

# The Care and Framing of Your Watercolor Art



When working with watercolor paintings, maintaining the quality and longevity of the artwork goes beyond the painting process itself. From selecting the right materials like heavy paper and archival adhesives to mastering the techniques of stretching and framing, each step plays a crucial role in preserving the beauty of the piece. Proper storage and handling, using acid-free matboards, and avoiding common issues like warping are essential to ensure your artwork remains vibrant and intact over time. This guide will explore the best practices for mounting, framing, and caring for watercolor art, helping you protect your creations for years to come.

# Framing Your Art

Create a solid foundation for protecting and showcasing your watercolor art.

## 1. Mounting Watercolor Art

- **Why Mounting is Important:** Watercolor paper can wrinkle due to the moisture used in the painting process. Mounting the painting on a sturdy backing ensures the paper stays flat and preserves the artwork.
- **Types of Mounting:**
  - **Mounting Strips:** The most archival method of mounting uses mounting strips to attach the art to the backer foam core. No adhesive touches the art. You can also use archival photo corners.
  - **Dry Mounting:** Involves using a heat-activated adhesive sheet to attach the artwork to a mounting board. While effective, it is permanent, so it's important for the artist to be sure before using this method. A newer method of dry mounting, called Cooltack, can be reversible.
  - **Hinging:** A non-permanent method that uses acid-free tape or paper hinges to attach the watercolor painting to a mat board. This allows the artwork to be removed or replaced later.
  - **Materials to Use:** Always choose acid-free or archival materials (like tape, mat boards, and backing) to protect the artwork from yellowing over time.

## 2. Matting

- **Purpose:** Mats not only provide an aesthetic border around the artwork but also prevent the painting from touching the glass, which can cause damage over time.
- **Choosing the Right Mat:**
  - **Mat Color:**
    - The colors in the mats and frame will enhance colors in the art. Choosing colors that enhance the foreground and background can make the image appear more three-dimensional.
    - Neutral colors like white, off-white, or light gray are often used to highlight the colors in the artwork.
    - You can also choose a mat that complements the dominant colors in the painting.
  - **Double Mats:** Sometimes, a second, thinner mat in a contrasting color is added underneath the main mat to create a layered effect.
  - **Mat Size:** The mat should be proportional to the artwork. Typically, a wider mat gives a more polished and professional look, allowing the painting to stand out.

## 3. Framing

- **Frame Selection:** The frame should complement the artwork without overpowering it. Here are a few tips:
  - **Style:** A simple, sleek frame often works best with watercolor paintings, as it allows the delicate nature of the medium to shine.
  - **Material:** Wood and metal are common options, with wood frames offering a classic look and metal frames adding a modern touch.

- **Color:** Neutral tones like black, white, or natural wood are versatile choices, though you can choose a color that enhances the painting's palette.
- **Glass and Acrylic Glazing Options:**
  - **Regular Glass:** Affordable, but it can cause glare.
  - **Non-Glare Glass:** Reduces reflections, but might slightly dull the colors of the painting.
  - **UV-Protective Glass:** Prevents fading and discoloration from sunlight exposure, making it ideal for protecting watercolor paintings.
  - **Acrylic Glazing:** Acrylic is a form of plexiglass used for framing. It comes in regular, non-glare, and UV-protective forms. Acrylic is shatterproof, lighter than glass, and can be scratch-resistant and static-free (great for pastels!)
  - **Alabama Art Supply recommends** and uses Tru Vue® Museum and Conservation Clear Glass, and Optium Museum Acrylic.

#### 4. Spacing and Layout Tips

- When matting and framing, ensure there is adequate space between the painting and the frame, as crowding the artwork can detract from its appearance.
- Optional: Leave a slightly larger border at the bottom of the mat for a more balanced visual effect.

#### 5. Handling and Care

- Always wear gloves when handling watercolor paintings to avoid transferring oils from your fingers onto the paper.
- Make sure the artwork is completely dry before framing it to avoid mold or damage from trapped moisture.
- **Bonus Tips:**
  - **Floating Mounting:** This method displays the artwork without a mat, giving it a modern, minimalist look. The painting is attached to the backing with small tabs and “floats” inside the frame.
  - When art is floated above the move
  - **Shadow Box Frames:** These provide depth and can be used for watercolor works with unique textures or dimensional elements.

