



# SAVING YOUR Treasures

*A Website about what you can do to protect and preserve the things of importance in your life*



## Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center

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## CARING FOR YOUR FURNITURE

Everyone has furniture in their homes. Most furniture is made from wood and/or metal. Wood is an organic material that has complex interactions with the environment and with users. Metals also share a complex relationship with the environment.

We have all heard it said that “Wood needs to breathe,” or “Wood needs to be fed.” These statements are not true. Wood is not alive. A living tree has very few living cells within its trunk; and when it’s cut, the remaining living cells die. By the time the lumber cut from the tree has been made into furniture, the wood has been dead for a long time. If the wood is dead, it does not need to breathe nor eat. “Feeding” furniture oils to wood will not have a positive impact on the long-term preservation of a piece of furniture and may in fact decrease its valued lifespan.

### **Environment**

As with any other antique or historic object the environmental conditions in which furniture is stored is critically important to its condition and survival. Organic materials, such as wood, absorb moisture as the relative humidity rises and release moisture as the relative humidity is lowered. This cycle of swelling and shrinking as the environment fluctuates results in weakening of the wood fibers, cracks, and shrinkage. It is important to store your furniture in stable relative humidity and temperature conditions. Avoid storing items in the attic, where the wood may dry out and crack and surface coatings may become sticky, or in the basement where the air is damp and mold growth may occur. Antique furniture should be stored around at 50% Relative Humidity. (See “Recommended Environmental Conditions”)

Light also plays a large part in the deterioration of furniture. It has cumulative effects on wood that is irreversible. Light is known to bleach dark woods, darken light woods, and effect finishes, stain, or paints leaving discolored, brittle, or cracked materials. Eliminating damage by light is a relatively easy step. Avoid direct sunlight on furniture. Close the shade or drapes during sunny periods throughout the day. Installing awnings or shutters is another possible way to eliminate light damage. (See “Light”)

Pest infestations can also be a problem for furniture. The first sign of a pest infestation is a small amount of what looks like fine saw dust. This is called frass and is left behind by insects that have burrowed into the wood or upholstery and laid eggs. The larvae mature and chew their way to the surface leaving tiny exit holes. If you are uncertain you have a pest problem or how to destroy the problem, consult a professional. They will be able to determine what type of pest it is and recommend treatment. (See “Integrated Pest Management”)

### **Cleaning**

Dust is an air-borne particulate that may be a problem for antique furniture if it is not routinely dusted. Dust attracts moisture and pests, and as a result can contribute to the corrosion and deterioration of the object. Before any cleaning methods are attempted it is important to check the condition of your furniture. Do not attempt to clean a surface that is severely deteriorated or has loose parts such as decorations, screws, or nails. Cleaning and repair is best done by a conservator under such circumstances. If the piece is in good condition use the following procedures for dusting.

Remove loose dust and dirt from your antique furniture using a clean, soft, dry cloth. Gently rub the cloth over the surface. Be sure to change the dusting cloth as it becomes soiled. You may also use a clean, natural bristle brush to remove dust from cracks or crevices.

Heavy accumulations of dust on antique furniture can be removed with the help of a HEPA vacuum. Once again, carefully check your piece first, noting loose parts. On the lowest setting, use the soft brush attachment to run the brush over the surface. Gently run the brush over carvings, ledges, moldings, and recesses. Use a clean, natural bristle brush to remove stubborn dust from cracks or crevices. Brush the dirt away from the area and toward the vacuum nozzle. Never do more than dust or vacuum surfaces that have not been coated with a finish. Such surfaces include interiors, cabinet backs, backs of doors, and inside drawers or compartments.

For heavier surface accumulations that may need to be cleaned with water or a solvent, consult a professional conservator. The original finish may react with many cleaning solutions. A conservator will make recommendations of cleaners that won't cause discoloration or damage to the furniture's finish from blanching or blooming. Blanching is a whitish discoloration of the finish caused by the introduction and evaporation of a solvent or water. Cloudy, translucent discoloration with a white or blue tint is known as bloom. This discoloration occurs after the introduction of water to the finish. In order to prevent such discolorations on your furniture, please consult a conservator before attempting any water or solvent cleaning. (See "What is a Conservator?")

## Waxing

Many different compounds have been used through time to polish furniture. Today in museums and historic homes, furniture polishes are no longer used. The current best practice for the care of furniture is to apply a protective layer of paste wax to the finished wood surface. It is important to remember the reason for waxing or polishing a piece of antique furniture is to maintain the finish, not improve or repair it. Each finish should be tested for compatibility with the paste wax before any waxing is started. Recommended paste waxes include Behlen's® Paste Wax or Butchers® Bowling Alley Wax. Follow all of the instructions on the packaging and do not apply the wax more than once a year. The wax will protect your furniture's finish so there is no need to use commercial products such as Pledge or lemon oil. These products deteriorate faster than the wood or wax and will cause gummy build up on the surface over time. Some contain silicone compounds that are impossible to remove and will compromise any future refinishing attempts. The properties of buffed paste wax help keep dust and moisture away from the wood surface, which will only require gentle dusting with a clean, soft cloth.

## References:

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