

PROTECTING CONTEMPORARY WALL SCROLLS

By Albert Lewis, Preparator at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University

Tru Vue 6mm Optium Museum Acrylic® oversized sheets have enabled the ideal combination of viewing experience and protection for the large scale, scroll mounted ink paintings in *Ink Worlds*, a special exhibition of contemporary ink painting from 1960 to the present at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University.

In the early stages of planning the biggest challenge for the exhibition team became apparent immediately. The curatorial vision was to experience the tactile nature of the ink and paper surface without traditional frames or wall cases impeding the viewer's experience of how these artworks are intended to be seen. Many of the ink paintings were mounted to scrolls made from silk and paper and are regularly displayed on collectors' walls without protection. In the case of a public institution borrowing these artworks for exhibition, the safety of the artwork becomes just as important as its presentation.

The first idea to display these artworks was to create stanchions or platforms distancing viewers 36 inches (91 cm) from the scrolls. Although this would have allowed the wall scroll to not be behind acrylic glazing or placed into a wall case, the viewer could not have experienced the artworks up close. This was a major drawback as some of the pieces have a striking amount of subtle detail. It was the next unexpected drawback that pushed us to think of a different way. After creating a 3D scale mockup of the gallery layout we realized that with everything having platforms or stanchions as protection, there was barely enough floor space left to walk around on. In fact it was so tight in some places that small groups on a gallery tour or people in wheelchairs would have significant difficulty.

The second idea was to create large metal frames that hold plexiglass sheets and paint the frames the wall color. This would subvert typical western style picture framing by suggesting a wall case. This would also, however, create a large amount of plexiglass in the gallery, providing an overall effect of reflective plastic surfaces and greatly reducing the visual subtleties offered by the matte black ink interacting with the soft texture of the paper. Additionally the curator's preference was to not see a frame of any kind.

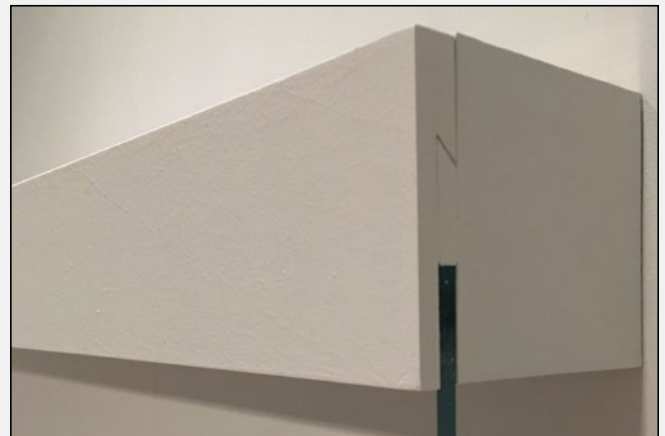
After much research we decided to get rid of the wall painted metal frames, which were inevitably going to have a very high price tag, and reallocate some of that cost to purchasing 6mm oversize sheets of Optium Museum Acrylic® instead. Everyone agreed that this product was the perfect hybrid of presentation and protection because of its non-reflective properties and ability to essentially disappear. When it came time to mount the sheets on the wall we

created a custom, low cost, bracket system instead of using metal stand offs which can have a commercial or industrial look.



Optium® sheet hangs from the top bracket by securing machine screws through the acrylic into the aluminum. Photo courtesy of the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University.

We created brackets made from 3 inch aluminum U channel, capped the ends and face with wood, and painted the whole frame the same color as the wall. We chose to have the full 120 inches (304.8 cm) of the Optium® sheet hang from the top bracket by securing machine screws through the acrylic into the aluminum. By hanging the sheets we were able to retain a certain amount of tension as opposed to having the sheets rest in the bottom brackets and risk bowing and/or warping. The last part of the installation was a simple cleated piece of wood to cover the attachments at the top. The presentation was stunning.



A simple, cleated piece of wood covers the attachments at the top. Photo courtesy of the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University.

Because the Optium Museum Acrylic® goes from the floor all the way to 120 inches high, your side to side scanning of the artworks in the gallery is completely uninterrupted. One last subtle detail to the design that makes the illusion much more effective is we had Architectural Plastics sand and polish the visible cut edges of the acrylic, allowing uninterrupted side to side viewing without casting unwanted shadows.



Installation view of "Ink Worlds" exhibition. Photo courtesy of the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University.

Due to Optium's anti-static properties there have been no problems with dust collecting on the glazing, an initial worry with the case design, since it is open on the sides. Additionally, a surprise benefit was that adjustments could be made to the artworks without de-installing the acrylic sheets. Often with sensitive scrolls, we place hooks in the wall to support the bottom and take some of the stress off of the hanging chord at the top. The exact placement of the hooks has to be just right. Occasionally the object will relax or contract over time, requiring a slight tension adjustment. The case design, being open on the sides and the Optium having no static attraction, allows us to adjust at any time without having to open up and reclean a traditional case.



Open case design. Photo courtesy of the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University.

The exhibition has been very popular and we are satisfied and excited to be able to present these intricate artworks to people in a personal and genuine way while preserving both the artist's intent and the museums responsibility to protect them. Although the exhibition is only up for three months we intend to take advantage of Optium's abrasion resistant properties and use these cases to display scrolls in our permanent gallery rotations for many years to come.



Installation view of "Ink Worlds" exhibition. Photo courtesy of the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University.



Albert Lewis, Preparator at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University, specializes in framing, gilding, mount making for book arts and designing unconventional display techniques for all types of artwork.

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