## Matboard

When selecting matboard for watercolor artwork, the materials and quality ratings are essential for preserving the painting.

#### 1. Matboard Materials

- **Paper Matboard** (Regular/Decorative Matboard):
  - **Material:** Made from wood pulp, which can be acidic unless treated.
  - **Use:** Ideal for temporary framing or inexpensive artwork, but not recommended for long-term storage due to the risk of acid damage (yellowing and deterioration).

- **Recommendation:** If using paper matboard, ensure it's at least buffered or treated to reduce acidity. It's best for pieces that won't be displayed permanently.
- **Conservation Matboard (Archival or Acid-Free Matboard):**
  - **Material:** Made from purified wood pulp or cotton fibers, and treated to remove acids.
  - **Use:** Suitable for long-term storage of artwork. It's designed to protect the watercolor painting from yellowing and acid damage.
  - **Features:** Lignin (a compound found in wood that can cause degradation) is removed, and the mat is buffered with calcium carbonate to neutralize environmental acids.
  - **Recommendation:** Conservation matboard is a great balance of quality and cost for artists who want to protect their work for the long term.
- **Museum-Grade Rag Matboard:**
  - **Material:** 100% cotton fiber (rag) matboard is the highest quality and completely free of wood pulp and acids.
  - **Use:** Preferred for valuable, original artwork, limited editions, and archival purposes. It offers the best protection, as it will not degrade over time.
  - **Features:** This matboard is naturally acid-free, lignin-free, and resistant to environmental pollutants, making it the top choice for museum-level conservation.
  - **Recommendation:** While it is more expensive, it is the best option for fine art collectors or artists creating valuable pieces meant to last for generations.

## 2. Matboard Ratings

- **Decorative Grade:** Also called "standard" or "regular" matboard, this is the lowest quality option, made from paper pulp. It's typically used for temporary displays or decorative purposes and is not acid-free. The artwork may degrade over time if stored in this type of matboard.
- **Conservation Grade:** This matboard meets archival standards and is acid-free and lignin-free, making it suitable for long-term artwork display and storage. It's a more affordable option than museum-grade matboard while still offering good protection for watercolors.
- **Museum Grade:** The highest standard of matboard, made from 100% cotton fibers. It is naturally acid-free, pH-neutral, and designed to last for centuries without damaging the artwork. It is ideal for valuable watercolors, heirlooms, and archival storage.

## 3. Core Color Considerations

- **White Core:** The most common and affordable option, white core matboard remains bright and doesn't yellow over time, unlike cheap paper-based boards.
- **Black Core:** Offers a stylish, dramatic look for modern pieces. It is also archival but tends to cost a little more.
- **Solid Core:** This type of matboard is consistent in color all the way through and gives a professional, clean look, especially when cut into windows or borders.

#### 4. Thickness (Ply)

- Matboard comes in various thicknesses, typically measured in "ply" (4-ply, 6-ply, etc.):
  - **4-Ply:** Standard thickness used in most framing.
  - **6-Ply and Above:** Thicker matboard provides a deeper, more dramatic bevel around the artwork. It's often used for high-end or professional framing.

**Conclusion:** For students and artists, **conservation-grade matboard** is a reliable and budget-friendly option, offering solid protection. For valuable watercolor pieces intended for sale or exhibition, **museum-grade rag matboard** is the best choice, ensuring the artwork remains in pristine condition over time. These considerations help ensure that watercolor paintings are not only beautifully displayed but also preserved for the future.

## Adhesives

When it comes to archival adhesives, using the right materials is crucial to protect watercolor artwork from damage like yellowing, deterioration, or acid exposure. Here's a guide to some of the best archival adhesives for mounting and framing watercolor art:

### 1. Archival Hinging Tape

- **Best Use:** Attaching artwork to matboards or backing boards without directly adhering the art to the board.
- **Characteristics:**
  - Made from acid-free, pH-neutral materials.
  - Often made from Japanese rice paper or other lightweight, strong materials.
  - Removable, so it allows for non-permanent mounting and easy removal if needed.
- **Top Brands:**
  - **Lineco Archival Self-Adhesive Hinging Tape:** This tape is pH-neutral and pressure-sensitive, making it ideal for lightweight watercolor papers.
  - **3M Scotch Artist Tape for Canvas:** Acid-free and ideal for temporarily mounting art, it's easily removable without leaving residue.

