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Temporary Facings on a Varnished Wall Map

WHEN A TEMPORARY FACING CAN BE ADVANTAGEOUS

Most varnished maps are backed with a cloth material. This can be a thin linen or cotton, but it is often quite deteriorated and no longer offering support. It can also be extremely dirty and frayed. Considering that these maps can be fragmented and brittle, removing the cloth so as to obtain access to the map itself can cause more damage (fig. 1).

To remove this backing, the map can benefit from being temporarily held together from the image side. Whether or not the cloth backing is removed, either dry or with moisture, these maps behave best when consolidated from the front. A temporary facing can help enormously, ensuring that pieces are not lost or shattered even further (fig. 2). The facing material needs to be lightweight and easily removed; we have found that a thin rayon paper, applied with a water-based adhesive, works best. We have applied temporary facings of rayon paper in the following manner.

First, dry surface cleaning is undertaken, if possible. Squares of thin rayon paper are cut to approximately 8 × 8 in. and applied in an overlapping pattern with a very thin “paste water.” The rayon square is placed onto the map, starting at one corner and pasted through very quickly—the adhesion only needs to be sufficient to hold the rayon lightly in place, and the adjacent square is quickly laid down with maybe a half-inch overlap. The whole process is best done quickly and executed by two people. The idea is to get the face of the map covered rapidly so that “tidemarks” do not appear from the application of a water-based adhesive (which is mostly water). Each square, once in place, forms a kind of quilted pattern (much like the facing technique used in fresco removal). Once in place, sheets of polyester webbing like Hollytex can be placed over the surface and wool felt or other heavyweight material laid over that while it dries. The degree of adhesion should be just enough to hold the fragmented map together but not enough to deposit much adhesive onto the image (fig. 3).

Proceedings from the AIC-sponsored event, “Varnished Wall Maps: A Collaborative Seminar to Investigate Treatment Methodology,” September 14–16, 2022.



Fig. 1. 1892 map of Marin County. Mounted to deteriorated cloth. 55¼" × 53¾".



Fig. 2. 1892 map of Marin County. Mounted to deteriorated cloth. 55¼" × 53¾". Raking light.



Fig. 3. 1892 map of Marin County. After application of rayon facing with a thin paste wash. Dried under Hollytex and felts.

Once dry, the map can be turned over onto a polyester support, like Melinex, and the cloth backing dry-cleaned as needed. If the deteriorated cloth is particularly weak, it can be removed mechanically by tearing it off in narrow strips or removed with moisture applied by spraying water on the material (fig. 4).

The map's verso is now exposed and can be dry-cleaned as needed before wet cleaning (fig. 5). A second support of Melinex is necessary for turning the map over and accessing the front.

We have, at times, also done the following. If it is determined that the existing varnish is soluble in alcohol, after application of the temporary facing and drying of the map



Fig. 4. 1892 map of Marin County. In progress: mechanical removal of cloth backing.



Fig. 5. 1892 map of Marin County. In progress: wet cleaning between two sheets of thin Hollytex by spraying with filtered water and blotting.

in its entirety, we have sprayed the back of the cloth with an 50:50 mixture of alcohol and water mixture and peeled it off that way. Then the front can also be sprayed with alcohol, and the temporary facing carefully lifted off, taking a good deal of the varnish layer with it. Any residual varnish can be reduced or removed with alcohol and cotton or blotters. In these cases, a thicker rayon material is helpful for absorbing



Fig. 6. 1892 map of Marin County. Completion: backed with one layer of medium-weight Sekishu and wheat starch paste. Stretch-dried and flattened under felts and weight. Once completely dry, residual varnish was reduced/removed with fine sandpaper. Losses were filled with toned paper and narrow strips of similar toned Japanese paper wrapped around the margins, applied with paste. To be framed.

some of the dissolved varnish. Backing with one to two layers of Japanese paper (Sekishu RK 12 and 13) from Hiromi Paper is then done in the usual manner.

CONSERVING WALL MAPS IN A PRIVATE PRACTICE

Most of the wall maps that our studio has conserved in the past three decades, varnished or not, have been privately owned; those clients have different expectations and desired displays.

These maps are often framed and hung in homes or public places, as opposed to being housed in flat files or even dismantled for easier storage. Some are returned to their original hanging dowels. In addition to wanting them preserved, the desire is for them to be as legible as possible and to look attractive. Since a discolored varnish layer is often an impediment to legibility, there is a mandate to remove that disfiguring layer and then provide a new backing of paper and rigid support. The backing is of Japanese paper; the rigid support is usually a Tycore honeycomb panel or Falcon board

faced with 100% rag. When the cleaned map is backed with Japanese paper, the margins are left larger than the map and then used to wrap around the rigid support. The map itself is not adhered directly to the board but is held only by the paper margins. In this way, the consolidated map can easily be removed at a future date (fig. 6).

If the owner wishes that the map to be returned to its original dowels, we will first check to make sure they are straight and not warped (if the latter, they are replaced). Then, the dowels will be cleaned, stained if necessary, and sealed. The added paper margins can be used to attach the map to the dowels.

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