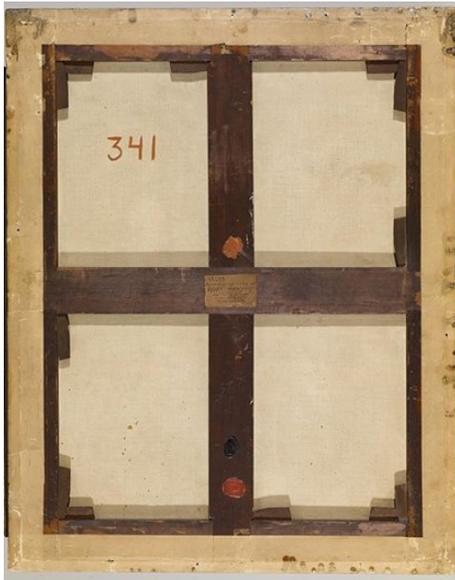




Utrecht Art Supplies Canvas Stretchers: An Overview



The familiar wooden canvas stretcher is more than a simple frame. It's a machine designed to apply and maintain tension on canvas paintings. When assembled, four strips form a chassis that provides both flexibility and rigidity.

How Stretchers Protect Paintings:

Simply put, a tight canvas is a flat canvas, and a flat, stable fabric support reduces stress on the paint film. Achieving a tight stretch initially allows the sizing/priming to stiffen the fabric into a stable plane. As the painting ages, a good stretcher frame should facilitate small adjustments in tension to maintain flatness.



The Lift

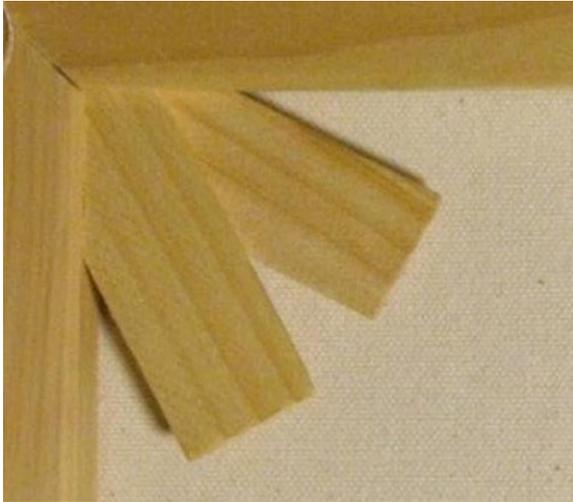
The "Lift" is a proud articulation at the outer edge of the stretcher strip. It maintains space between the back of the canvas and the face of the frame, preventing a ghost image from developing in the painting.

Some light-duty stretchers have a fairly shallow lift that is the same on both sides, so it doesn't matter which side faces out. Most heavy-duty stretchers, however, have the lift only on one side, so it's important to have the correct sides facing toward the back of the canvas. Also, there may occasionally be some slight inconsistency in the height of the lift. This is easily fixed by filing or sanding the frame corners before stretching canvas.

Expandable Joints

A stretcher that is well designed should allow for additional expansion, in the event a canvas becomes loose and goes slack, or shrinks and tightens from changes in humidity.

The most common style of stretcher joint is a mortise and tenon with mitered face. This style of joint is designed to be assembled without glue, friction-tight but flexible enough to accommodate later adjustment with keys or other mechanism used for spreading corners.



Keys

Stretcher strips and pre-stretched canvases often come with small wedges (2 per corner) that can be inserted to gently expand the frame dimensions to increase tension on a canvas that has become loose. Important: before keying out paintings with tightly fitted picture frames, make sure the frame rabbet is large enough to allow expansion. The canvas may not fit if it's keyed out too far.

Cross Braces

Paintings of large dimensions may need cross bracing to prevent bowing and distortion from the tension of canvas and from the weight of hanging. Depending on size and proportions, a single horizontal brace may be sufficient, or intersecting braces may be needed. Heavy duty stretchers should be braced to support dimensions over 30". Some stretchers are available with mortise and tenon or lap joints cut to fit braces, but simple bracing can even be attached with very basic hardware like T-plates.



Alternative designs:

In addition to all-wood stretchers with cut joints, metal stretchers are also available which use hardware joinery and keys. Aluminum/wood combination stretchers are more costly than wood, but they offer superior strength and resistance to humidity.

Questions? [Ask the Expert](#)

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