### 2. Archival Wheat Starch Paste

- **Best Use:** Mounting or repairing delicate paper-based artwork, especially when working with fragile or antique watercolor pieces.
- **Characteristics:**
  - Completely acid-free, made from natural wheat starch.
  - A favorite among professional conservators due to its reversible properties (it can be removed with water if necessary).
  - Dries clear and doesn't leave any residue.
- **Top Brand:**
  - **Lineco Neutral pH Adhesive:** Often mixed and used by conservators for archival purposes.

### 3. Archival PVA Glue (Polyvinyl Acetate)

- **Best Use:** Mounting watercolors to backing boards or repairing paper surfaces. Suitable for heavier pieces where a stronger bond is needed.
- **Characteristics:**
  - Acid-free and pH-neutral, PVA glues dry flexible and clear.
  - PVA glue is permanent, so it's not reversible like starch paste, but it won't yellow over time.
- **Top Brand:**
  - **Lineco Neutral pH Adhesive:** This archival-quality PVA glue is widely used for bookbinding, mounting, and paper conservation.

### 4. Japanese Paper Hinges with Archival Paste

- **Best Use:** Non-invasive, removable method for mounting watercolors to matboards or backing boards.
- **Characteristics:**
  - Japanese paper (like Kozo or Mulberry paper) is incredibly thin, yet strong, making it ideal for delicate mounting without damaging the artwork.
  - Paired with archival paste (like wheat starch paste), these hinges are acid-free and easily reversible.
- **Top Brand:**
  - **Yamato Rice Paper Adhesive:** This adhesive, paired with Japanese rice paper, works great for archival applications and is often used by museum conservators.

### 5. Acid-Free Double-Sided Mounting Tape

- **Best Use:** Quick, permanent mounting of watercolor art to backing boards or within frames.
- **Characteristics:**
  - Easy to use and provides a strong bond.
  - Ensure that the double-sided tape is archival and acid-free, as some tapes can degrade and yellow over time.
- **Top Brand:**
  - **3M Acid-Free Double-Sided Tape:** Provides a long-lasting bond for matting and framing, without risking the artwork's longevity.

### 6. Corner Mounts (Archival Photo Corners)

- **Best Use:** Holding the artwork in place inside a mat without the use of adhesive directly on the artwork.
- **Characteristics:**
  - Non-invasive and completely removable, so they allow the artwork to "float" within the frame without damage.
  - Made from acid-free materials, they come in clear or paper versions and are typically used for small to medium-sized works.
- **Top Brand:**
  - **Lineco Acid-Free Polypropylene Photo Corners:** These clear corners are durable, easy to use, and protect the artwork from direct adhesive contact.

## 7. Archival Mounting Strips

- **Best Use:** Mounting without adhesives touching the art. The artwork slides into the strip, which is attached to the mat or backing board.
- **Characteristics:**
  - Completely archival and acid-free.
  - Ideal for safely securing valuable watercolor pieces without adhesives touching the artwork.
- **Top Brand:**
  - **Lineco Archival Mounting Strips:** Made from acid-free polyester, these strips offer a secure hold while leaving the art untouched by adhesive.

### General Tips for Using Archival Adhesives:

- **Choose Reversible Adhesives:** For valuable or delicate watercolor art, use reversible adhesives like wheat starch paste or archival hinging tape to ensure the artwork can be removed or restored later without damage.
- **Use Acid-Free and pH-Neutral Products:** Always select adhesives labeled as acid-free and archival to prevent damage to your artwork over time.
- **Test Before Applying:** If you're uncertain, test a small amount of adhesive on a scrap piece of paper before using it on the final artwork to ensure it won't damage or discolor the paper.

By using the right archival adhesives, you can protect your watercolor paintings and ensure they last for many years to come!

## Signing Your Watercolor Art

Signing your art presents your work professionally while maintaining a balance between personal expression and practicality.

### 1. Why Signatures Matter

- A signature is a mark of authenticity and ownership. It adds value to the artwork, both for collectors and the artist themselves.
- It's also a way for the artist to assert their identity and brand, making it easier to track their body of work.

