

Developed in collaboration with Conservator James Bernstein and Golden Artist Colors, Inc.

Stretching Canvas Face-Down, On-Edge or Face-Up

Stretching Canvas Face-Down

Artists often like to stretch canvases face down. A level table or the floor supports the fabric in plane, as the canvas is pulled up around the sides and onto the back. This is particularly suited to oversized or monumental paintings.



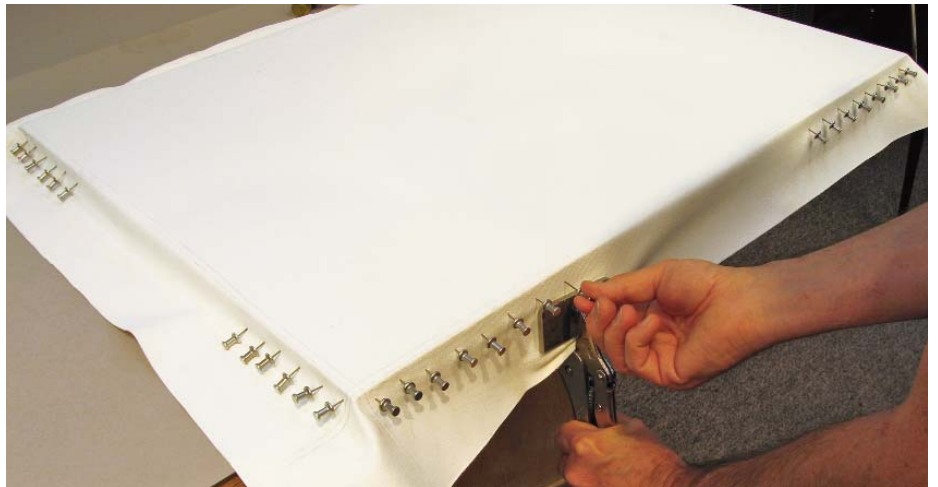
A very large canvas being stretched and tacked face-down.

This method however, is totally blind. One cannot see variations in fabric tension as stretching proceeds.

Pulling around two plane changes (one where the front turns around the face bead to the side, the second where the side turns around the back) produces a great deal of friction, making it difficult for the canvas to slide past the two turns.

Stretching Canvas On-Edge

Moderate canvases may be stretched on end, with the strainer standing along one end at a time on a table or floor and then stretched mid-air. This is do-able when



Stretching a canvas face-up, systematically working from the corners inward.

stapling the fabric directly but cumbersome, as the stretcher is not fixed and teeters forward and back. If push pinning the sides, standing the members on end will often bend or dislodge a number of the pushpins.

Stretching Canvas Face-Up

My preference is to stretch canvases face-up. I have the stretcher supported across tables or sawhorses and the fabric laying across the top of the stretcher. The fabric is then pulled downward and temporarily pinned to the sides.

When stretching face-up, gravity will cause the canvas to sag onto the crossbars. To lift the canvas and bring it up to plane, scraps of card or foam board are temporarily inserted between the strainer members and the fabric. This way, one does not have to fight gravity during the stretching. If introducing offset boards, be sure they are small enough to slip through the stretcher bracing for removal after stretching is complete.

During face-up stretching, I like to pull the stretcher/strainer edge slightly beyond the table or saw horse edge. This enables me to pull the fabric margin straight down,

grasping the fabric in hand, extending my arm and using my body weight for considerable pull. Of course, where premium pull is needed, stretcher pliers enable gripping and fulcrum leverage advantage that bare hands can't always achieve.

Whatever the method of stretching, I recommend temporarily pinning the canvas first with pushpins (see other stretching discussions). After satisfactory tension is achieved, the pins maybe replaced with staples or tacks. Do not remove any of the pushpins from the painting perimeter until all fabric margins are stapled or tacked.

Also, do not totally remove or trim extra fabric margins. Remember to leave generous canvas margins to provide work edges for when the canvas needs re-stretching or conservation in the future. And never cut away the fabric at the corners. Finish the corners last, carefully folding and tucking the fabric under and to the back. Some artists distribute the fabric over two folds; others choose to gather the extra fabric in a single fold.

If using tacks, I recommend copper plated steel tacks. They will not corrode the fabric as steel tacks do, and they will respond nicely when using a magnetized head tack hammer

for setting. When hammering, grip the wood handle as far as possible toward the bottom of the hammer (away from the head). This produces more tangential force, encouraging tacks to go in straight and flat, not tipping at various angles.

The stretched canvas is now almost ready for painting. The last precaution is to go over the primed surface and be sure it is absolutely clean and free of dirt. This will insure good paint adhesion.

When painting, avoid undo pressure on the canvas that might distend the fabric and leave a planar dish or looseness in any region. If planning to do heavy physical work on an area, (e.g. applying pressure or scraping),

temporarily place a rigid smooth board behind the canvas to support the canvas in plane, preventing distortion.

For further discussion and resources regarding canvas preparation and stretching, see:

Bernstein, James. *A Remarkable Way to Stretch Canvases (and other Essentials of Canvas Preparation)*.

JUST PAINT New Berlin, NY:

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*A cardboard is inserted to protect the painting.
The key is then gently tapped to expand
the corner.*



*Detail of an individual bar control stretcher
(courtesy of John Annesley Co.)*