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ASK THE EXPERTS



Eugene Chodorow and August Henkel working on a canvas mural, temporarily stretched for later installation, ca. 1939

Can Murals be Portable?

Ask the Experts: “A client wants me to paint murals for their house, but they want to be able to remove them when they move. I already asked about stretched canvases, and they said no, they want it to be on the wall, but removable. Is this possible?”

A: Yes, this is a request painters often receive. There are mounting and installation techniques that facilitate removal of murals, but successfully mounting and relocating artwork will depend on good planning and skill.

Both artist and collector should be aware that removing a fabric mural from walls can be risky for the artwork. As materials age, they may not retain enough flexibility to survive detachment, rolling and transport. Valuable paintings or those of antique age should only be removed by a trained professional.

Smaller murals in less challenging places can be installed by the artist, but scale, materials, and details of the location where the mural will be placed sometimes make it desirable (or even necessary) for installation to be

handled by a third party, especially if scaffolding, special architectural anchors or other challenging factors are involved. Determine this at the beginning of the project, and when installment service has been arranged, find out whether your choice of materials might need to be modified.

Check condition of the wall

Before installation, make sure the wall is in proper condition to receive the artwork. Peeling paint, cracks and water damage are issues that need to be addressed before installing artwork. Efflorescence (chalky material flaking from the wall), mold, and rusty nails may indicate that water is penetrating the wall. This needs to be addressed in order to ensure a durable mural installation. Wall adhesives will not attach well to loose or peeling paint, and imperfections like cracks and holes can become visible through canvas. Minor issues can be addressed by the artist, but extensive or structural flaws should be referred back to the property owner, or to a specialist craftsman.



Marouflage

Canvas paintings can be attached to walls with adhesive, but for the installation to be reversible, the adhesive needs to be carefully chosen. Certain clay-based

wallpaper adhesives are favored by mural painters for easy removal, with cheesecloth between layers of adhesive to provide a release mechanism.

Especially when murals are fitted precisely to architectural spaces, paintings should be executed “full bleed” with paint extending past the image area, with enough excess to allow trimming to fit. Before trimming, wait to see if fabric shrinks in reaction to the adhesive.

Canvas paintings that are sufficiently flexible can be rolled for transport from the studio to the installation site.

Paintings should be rolled paint-side-out around a wide, rigid core material like PVC pipe. Rolled artwork should be wrapped in bubble wrap and cardboard, with ends carefully protected. Paintings should be unrolled as soon as possible.

Tiled Murals

A mural can be divided into multiple “tiles” for easier transport and installation. Tiles can be individual stretched canvases or panels; canvases on manufactured stretchers are limited to standard dimensions, however, and may not offer a corner-to-corner fit. Tiled murals may offer the advantage of safer, easier removal compared to adhesive-mounted canvas, but some clients may find seams between segments unacceptable.

Panel

Murals can sometimes be executed on a single, seamless panel, depending on factors including panel weight, strength and compatibility with mounting hardware. Other considerations for single-panel murals include studio configuration and details of packing and transportation.

Not all panel materials are well-suited to mural painting. Hardboard, a common manufactured panel (sometimes called “Masonite”, a discontinued product), is inexpensive, but heavy. A supporting frame or cradle will usually be necessary to handle attachment. Hardboard corners and edges are delicate; cradling can become visible through large sheets, and irregularities can be easily spotted if lighting is not optimal. Thin birch plywood is easy to cut, lightweight and can handle light-duty hardware attachments, but is not very resistant to warping or planar distortions.

MDO plywood, an exterior-grade panel, offers many of the key properties required of a rigid painting support. The smooth facing material of MDO provides an excellent surface for priming and painting, and the panel core can easily retain screws and connectors. MDO weight is significant, however, so this material is best used for small to moderate scale paintings, and where strong hardware connections will work.

Aluminum composite panels, composed of thin sheet metal with honeycomb aluminum core, offer an excellent combination of high strength, durability and low weight, but they are more difficult to source, more expensive than common construction materials, and can require special tools for cutting. Careful surface preparation is needed to ensure priming will adhere permanently to aluminum supports.

Preparation for removal, relocation

Make sure to document details of installation, including what type of hardware was used. This information will be needed if the collector plans to remove the murals at a later date. It’s also a good idea to provide documentation about the materials used in creating the artwork, in case cleaning or conservation services are needed. Be direct with the client if professional services will be required to safely remove and re-mount murals; if possible, provide contact information of a trusted conservation specialist.

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