The Menil Drawing Institute focuses exclusively on unique works of art on paper, drawings. One of the popular romanticized characteristics of drawings is their intimacy, and there are many examples in our collection of drawings that demonstrate this quality. Recently we spent time with a Rembrandt sketch, poring over the exquisite details of the 4” x 4” paper. It may be this category of work that inspired Keiko Keyes to make the poetic analogy likening paper conservators to solo violinists.

However, more and more often, intimacy of scale is giving way to the power of scale. Crates measuring ten by ten feet are lining up to roll through the loading dock. Crates holding a single drawing can be so large they have to be secured at steep angles to get through doorframes.

With availability of papers in large rolls, artists are making statements that expand beyond a frame. Rolled drawings are becoming more common and they present much different challenges than drawings of an intimate scale.

If art is created on a large sheet of paper and then mounted to a stretched canvas - we can use standard hanging hardware and specialized mechanical lifts to deal with the weight. Those works behave like traditional paintings. But many drawings are not treated in that manner by the artist, and the impracticality, expense, and even undesirability of framing large-scale drawings means that they wind up on rolls.

Choreographer Trisha Brown produced life-sized drawings by dancing on papers taped to the floor, with drawing media held in her hands and between her toes. Her dancing on the sheet also left artifacts of movement related to the stresses from the pressure of her body on the paper. The distortions and stretching of the paper were an integral part of the artwork.

The intent of the artist is always paramount in the care and display of drawings. The drawing was produced horizontally, but the artist and her gallery had installed a hanging system for the work to be displayed vertically.

From a curatorial standpoint the aesthetic of the install method was important to maintain. In this case, it was a series of long strips of wide pressure sensitive tape, secured to the verso of the drawing and extending beyond the edge by several inches. The tapes were folded over, and pushpins were used to tack this double thickness of the tapes to the wall. Additional horizontal tapes had been added as reinforcement, across the vertical tapes just below the top of the drawing.

Although this would not have been my preferred method if I were doing the original installation, I was tasked with making it work. The (possibly archival) pressure sensitive tapes were very securely attached to the drawing, however the work had been installed so many times that the numerous holes present on the tabs were making securing with pins difficult.

The holes had been enlarged, and the central area of the tapes was useless from a structural standpoint. It was clear that repeating the same method of installation would not work.

Adaptations needed to be made to strengthen the system. Addressing this in the most pragmatic and straightforward way possible, I took a “when in Rome” approach and added archival tyvek tape to reinforce the back of the vertical pressure sensitive tapes. The reinforcing tape covered the numerous holes in the original tape facing the wall.

To distribute the weight of the drawing and make tearing of the tapes less likely, I cut small two-ply matboard pieces (thin but sturdy) for each of the tabs – just slightly smaller than the fold-over.

Inserted between the folded flaps of the original tape, the matboard provided support for the entire width of the tapes, rather than at the pinpoint only - as the previous system had.

We then used two pushpins per tab rather than one, to avoid the heavily damaged portions of the tabs. The new tyvek tape added strength to the original tab at the points of contact.

The end result was a drawing that was secure on the wall with very nearly the same aesthetic appearance as the original artist installation. Once the tabs were secured, we unrolled the vertical drawing on the wall and “overmatted” the lower edges using thin boards and push-pins (placed outside the drawing). This temporary measure prevented the drawing from curling forward as the paper relaxed into its new orientation.

This all happened rather quickly in the only available space in the museum that was large enough to temporarily install the work, the high-ceilinged paper conservation studio.

Everything we did with this drawing required a lot of participants. In preparation, the art handling crew had gathered together with us in the paper lab to talk through the proposed system of installation.

Our lab technician Grace Walters drew out a step-by-step diagram with our projected plan of action. It showed all the players and described what role each would have in the installation/de-installation.

Looking at these diagrams together before approaching the drawing confirmed everyone was on the same page. A few changes were made as we went along, and the diagrams were accordingly updated afterwards. Movies and stills were also made to document the process. And just as installation had required adaptation of the hanging system; in de-installation we improved the diameter of the tube, using a sonotube covered with MarvelSeal.

Before a year was out, the drawing was scheduled for an exhibition. In that time, there had been several changes on the art handling crew and although some staff were familiar with the artwork, it was a new team approaching the drawing this time. We had documented quite a bit about the drawing during the tight installation in the paper lab. Prior to this second installation the new team reviewed all those plans, photos, and movies.

The gallery placement was at a narrow end of a room, with just enough area to navigate the two lifts required to manage the drawing and its heavy tube. Since we were quite familiar...
On a Roll: Drawings Beyond the Frame, continued

with the drawing and its needs, we were able to negotiate a few details in the exhibition design.

The placement of the drawing in a dead end of the gallery meant that people were not walking around it, and a platform on the floor kept visitors at arms length. Nearby air vents were covered. This reduced stress both on the drawing and on our gallery attendants.

