



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 Nebraska State Historical Society

1326 S. 32nd Street, Omaha, NE 68105 (402) 595-1180, Fax: (402) 595-1178

nshs.treasures@nebraska.gov

www.nebraskahistory.org

THE CLEANING OF OBJECTS MADE FROM ORGANIC MATERIALS IN MUSEUMS AND HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUMS

The cleaning of objects of organic materials in a collection is not to be undertaken lightly. There are many serious factors to consider. **A conservator and curator should be consulted in order to assess all the issues relating to the care of the object in question.** Organic materials include leather, bone, ivory, antler, feathers, tortoise shell, baleen, horn, hoof, teeth, and plant materials like basketry, bark, nuts, and seeds. These procedures should **not** be used on any objects that have:

- feathers as decorative or structural materials,
- loose or friable media or supports,
- the potential of having been treated with a toxic pest control chemical (**arsenic**),
- the potential of having indigenous or historic deposits that should be protected, or
- extensive repairs.

Objects exhibiting any of the above conditions should **only be cleaned by a conservator.**

If the following cleaning methods have been determined to be appropriate for a specific object, the procedures should be followed using the utmost care and sensitivity. Only those people who have been specifically instructed in these methods by a conservator should undertake them. Extreme care is needed to avoid doing more harm than good. The materials and techniques listed below have been tested and found to be safe and effective when used in a careful and sensitive manner.

A clean, well-ventilated work area should be provided for the cleaning process, including a large, padded work table with adequate light. Clean, dry hands are needed to avoid contaminating the object.

Materials:

- clean, acid-free paper, or fabric work surface
- clean, small, **very soft**, natural bristle brushes (such as a Japanese Hake brush)
- vacuum with a HEPA filter and a variable speed motor for control of suction and micro tool attachments

Procedure:

1. Prepare an extremely clean and dry work area and cover the work surface with a clean piece of acid-free paper or fabric.
2. Place the object on the work surface. If the object is a three-dimensional, constructed object, leave it **closed** until the exterior surfaces can be cleaned.
3. Begin cleaning by **slowly and gently** using the soft brush to remove loose surface dust and debris. Use the vacuum, on **very low power**, as a receptacle to receive the loosened dust and debris and remove it from the work area as you brush. Strokes of the brush should begin at the top of the object and move towards the edges and the bottom of the object. A very light touch is most effective. If there are any signs of loose media or support stop the cleaning immediately and contact a conservator for further instructions. The vacuum nozzle should be covered with piece of screening or a few layers of cheesecloth to prevent loose parts from being sucked into the vacuum where they can be crushed or difficult to remove. The vacuum should be set to the **lowest** effective power.
4. If the dust, dirt, or debris on the object is too tenacious to be easily vacuumed off, it is permissible to try to release the surface dust or dirt with a natural bristle brush that is stiffer. **Do not be tempted to use any liquid cleaning solutions.** These will cause permanent staining and may remove or dissolve part of the material of the object.
5. Some materials such as bone, ivory, antler, feathers, tortoise shell, baleen, horn, hoof, and teeth can be cleaned with liquid solutions, but only after they have been tested by a conservator and specific additional instructions have been provided.

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