work but are not usually annotated to confirm if the mount is the acquisition mount or again one added by AGNSW. This paucity of documentation means that mounts and frames are assessed by their appearance, apparent age, by the nature of the fixing devices on the back of the frames and by any evidence of reframing (more than one set of nail or point holes, new backing boards etc.).

Recently, AGNSW has begun to more fully document the framing of new acquisitions and all changes made to the mounting and framing of works on paper. Documentation includes a report detailing the nature and dimensions of the mount and frame with a scale diagram of the frame profile, a list of inscriptions and labels, a photographic record of the mount and frame and detail images of the frame, a sample of the mount and any labels that have been removed and where required a statement from the relevant curator indicating their reasons for removing the mount and frame. Similar documentation is created for new/reproduction frames which, of course, includes the details of the frame maker.

The intention is that this documentation will not only provide a better and more accurate history of mounting and framing but will also serve as a record that can inform future decisions about the framing of AGNSW’s collection. Documentation also creates its own imperative, making conservation and curatorial staff more conscious of, and more conscientious about, the reasons for

their decisions, simply because they have to write them down.

Conclusion

Any approach to framing comes loaded with its own subjectivities and compromises. By using the original frame for the Proctor we have had to fold the artwork, a practice we would not normally recommend. In creating a reproduction frame for the Turner we have removed another frame that was probably also made specifically for the work, is a document of the framing practices of a certain era and was providing the work adequate protection. In reframing the Croft photographs, we have removed original frames in order to integrate the works with other parts of the collection. And for all of these works, including the Ostoja-Kotkowski, we have inevitably applied our own aesthetic judgement to achieve a mode of presentation that we think is acceptable. Such conflicts may be unavoidable. We do, after all, need to display the works somehow. Any choice we make based on one set of priorities can be seen as compromising another set of priorities, and any or all of our choices might be reconsidered by a future generation of custodians.

The purpose in documenting these changes to the mounting and framing of a work is not to provide any sort of value judgement of the choices that have been made in the past, or that will be made in the future, but simply to document those choices. This provides a record that can inform future decisions and will make it possible to more accurately reproduce frames if the need to do so ever arises. In the long run this documentation will create its own history of the mounting and framing decisions we make – our choices, and the reasons for these choices, inevitably becoming a part of the history of the collection and its display.

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