

Guidelines for Handling East Asian Scrolls and Screens

Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery
Smithsonian Institution

Considerations

East Asian paintings are subject to two types of deterioration: 1) Physical damage from (improper) handling, vandalism or neglect and 2) Chemical degradation, which is dependent on the environment. Thoughtful handling, storage and display will minimize most physical damage. Maintaining a clean, pest-free and stable environment within a range of 50 – 60 % RH and 60 – 70 F will help retard chemical degradation. Since screens and scrolls are permanently damaged by over-exposure to light, a rotation cycle of six months on display at approximately five foot candles followed by five years in storage is maintained at the Freer/Sackler Galleries.

Before handling a piece of art, be aware of what you are doing.

- Move artwork only when necessary.
- Before beginning, think the procedure through to avoid problems and damage.
- When moving or handling an artwork, pay attention to what you are doing.
- Do not rush.
- Give as much attention to the 'object' as to the 'art'. They coexist.
- If a work of art appears to be unstable or damaged and may worsen from handling, do not handle it. Ask a conservator for advice or assistance.

When handling a piece of art, the following practical precautions should be taken.

- Wash your hands before and at intervals during art handling. Dirt, grime and perspiration can be transferred to the artwork causing permanent damage to paper, textiles, metal and lacquer.
- Remove jewelry, watches, keys and ID badges when handling art. Be careful of ties, reading glasses and belt buckles when bending over to look at art on a flat surface. Don't have anything in shirt pockets.
- Prepare a clean and clear area where you are going to move or place an object before you pick it up, hang it up or take it down. Have the necessary equipment (and people) ready before you need them.
- Never touch the surface of the artwork or place anything on it (other than a clean weight if necessary).
- Only wooden pencils should be used around works of art – never pens. The lead from a mechanical pencil can break off and mark the artwork.
- Handle only one object at a time, no matter how small. Always use both hands to move an object. Unless one person can easily manage an artwork, two or more people should handle it together.

Unrolling and Rolling Scrolls

- Handscrolls and hanging scrolls should be unrolled initially on a flat surface. If you are unfamiliar with the object, this is the safest way to check for instability (threadbare hanging cord, loose roller knobs) and damage (breaks or tears in the painting or mounting) before the object is displayed or hung.
- Weights should be placed at both ends of the table to keep the scroll from rolling off.
- The handscroll tying cord (and clasp) should be secured before the scroll cover is rolled up. Loosely knot or wrap the gathered cord in tissue near the right edge of the scroll cover. This will prevent the cord (and clasp) from falling out of the handscroll while rolling during handling. This is especially important if there is a heavy jade clasp. A roller support tube may also be used.
- Clean, small weights (covered with fabric or paper) should be used to keep the ends of the scroll from haphazardly moving during viewing. (If possible, hanging scrolls should be unrolled completely before viewing to diminish this problem.) Place weights over the upper and bottom edges of the mounting borders and/or at the ends of the scroll. Do not place weights on the painting itself if at all possible. (If necessary, unroll the scroll to an area where there is no image that could be abraded by the weights and only place them along the edges.) Do not carry the weights over the scroll but around it; a dropped weight can damage the scroll.
- Once the front/top of the scroll is secured with weights, unroll the desired length and secure the end/bottom before viewing. To unroll a large scroll, one person on either side of the scroll unrolling the end/bottom together will be necessary. Leave room on the table for taking notes to the side of the object. Do not take notes or carry pencil and pad over the object.
- To proceed to the next section of the scroll, remove the weights from the front/top of the scroll and roll toward the end/bottom. Stop and correct any telescoping of the scroll as needed. When the front/top is rolled almost to the end/bottom, remove the weights. Pick up both rolls of the scroll with both hands keeping your fingers under the scroll. Carry the scroll to the other end of the table keeping low to the table surface. Do not drag the scroll across the table. Repeat unrolling procedure as above.
- Re-rolling a handscroll can be done safely while seated in one place. Maintain slight tension at the end of the scroll and roll carefully, slowly and evenly toward the front. Once the two rolls are together, pick up both rolls of the scroll with both hands keeping your fingers under the scroll. Move the scroll to the left and place it on the table. Unroll the scroll to the right and continue re-rolling the end of the scroll to the right as above.
- Try to guide, not force, the scroll to roll up snugly and evenly. Stop to correct telescoping and looseness as it occurs but do not expect the edges to line up perfectly.

- Do not stand the scroll on end to correct any unevenness or to roll it up tighter.
- Do not tighten the scroll or tying cord excessively. A protective strip of paper may be rolled around the scroll under the tying cord.
- To re-roll a hanging scroll, apply slight tension at both ends of the bottom roller. Roll up the scroll evenly and slowly toward the top while moving along the scroll. Once you have reached the top of the scroll, refold the hanging strips (futai) back into place (if necessary). Turn the scroll sideways and retie the tying cord.
- Try to guide, not force, the scroll to roll up snugly and evenly. Stop to correct telescoping and looseness as it occurs but do not expect the edges to line up perfectly.
- Do not tighten the scroll or tying cord excessively. A protective strip of paper may be rolled around the scroll under the tying cord.

