

## Conservation Mountboards

As new products and techniques continue to emerge, and consumers demand increasingly higher standards of workmanship, choosing the correct tools for the job has never been more important.

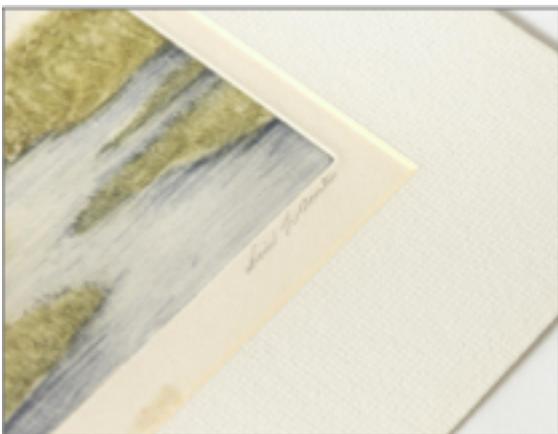
Poor quality mounts and backing boards can cause irreversible damage to artwork. This is a worrying problem in itself, but becomes an even greater issue, when such materials are applied to sentimentally important or financially valuable pieces. In an attempt to combat this problem, The Fine Art Trade Guild, with the help of mountboard manufacturers, has introduced industry standards to aid framers and consumers in the correct choices of materials for different types of work.

Here, we explore the benefits of using conservation quality mountboard and the inherent dangers of using poorer quality alternatives.

Lignin, otherwise known as groundwood acid, is the substance which binds cellulose fibres in wood and paper. It is chemically unstable, sensitive to light and heat and when it breaks down, it becomes acidic and attacks the surrounding cellulose. Because a mountboard is manufactured from fibres containing lignin, it is only after cutting through the fibres that the discoloration begins.

In standard board, the only protection against acid migration is the protective paper on the back of the board which has been buffered with calcium carbonate. However, in time, this guard is exhausted and eventually ceases to offer any protection to the artwork.

**Picture 1**



Picture 1 shows a limited edition print mounted with standard mountboard. This print was mounted approximately 15 years ago, and after just seven

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years, the damage became apparent. As you can see in the picture, the bevel has become discoloured as a result of the lignin content of the board. It's not just the mountboard that can cause this sort of discolouration. You can also see the damage caused to artwork as a result of acid migration from the bevel of the mountboard and the hardboard to which the artwork was directly attached. The white band around the edge indicates that the buffered backing paper of the standard mountboard has protected the print to some degree but irretrievable damage has occurred to the rest of the print, rendering it worthless.

Hardboard is extremely acidic and should never be placed directly behind sentimentally or financially valuable artwork. A conservation quality undermount/barrier should always be used to protect the item.

Choosing the correct materials for a job is vitally important. The Fine Art Trade Guild introduced the 'Five Levels of Framing', which succinctly identifies the materials to be used at various levels. These include minimum, budget, commended, conservation and museum. Obviously to avoid damage to valuable items, conservation materials and techniques should always be used.

There are two categories of conservation quality boards: museum quality and conservation quality. Museum board is manufactured from 100% cotton fibre which is naturally lignin free. As such, it is recommended by the FATG as the highest quality mountboard suitable for items requiring the greatest level of protection.

Conservation mountboard is manufactured from high quality alpha cellulose and is essentially lignin free. For a combination of colour, texture and a high degree of protection, it is the perfect choice for valuable items which require long-term protection.

By using conservation materials, you are raising the quality of framing within the industry. Most consumers are totally unaware of the types of mountboards available and it is therefore the responsibility of the framer to provide advice on the options open to them. Examples of damaged artwork as a result of incorrect materials will usually encourage a customer to choose the 'conservation route'.

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The cost of mounting a picture is a fraction of the whole framing price and whilst the cost of using conservation board is marginally greater, the true value is in the protection of the artwork.

Having examined the damage poorer quality materials can cause, let's look at the best way to frame artwork to conservation standards.

**Step 1-** When mounting a picture, the mount should be cleanly cut without over/undercuts. A small allowance should be made to cover the edge of the artwork, ensuring that it is held firmly in place.

**Step 2 -** A conservation quality undermount/barrier should be placed between the back of the artwork and the backing board to offer greater protection. It is also important that the artwork is attached to the undermount to offer it greater support. Artwork should never be attached to the back of the mount when framing at commended level and above.