### 2. Where to Place the Signature

- **Traditional Placement:** The bottom right corner is the most common location for a signature. It balances the composition and keeps the signature subtle. Sign near your art. Do not sign along the edge of the paper, it may be covered up by the mats or frame.
- **Alternative Placements:** Depending on the composition, some artists choose the bottom left corner or even the back of the artwork if they want to keep the front visually clean.
- **Consistency:** Be consistent in your signature placement. This helps with building recognition and creates a unified body of work.
- **Recommendation:** Do not sign the matboard. Future owners of your art may want to change the matboard to match a new frame design, which could result in the separation of your signature from your art.

### 3. How to Sign

- **Subtlety:** The signature should complement the artwork without distracting from it. Typically, it is small but legible, using a color that blends well with the palette of the painting.
- **Medium:** Signatures in watercolor art are usually done with:
  - **Pencil:** Light and erasable, making it a good option for testing placement before finalizing.
  - **Ink:** Archival ink pens are often used for a more permanent signature.
  - **Watercolor:** Some artists prefer to use their paint to sign, maintaining the same medium as the artwork itself.

### 4. Including the Date

- Some artists choose to include the year or even the full date along with their signature, particularly on the back of the artwork. This helps document the creation time and can be important for collectors.

### 5. Signing Your Art: Initials or Full Name

- **Initials:** Some artists use just their initials for a more minimalist signature.
- **Full Name:** Others use their full name or a stylized version of it. This is common when the artist wants to make the signature more prominent or identifiable.

### 6. When to Sign

- The signature should be added after the painting is completely dry and before it is mounted or framed. This ensures no smudging or damage occurs.

## How to Avoid Paper Warping

Warping is a common issue with watercolor paintings because the paper absorbs water during the painting process, causing it to buckle or curl. Here are several effective methods to help avoid warping:

### 1. Use Heavyweight Watercolor Paper

- **Why:** Thicker paper handles water better and is less likely to warp.
- **Recommendation:** Use paper that is at least **300 gsm (140 lb)** or heavier. Heavier paper (like 400 lb) is even less likely to warp, but it may be more expensive and difficult to find.

### 2. Stretch the Watercolor Paper Before Painting

- **Why:** Pre-stretching the paper allows it to dry flat after absorbing water, preventing warping.
- **How:**
  1. **Soak the Paper:** Immerse the watercolor paper in water for about 5 to 10 minutes, depending on its thickness.
  2. **Tape or Staple the Paper to a Board:** After soaking, tape the wet paper onto a sturdy board using **gummed tape** (water-activated) or staple it at the edges. The tape will hold the paper as it dries and shrinks, keeping it taut.
  3. **Let It Dry Completely:** Allow the paper to dry fully before starting your painting. The paper should remain flat during and after painting.



### 3. Use Watercolor Blocks

- **Why:** Watercolor blocks are pre-stretched sheets of paper that are glued together on all four sides. The block holds the paper flat while you paint, preventing warping.
- **How:** Simply paint directly on the block. Once the painting is complete and dry, you can remove the sheet with a palette knife by slicing around the edges.

### 4. Control the Amount of Water Used

- **Why:** Excessive water can cause more warping, especially on lighter paper.
- **How:**
  - Use a controlled amount of water on your brush.
  - Avoid over-saturating the paper unless necessary for specific techniques.
  - Use a spray bottle for misting light amounts of water when needed, instead of soaking large areas.

### 5. Work on a Flat, Sturdy Surface

- **Why:** Painting on a flat, firm surface can prevent uneven water absorption and help the paper dry evenly.
- **How:** Tape your watercolor paper securely to a board or table with masking tape or gummed tape to prevent movement and warping during painting.

### 6. Dry the Painting Evenly

- **Why:** Uneven drying can cause certain areas to warp more than others.
- **How:**
  - Let the painting dry naturally in a well-ventilated, flat area.
  - If you want to speed up the drying process, use a hairdryer on the **cool or warm setting**, moving it evenly over the surface.
  - Don't dry one spot too much at once, as this can create uneven drying and more warping.