Hanging and Taking Down Hanging Scrolls

- Check the hanging cord, metal fittings and knobs for stability before hanging the scroll. If the scroll is unrolled flat, roll it up before hanging.
- For most Japanese scrolls, unroll the top section of the scroll on a flat surface and unfold the hanging strips (futai). Never unroll the scroll to the point where the painting is exposed before hanging.
- Cradle the rolled scroll in one hand and use a 'hanging stick' (yahazu) to pick up the hanging cord in the center. Proceed to the wall maintaining tension between the rolled scroll and hanging cord. Hang the cord on the wall hook and place the 'hanging stick' in a corner of the wall, against a piece of furniture or drop it to the ground. (A 'hanging stick' leaning against the wall may slip and hit the scroll.)
- Cradle the rolled scroll from beneath with both hands, each supporting an outer edge of the mounting and a roller knob. (The knobs are sometimes loose and can fall off while unrolling.)
- Slowly let the scroll unroll in your cupped hands while moving down until the scroll is completely unfurled. Steady the knobs gently before releasing the scroll.
- Straighten the scroll by adjusting the hanging cord or knobs if necessary.
- Large scrolls (three feet or wider) should be handled by two people. Using a stepping stool or movable staircase is usually safer and easier to manage than a 'hanging stick'. One person cradles the scroll from beneath with both hands. The other person mounts the stair/stool and then pulls up the scroll with the hanging cord. The hanging cord is looped into the hook on the wall. The first person unrolls the scroll as above.
- If the scroll has four eyelets along the top bar, the hanging cord should be looped over at least two hooks evenly spaced within the two pairs of eyelets. Three hooks evenly spaced between the four eyelets may also be used to lessen stress and planar distortion of a large hanging scroll.

- To re-roll a hanging scroll, apply light tension to the mounting at both ends of the bottom roller. Begin rolling the scroll from the bottom evenly and slowly. While rolling, hold the scroll with both hands at the outer edges of the mounting near the roller knobs. Stop to correct telescoping and looseness as necessary. Do not expect the scroll to line up perfectly along both sides. If the scroll does not roll up evenly, adjustments can be made safely if the scroll is unrolled and re-rolled on a flat surface.
- Roll the scroll until the painting is no longer visible (to avoid damage to the painting from mishap while removing the scroll from the wall).
- Use the 'hanging stick' to lift the hanging cord from the hook and maintain tension until the scroll is lowered on to a flat surface. Continue rolling up the scroll and refold the hanging strips (futai) if necessary. Completely roll up the scroll and tie the tying cord. A protective strip of paper may be rolled around the scroll under the tying cord.

Unfolding and Folding Screens

- Folding screens should always be moved completely closed and transported on a cart if being moved some distance or to another room.
- To lift a screen, crouch down, place each hand at the middle of either folded edge, grip firmly (as though pushing your palms together) and lift from the knees, not with the back. (Do not squeeze the panels of the screen together.)
- Place the screen in the middle of the space where it will be viewed. (A pair of screens should each be placed a quarter of the distance from the center of the space.) Do not let the screen stand alone when closed as it is likely to fall over. (Open the panels from the middle of the screen so that it is stable.)
- To open a screen, stand in front of its front folded edge. Open the back middle fold ninety degrees while rocking the screen very slightly backwards. (Hold the screen only along the top or outer edges of the frame. Do not handle the screen along the front folds as this will damage the painting.)
- Move to either side of the screen to unfold the next section, working from the inside out. Place one hand on the upper front corner of the frame to support the hinges of the screen. Place the other hand on the upper back edge of the screen holding the panels together. Rock the panels slightly forward and slowly swing the outer panels open to a ninety-degree angle. Repeat for the outer panel of the screen reversing the direction of the swing and supporting the back hinge. Move to the other side of the screen and repeat as above.
- To close a folding screen, reverse the above procedure.
- When handling a screen, never touch the front hinges in the area of the painting. Handle only the lacquer or wood frame, back hinges and, if necessary, the surrounding silk borders.

Opening and Closing Albums

- Place the album on a flat surface. Check the cover, title label, edges of the album and hinges for wear and breakage.
- Open the cover with one hand while supporting its hinge with the other, especially if the cover is large or heavy.
- Turn each page separately lifting the outer edge with one hand and supporting the hinge with the other. Large album leaves may be turned using both hands to support the outer edge, especially for flexible (Chinese style) leaves.
- If the album leaves have been separated, view each leaf individually and stack them in a separate pile.
- If the album is thick, a cushion or stack of matt boards should be placed under the front cover to support it before opening. As more of the album leaves are opened and transferred to the right, individual boards may be removed to lessen tension on the hinges.
- If there is interleaving between the pages of the album, each sheet should be removed by placing a finger on one corner and lifting away the sheet from the opposite corner without touching the surface of the art. Avoid sliding or pulling the interleaving across the surface of the artwork. The sheet should be placed on the facing side of the leaf before the page is turned.
- Never turn the pages of an album by sticking a finger inside the hinges and flipping the pages. This can break the hinges and damage any artwork on the underside of the album leaves.

- Close an album one page at a time, slowly reversing the procedure above. If the album is over half closed, the top stack of leaves may be held together and closed while supporting the hinge.
- Be especially careful handling albums with damaged hinges. Do not slide the facing halves of an album leaf together or straighten the edges of a closed album like a deck of cards.

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