**Picture 2**

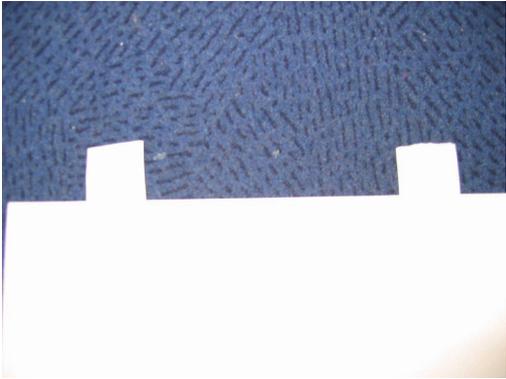


**Step 3 -** Picture 2 illustrates the hinges that attach the artwork to the undermount. At commended level and above, hinges should always be made from archival gummed paper tape which is fully reversible. Hinges attached to the back of the artwork should be torn and not cut, as shown in picture 3, since the feathered edge of the tape is far less likely to show through light weight papers. It is also important that hinges should be made from

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paper which is either the same weight as the artwork or weaker. If a picture is dropped, the hinge should fail thus avoiding tearing of the artwork.

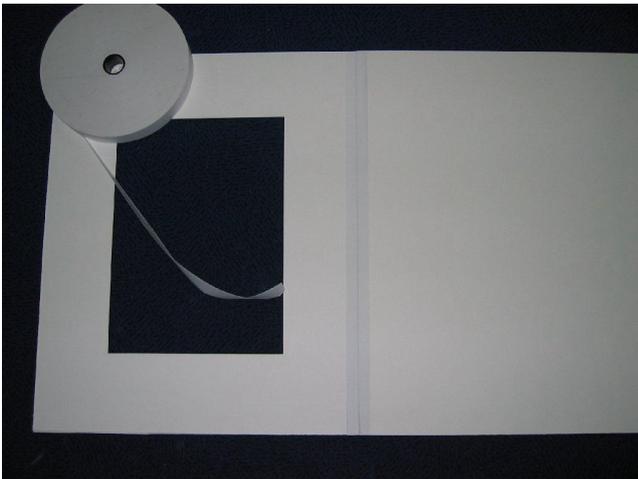
**Picture 3**



Conservation quality T Hinges are always recommended since they cause the least damage to artwork when removed. Some framers use a continuous hinge across the top of the artwork. However, these types of hinges tend to stretch when applied, and shrink as they dry because of the different shrinkage rates of art paper and tape. This in turn can cause severe cockling.

· **Step 4** - Picture 5 shows the joining of the windowmount to the undermount. These should always be the same size and hinged along the longer side using a gummed conservation tape with a water-soluble adhesive. Once joined, the artwork can then be positioned on the undermount.

**Picture 4**



**Picture 5**



By placing a paper-weight on the middle, it prevents the artwork moving and the “T bars” can then be stuck over the hinges on the top edge of the artwork about 1mm from the edge of the paper. Picture 5 shows close up of the T bar along the edge of the artwork.

The mounted artwork is now complete and ready to be glazed and framed.

**Step 5** - Glass with high UV protection is recommended for all valuable items, as this will help to prevent damage caused by UV rays. The frame must give sufficient clearance inside the rebate to allow for expansion and contraction - the glazing should not touch the artwork. A strong backing board should be used to protect the artwork from damage and again must be cut to allow sufficient clearance inside the rebate.

The frame, once secured with framers points, tacks or similar, should be sealed with gummed paper tape. Self-adhesive tapes do not offer the same protection since they do not offer a long term guarantee.

Do not seal the back with self-adhesive tape, instead, carefully apply gummed paper tape, as shown in Picture 6.

**Picture 6**



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**Step 6** - The finished product! Dust and Dirt should be removed and the glass cleaned and polished without smears. Picture 7 shows the finished artwork which has been carefully mounted and framed to conservation standards.

**Picture 7**



In today's economic climate, as in all industries, it is vital that we stay abreast of changes taking place within the framing world, both with materials and techniques, to ensure that we are constantly delivering the highest quality workmanship possible. Following the guidelines and techniques outlined by the Fine Art Trade Guild under the Commended Framers scheme, will not only raise industry standards and create higher quality products, but; most importantly of all – ensure a happy customer.

**\*The artwork is by Jon O'Brien, a creative photographer based in Yateley, Hampshire. Lynn Hall, an Advanced Guild Commended Framers and Chairman of the Framers committee kindly donated images and contributed to the writing of this article.**