The duration of the exhibition installation was two weeks, so we scheduled the installation of the drawing in the earliest timeframe. Installing temporary restraining boards around the bottom edge and sides coerced the drawing into relaxing with a nice drape. Just prior to the opening, the restraining borders were removed which resulted in an unrestrained sheet with a slight curl at the bottom which was the preference of our curator and exhibition designer.

With this installation, as before, we assembled a large crew and documented the entire process with movies made with a simple digital camera on a tripod. One of the important messages these films convey is the difficulty of maneuvering the drawing, and the importance of having enough space to work around it.

**John Cage, *New River Rocks and Smoke*, 102” x 389”**

Less than a year later a new curator approached me with a request to install an iconic artwork by John Cage that I knew only by reputation. It was referred to as “the scroll.” *New River Rocks and Smoke* was legendary in that it is so large (102” x 389”) that it was stored on a roll, and no one working in conservation or art services had ever seen it other than on a tube in storage.

The tentative plan was to install the scroll in a stand-alone exhibition on relatively short notice. Frankly I was thrilled to have an excuse to pull together the team to look at it. However, it is no trivial task to do anything with an un-mounted drawing that is over thirty-two feet wide.

There was only one place in the museum that was large enough to safely unroll the drawing for assessment – in a gallery on a day that we were closed to the public. It was exciting to open up the artwork, and everyone was pleased to see it and contend with its condition. Once they saw the drawing, the curatorial staff was eager to program the exhibition.

The drawing was made in part with fire. The techniques used to create the drawing caused damage and distortion that is seen as integral to the work.

When you wave a large sheet of paper over a fire to deposit soot patterns, you expect a few damages to the sheet as a result. It was far from pristine, with numerous tears and scars that clearly related to the production. There were also rough repairs that had the appearance of something likely done in the artist’s studio. We accepted those conditions and appearance with a wabi-sabi mindset.

There were also damages and losses to the edges of the paper caused by the drawing having been stapled to a wall.
Since the early technique for display caused these damages and losses, the curators didn’t want to disturb that history of the artwork.

Damage due to earlier installations was recognized early on, and not repeated. At some point a series of hinges had been placed all around the drawing with stringent uniformity to replace the stapling technique; but even those were damaged.

The hinges had been designed to provide invisible attachment to the wall. A portion of the hinge close to the paper edge was left un-adhered. To attach the piece to the wall, the drawing had to be bent / held back as a thumb tack was inserted by hand through the hinge into the wall.

This system was a dramatic step up from the staples that were originally used, but problems were still evident. Many of the hinges were partially torn from prior installations. A better system was needed, but with time constraints – impractical. We discussed and rejected the use of magnets.

The ordinary flat head thumbtacks used for the earlier installation were discovered in the framing studio. Re-using the original thumbtacks was practical, as the flat heads hid behind the drawing, however the mechanics of getting them positioned and secured had to be improved to avoid tearing the hinges or distorting the drawing.

We constructed a mock-up with hinges and tested it in the following manner. Each tack was inserted into a piece of folded over tyvek tape which securely held it so that it could be positioned. A piece of hard two ply board was then slipped between the tack head and the drawing. The board, which was curled at the top to hook over the thumb, acted as a barrier between the tack head and the drawing, preventing an impression when force was applied.

Finally, a pressing tool was made of a small acrylic sheet, padded with thick blotter, and wrapped with silicone release mylar, to which a loop was added at the back so it could be held by a thumb. When everything was in position, the tool was used to push the tack into the wall. The tool provided a firmness that would force the tack into the wall, but a surface that was soft and slick enough not to distort the paper or disturb the drawing media.

As we re-rolled the drawing, our pre-program lab technician Brianna Warren photographed the verso, and the damages that would need to be addressed were documented.

Problems with hinges were easier to quantify later with the digital images than onsite during the short period of time we had in the initial examination.
On a Roll: Drawings Beyond the Frame, continued

Our chief installer reviewed the mockup with me, and we agreed we could safely move forward using this technique. That meant that the hinges needed to be repaired before the exhibition. Given the extent of the damage and the time required to have the drawing in place for the repairs, we moved the drawing to the storage room of the Menil Drawing Institute, which has large banks of flat files with worktops and ample room for maneuvering.

To make the workspace even larger we brought adjustable height worktables from the lab and lined them up to extend the tabletop. Every time we handled this work at least four people had to be present - usually more. A larger work surface meant fewer rolling and unrolling sessions.

Prior to the day of installation, the crew got together to review the plans and practice the installation technique on a mockup. As usual on the day of installation we recorded everything, both in stills and movies.

We assembled a crew that was slightly larger than what we thought we would need. It is always good to have runners available. With so many hands present, it is important to be clear about who is conducting the project. In this case it was our art handler, Alex Rosas, who was at the top of the lift securing the drawing and handling all observations and concerns. We would all wait for his direction and act in unison to keep the drawing safe.

The series of simple actions went just as planned. The weight of the roll was fully supported as it was rotated across the platform. The right edge of the drawing was held in place until enough of the drawing was secure on the wall to bear the weight of the paper sheet.