### 7. Flatten the Painting After It's Dry

- **Why:** If your painting warps despite precautions, you can flatten it afterward.
- **How:**
  - **Place the Painting Face-Down on a Clean Surface:** Ensure the surface is clean and free of any debris that could damage the artwork.
  - **Dampen the Back of the Paper:** Use a damp (not wet) sponge or cloth to lightly moisten the back of the paper. Do not get it too wet; just enough moisture to make it flexible.
  - **Press the Paper:** Place a clean towel or sheet of acid-free paper over the dampened paper, then place heavy books or weights on top. Leave it overnight or for several hours until the paper is dry and flat.

### 8. Use Gummed or Masking Tape on the Edges

- **Why:** Taping the edges keeps the paper taut while you paint, reducing the risk of warping as the paper dries.

- **How:**
  - Use **gummed tape** (water-activated) for more secure adhesion.
    - Alternatively, **masking tape** can be used, but it may not hold as tightly.
    - Remove the tape carefully after the painting has dried to avoid tearing the paper.

## 9. Use a Hard Press or Hot Press Watercolor Paper

- **Why:** These types of watercolor papers have smoother surfaces and are more resistant to warping because they absorb water differently than cold press paper.
- **Recommendation:** If your work doesn't require heavy texture, consider switching to hot press paper, which may warp less than the more textured cold press paper.

## 10. Avoid Excessive Reworking of Wet Areas

- **Why:** Constantly going back over wet areas can over-saturate the paper, leading to buckling.
- **How:** Allow areas of the painting to dry before adding more water or pigment. Patience between layers helps prevent warping.

By following these techniques, you can avoid or minimize warping in your watercolor artwork, ensuring your art pieces remain smooth and professional-looking throughout the painting process and beyond!

# Storing Your Watercolor Art

Storing watercolor art properly is crucial to preserving its quality over time. Following these storage guidelines can help maintain the vibrancy and longevity of your watercolor artwork. Here are some best practices for your art:

## 1. Avoid Direct Sunlight

- **Why:** Watercolors are especially sensitive to light, and prolonged exposure to sunlight can cause fading and discoloration.
- **Solution:** Store art in a cool, dark place, or use UV-protective glass if the artwork is framed and displayed.

## 2. Use Acid-Free Materials

- **Why:** Acidic materials can yellow and degrade watercolor paper over time.
- **Solution:** Always store watercolors in acid-free folders, envelopes, or boxes. Archival-quality papers, tissues, and mats are ideal for protecting the artwork.

## 3. Keep Art Flat

- **Why:** Rolling or bending watercolor art can cause creases or cracks in the paper and paint.
- **Solution:** Store the artwork flat in a drawer or portfolio, with protective sheets of acid-free tissue paper or glassine between each piece to prevent smudging and sticking.

#### 4. Avoid Humidity

- **Why:** Watercolor paintings can be particularly vulnerable to moisture, which can cause mold, mildew, or warping of the paper.
- **Solution:** Store your watercolor paintings in a dry environment with stable humidity levels. Avoid basements or areas with high moisture content. Use silica gel packets in storage containers to help control moisture.

#### 5. Framing with Archival Materials

- If the artwork is framed, ensure that all materials, including the mat board, backing, and adhesive, are archival and acid-free to prevent degradation over time. Consider using UV-protective glass for extra protection.

#### 6. Avoid Excessive Heat

- **Why:** Heat can cause watercolor pigments to become unstable and paper to warp.
- **Solution:** Store artwork in a room with a consistent, moderate temperature. Avoid attics or places where temperature fluctuates greatly.

#### 7. Use Protective Sleeves or Portfolios

- **Why:** Watercolor paintings are delicate, and even the oils from your hands can damage the paper or paint.
- **Solution:** Use clear, archival-quality plastic sleeves or portfolios to protect individual paintings. These can also prevent smudging or damage from contact with other surfaces.

#### 8. Handle with Care

- Always wash your hands or wear cotton gloves when handling watercolor paintings to prevent oils, dirt, or moisture from transferring onto the paper.

#### 9. Long-Term Storage Solutions

- **Flat Files:** Ideal for long-term storage, flat files keep artwork safe and flat in a dry, protected environment.
- **Archival Boxes:** Acid-free boxes can also be a good option for storing multiple pieces. Use interleaving sheets of tissue paper to separate each piece.

#### Bonus Tip:

- If you need to transport watercolor paintings, be sure to use sturdy, rigid portfolios or containers to prevent bending or damage during transit.



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