

Studio Craft: “First Aid” for a Drawing

Ask the Experts: “I just damaged a really nice drawing that needs to be framed and delivered soon. What can I do myself to fix it? I don’t want to have to do the whole thing over again.”

A: Whether or not you can carry out a repair depends on the nature of the damage, the area of the drawing affected, and your skill level and training. Some issues with works on paper can be easily addressed in-studio, but others require specialist attention from a qualified professional. If the drawing is not by your hand, is of antique age or has significant value, we would advise seeking professional services, rather than risking further damage and loss of value.

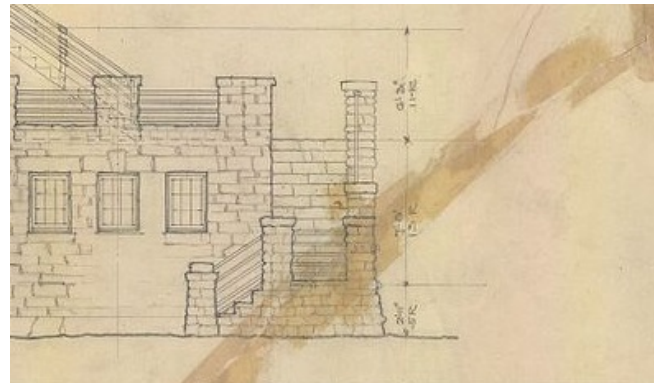


Torn paper

A small tear at the edges of a drawing can sometimes be hidden under a mat, but the tear will persist and may get worse if the drawing is re-framed. The torn edge could be trimmed away, as long as doing so wouldn’t significantly alter design or overall appearance. This approach works

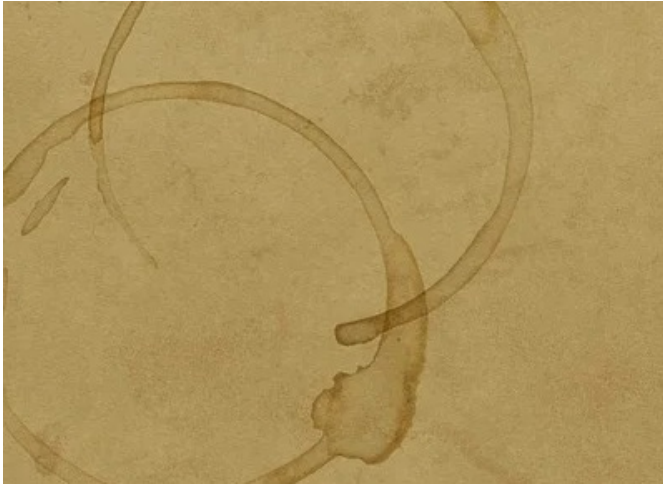
best for drawings with crisp, cut edges, because the trimmed side will not look drastically different from the others. Drawings on deckle edged papers can still be trimmed, but results will depend on how much paper will be lost in further tearing down the sheet.

If the tear is in an area that can’t be trimmed away, while it may be possible for the artist to make repairs that are durable and invisible, there’s a good chance that a repair will be easy to spot and draw attention. Archival tissue and adhesives can sometimes be applied to very small areas without becoming very apparent, but a tear of significant size will likely require specialist repair.



Unightly “Scotch tape” marks on a repaired drawing

Common plastic (“cellophane”) tape should never be applied to permanent art. The adhesives used in household and office supply tapes bond permanently with paper, and can cause serious, destructive effects as they age. Tape lines on old documents and works of art show the darkening and embrittlement that can result from amateur repairs. Even highly trained conservation professionals are often unable to completely amend tape damage.



Stains

Spills and stains can sometimes be reduced in appearance or removed if caught quickly, depending on the type of stain. Spilled beverages can be blotted and lifted (at least to some degree) with paper towels and distilled water. Avoid over-saturating the affected area, and dab rather than rub, to avoid damaging the paper surface. When the paper dries, it may ripple or distort.

Oily or greasy stains usually can't be removed in-studio. Also, oils tend to migrate past the original spot, and can transfer to other papers through direct contact. Avoid stacking oil-stained sheets with other papers and boards. Use glassine paper as a barrier against transfer.



Mold colonies on an old sheet of paper

Mold/foxing

Mold spots can be cut from the paper, but unfortunately, most of the time the affected area is located in a passage where paper loss is apparent. Exposure to direct sunlight can destroy mold and lighten spots, but usually artists are not able to completely reverse mold damage without

conservation services. Since mold spots on paper can spread and transfer to other sheets, drawings affected by mold should not be stacked or stored in close contact with other works on paper.



Creases

Creases can sometimes be carefully burnished away (or at least reduced) with a bone folder or agate tool. (Bone and agate are preferred over metal tools, which can leave indelible marks.) This should be limited to minor, cosmetic imperfections; more extensive repair is likely beyond what the average artist should attempt. Commercial artists and watercolorists have used burnishers for decades, to harden passages that have roughened from erasing or lifting out. Our opinion is that burnishing falls in the category of process, and that the artist should feel free to employ this technique on their own work.



Smudges

Most of the time, artists reflexively grab an eraser to remove a smudge or accidental deposit of the drawing medium, but sometimes it pays to pause before using an

instrument that can alter the paper surface. If the drawing is in-progress, it may be that a smudge or dark mark could be absorbed into the overall design. A blending tortillon or chamois can lift some of the medium without the friction or tackiness of an eraser.

When it comes time to erase, choose which type to use based on the paper surface and staining power of the medium. A crumbly gum eraser can be used to “dry clean” broad areas of the page where the side of the hand may have left smudges. (These used to be called “bread erasers”, both for their crumbly consistency and also because stale bread was used historically for gently cleaning paper.)

A kneaded rubber eraser can lighten marks by dabbing, without rubbing, preserving the integrity of lines and leaving the paper surface intact. For dark marks that fail to yield to gentler tools, a vinyl eraser can often give results, though the resulting surface might not accept subsequent media as well. Finally, as a last resort, an old-fashioned, sanded “typewriter” eraser removes marks that can’t be removed by other means, by abrading the surface and actually removing paper. A sanded eraser will drastically alter the paper surface, and excessively vigorous application can actually wear a hole in thin stock, so it’s important to limit use to the minimum effective application, only on papers durable enough to bear it.

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