

Aesthetic vs. Ethics: Approaches to Remounting Asian Scroll and Screen Paintings

ABSTRACT

Japanese, Korean, and Chinese paintings always are mounted in a particular format—for example, hanging scrolls, hand scrolls, screen and album leaves—using silk brocade borders and layers of backing paper. It is standard and accepted practice in Japanese scroll and screen conservation to remount such art works using all new border and backing materials. The goal is to both preserve the paintings and to present them in an aesthetically pleasing and historically “correct” manner. In Japanese, this practice is called *hyogu* (the word *hyogu* in Japanese means “to decorate the surface”). In the traditional Japanese view, this can be compared to changing one’s outfit.

Hyogu generally conflicts with the modern practice of trying to maintain all of the original elements of an art object. In Western conservation books present similar “problems.”

Japanese paintings require extensive structural work to replace materials that have deteriorated with age and frequent handling. As a result almost every Asian painting of any historical interest has been remounted at least once. In deciding how to treat such paintings the conservator must maintain a balance between traditional Japanese *hyogu* and modern practices of conservation. Museums must decide whether to reuse or replace remounting materials—and if the decision is to replace, how to do so carefully and appropriately.

Moreover, in the past certain American museums remounted scroll paintings onto flat panels to reduce the wear and tear associated with rolling and unrolling. The museums must therefore decide whether to keep paintings in the same historically inappropriate format or have the remounted panels/scroll paintings remounted in the original scroll format. Similarly, some panel paintings have

been remounted in a scroll format, raising the question of whether they should be remounted in a panel format. (And hand scrolls have become hanging scrolls or folding screens, *fusuma* sliding panels have become folding screens.) In addressing all such issues it is important to understand the Japanese and Chinese scroll mounting practices and principles.

A modern approach combined with traditional practice has been adopted among certain conservators in Japan and is practiced by Asian art conservators in this country. This paper uses their practice as a guide in discussing decisions regarding the format of objects and the use/reuse of mounting materials.

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