The staged tacks were held in place on a hard foam panel. The crew on the platform made sure the paper did not slip as it was being unrolled.

In the course of planning the installation, the curator and exhibition designer had pre-determined the display height. Once the hinges were repaired, the crew rolled the drawing back onto the tube at just the right height for the installation, careful to avoid any telescoping of the paper.

They had made a support insert for the tube, finished with material that could slide across the platform without marring the surface. Being able to unroll the drawing without bearing its weight was important since this drawing and roll are quite heavy, and the installation takes at least half an hour.
The tacking system worked beautifully and was made easier by Alex being on a lift rather than ladder. Once the roll was removed, the drawing still had a bit of curl at the edges. The sides were secured - held down with board for a few days while the paper settled into place.

Once the paper was relaxed, the side hinges were secured. Hinges along the bottom were secured loosely, not to interfere with the natural drape to the paper.

There is no rocket science about this, but it is impossible to overstate the importance of examining subtle details of simple projects. No aspect of the task is too small to explain or clarify. We documented our part of this drawing’s history so thirty years from now the next group of people will understand exactly how we approached this project. At the conclusion Alex and I reviewed each step together and documented it for posterity.

Shortly after our successful de-installation of the drawing, I was contacted by a colleague who needed to supervise the installation of a recently discovered related drawing by Cage. It was produced in the same era and had the same hinging system. I sent him our mockup kit, instructions, and movies. He conveyed to me that he and his team found the material invaluable, and their installation was a success.

One thing these experiences with rolled drawings highlighted is the importance of having discussions with artists whenever possible and documenting their part in the process. Hanging systems that work initially may not be viable over time.

Complications arise when failures in initial systems require us to make adaptations without input from the artist. Whether they are available for consultation or not, working out systems for large-scale drawings that meet the aesthetic goals of the artist and provide the security needed to present the artworks to future audiences is a satisfying and worthwhile goal.

The challenge of large rolled drawings has been an interesting one to address. After dealing first with a vertical roll, and then a horizontal one, next I am faced with a 222” mylar substrate, which I am reluctant to roll at all. It has media that cannot sit on itself - even with interleaving. I have been curious to investigate the concept used in truck bed cover engineering - a spiral track system for rolling the cover so surfaces don’t touch each other. Feedback from giving this talk at the WAAC annual meeting at the Getty made me realize there are people facing similarly interesting problems in the rolling of contemporary paintings and even ethnographic materials. I look forward to continuing to explore these large scale drawings and would be happy to hear from anyone faced with related projects.
On a Roll: Drawings Beyond the Frame, continued

Installation Notes for Rolled Drawing
J. Burandt & Alex Rosas 2019

Prior to Installation:
- The wall was measured and placement of drawing determined.
- No air vents should point towards the drawing, if so they need to be covered or diverted.
- The perimeter of the area the drawing is meant to occupy is outlined with dots of blue tape.
- A pencil line was drawn with a level along the top line.
- Dartek was stapled to the wall and the staples were covered with small passages of Tyvek tape.
- An insert was prepared for the tube - it has felt pads on the bottom to slide smoothly along the floor or platform without scratching. The weight of the roll is on the floor, not suspended by handlers.
- The drawing was rolled onto the tube very evenly at the same distance from the edge of the tube that it is wanted to be off of the floor or platform.
- Prior to installation a mockup was used to familiarize the team with the pinning method.

During installation of the upper edge:
- At LEAST six people should be present during installation.
- Three people held the drawing on the roll, being careful to keep the paper from sliding.
- The main installer is on a lift at the edge of the drawing.
- One person on a ladder at the edge assists the main installer by holding the paper in place as it is unrolled 3-4’.
- The main installer insures the first portion of the drawing is level with the pencil line.
- The main installer inserts tacks with supporting Tyvek tape (with backing in place) in 2-3 hinges.
- The initial hinge is secured by inserting the thin board between the tack and the drawing, and pressing the front of the drawing with the silicone release mylar coated tool.
- The ladder assistant remains at the first corner of the drawing and holds it in place against the wall as the main installer continues to tack the hinges to the wall.
- As the drawing is unrolled any interleaving material will need to be removed from the surface and handed off to a floor assistant.
- The three roll handlers work together to slide the tube on the floor as they unroll against the wall while being careful to keep the paper from sliding down on the roll.

Final installation details:
- Once the top of the drawing is tacked into place, the edges can be secured as well.
- The bottom edge was secured from the center outward.
- The bottom hinges are not carrying weight, they are keeping the drawing from floating out from the wall. They can be loosely secured to give the paper a more natural appearance.

Removal of the drawing:
- A microspatula is to be slipped between the wall and the hinge, gently loosening the tack, which should stay in place due to the Tyvek it is pushed through.
- As the drawing is pulled away from the wall, the Tyvek tape is separated from the hinge and the tack lifted away and pressed into the foam block.