



EASEL PAINTINGS

Introduction

A painting that hangs independently is known as an 'easel painting'. Some were commissioned and painted especially for their place in the church—they may have formed part of a screen or reredos—and are an important part of the building's history. Others may have been donated by parishioners, thus constituting an important record of congregation's involvement with their local church.

Paintings may be made of many different materials including paint consisting of pigments and a binding medium (such as oil), varnish, glue, canvas, wood, metal, gilding and plaster. The paint may be applied to canvas or panels, which may be framed or not, or protected by glazing and backing.

This guidance will help you identify the signs of damage to paintings and understand the causes of damage. You will also find practical maintenance tips and guidance on how to address the conservation needs of historic objects. It does not apply to wall paintings, miniatures, paintings on glass, ivory or parchment or watercolours, prints or drawings, as each of these have different requirements.

Looking after easel paintings in your church

Paintings are best hung in a stable environment without extremes of temperature or relative humidity. Damp spaces and spaces which are well-heated in winter should be avoided. Paintings should not be hung over sources of heat or moisture, such as radiators or heaters.

In order to avoid accidental physical damage, paintings should be hung away from furniture and busy areas of the church and not behind doors. Judiciously positioned furniture may help prevent contact with the painting.

If there are no signs of flaking paint, paintings can be carefully dusted using a soft brush. If in doubt or if the surface appears unstable, consult a specialist conservator.

If a painting is glazed, clean the glass with glass cleaner which has been sprayed onto the cloth but not the glass.

If small pieces of paint or details of the frame have fallen off, they should be carefully collected and stored. A conservator may be able to reattach the parts.

Paintings may need to be protected from sunlight. Seek advice from your DAC about what measures can be taken in your church to avoid direct sunlight falling on the painting.

If bat droppings are a problem in the church, you may wish to consider moving the painting, or providing some sort of protection, such as a ledge or canopy above it. It is not recommended to cover paintings with curtains.

Most damage occurs when paintings are being moved. Ideally any handling should be kept to a minimum.

During building work or redecoration, easel paintings should either be removed or appropriately protected, following specialist advice. Before moving a painting, make sure that it is securely fitted into the frame. Small paintings can be carried in a vertical position, using both hands and with the painted side facing towards, but not touching, your body. When resting a painting against the bottom of a wall make sure it is not in danger from doorways, furniture and passing people. If possible, the painting should not rest directly on the floor, unless the floor is carpeted. It should be raised on blocks made of a material such as firm foam rubber or wood covered with carpet. If a frame has delicate projecting elements, make sure that the weight of the painting rests on the flat back edge of the frame, not the mouldings on the front. The moving and handling of larger and heavier paintings is best left to specialists.

Some paintings are extremely valuable and may be vulnerable to theft. Consult your insurance provider, or your DAC, if security is a concern. You can find more information on the care of paintings on the [Institute of Conservation \(ICON\)](#) website.

What causes damage?

In churches the most likely causes of damage to easel paintings are:

- **Environmental conditions**

When exposed to frequent and drastic changes in temperature and relative humidity, the painting's structure can become stressed and weakened. Variation in the way the different materials react causes cracks, delamination (separation of layers) and eventually paint loss. High relative humidity may cause canvases to become slack and deform at the corners or the bottom edge. A white veiling layer called 'bloom' may appear which is caused by the migration of moisture through the painting. Low relative humidity may cause the wooden parts, such as the frame, canvas stretchers and the panels of panel paintings, to shrink and they may split or break at joints. A low temperature of under 5°C makes oil and acrylic paints brittle and liable to crack easily.

- **Water**

Water can damage both the support elements and the paint layers and can lead to paint loss.

- **Wood-boring insects**

These are the most common pests found in the wooden parts of a painting, such as the frame. They thrive in conditions of high relative humidity. If you see areas of fresh wood dust (frass), this is an indication that wood-boring insects are active.

- **Mould**

Paintings hanging against cold or damp walls may develop mould. It is always worth checking the reverse side of the painting regularly.

- **Bat and bird droppings**

In churches these may accumulate on the surface and cause damage.

- **Light**

Light can damage a painting by turning varnishes yellow, or causing pigments to fade.

- **Impact**

Canvas paintings are particularly vulnerable to damage from impact, which causes cracks in the paint layers and tears in the canvas.

What signs to look for

You should regularly check easel paintings in your church for damage. Look for the following:

- **Canvas:** torn, punctured, split at the edges, sagging, bulging or dented
- **Panel support:** split, warped, cracked or showing signs of insect damage
- **Paint:** cracked, loose, flaking, lost or fading
- **Surface:** dirty or dusty, covered by mould or mildew, blooming or whitening
- **Varnish:** this may have turned yellow or brown
- **Condition of the frame:** if in poor condition, this can put the whole painting at risk.

Repair and conservation

The conservation of easel paintings is a specialist task. If a painting is showing signs of damage you should contact a professionally accredited conservator to inspect it and advise you on required treatments. You can obtain details of accredited conservators on the [Conservation Register](#) (administered by ICON).

Some conservators may charge for visits and the preparation of conservation reports but we can help you with a grant for this initial work. [Our grants](#) also support conservation projects.

The conservation of easel paintings is likely to require formal approval. If you are a church, contact your [Diocesan Advisory Committee \(DAC\) Secretary](#) at an early stage about a faculty. If you are a cathedral please contact your [Fabric Advisory Committee \(FAC\)](#) for advice in the first instance.

