



SAVING YOUR Treasures

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



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DUSTING AND CLEANING COLLECTIONS AND HEIRLOOMS

Cleaning as Preventive Conservation:

The practice of good housekeeping is probably the most simple and inexpensive method of preventive conservation for a collection and for special heirlooms. Good housekeeping will keep dust, dirt, and debris from gathering on and around objects. By keeping valued objects clean, housekeeping reduces the risk of damages from dirt and dust, reduces the risk of pest infestation, and it greatly reduces the risk of serious mold activity in the collection. Housekeeping is an excellent method to ensure the safe, long-term preservation of your collection objects and heirlooms.

Preventing Problems in Advance: A Plan:

Housekeeping for a collection in storage or on exhibit should be discussed and defined in a housekeeping plan. The plan should carefully delineate who will do the work; in what order and how often the work should be done; with what tools and methods it will be completed; and exactly how the work will be performed. A housekeeping plan can be invaluable to preservation of the collection.

The practice of good housekeeping forms the “front line” in defense of the collection. The housekeeper works around and with each object in the collection on a regular schedule. This allows the person to observe and examine collection objects more often and regularly than anyone else, especially in collection storage and exhibit spaces.

It is always wise to begin the housekeeping process at the highest point in a room and to work to the floor. This way dust and debris from areas currently undergoing cleaning will not fall onto areas that have already been cleaned. Housekeeping tasks should be regularly scheduled based on need and the circumstances at hand.

For example, spaces are usually very dusty during the first few weeks the heating system has been turned on in the fall. The heated air dries out dust that has accumulated in the ductwork, which is then picked up and deposited throughout the building. In early fall, dusting and vacuuming will be required more frequently than during other seasons. Cleaning should only be performed when necessary. Excessive dusting and over-cleaning will unnecessarily increase wear and the risk for damages due to handling.

Tips:

The following are some general tips that can make housekeeping easier and more successful in protecting your objects.

- Thorough vacuuming and dusting should be performed regularly in all spaces, even those not often visited, such as mechanical rooms, basements, and storerooms.
- All extraneous materials such as trash, recycling bins, stored paper products, excess storage materials, cardboard boxes, and unused equipment should be removed from object storage locations and unused spaces. These extraneous items provide attractive living and hiding places for pests and are often contaminated before they are brought into the building. They become locations for dust and dirt build up and prevent careful and thorough cleaning of floors and shelves. Extraneous materials make it difficult to keep spaces neat and orderly. These materials should be stored in buildings or locations where collections or valued objects are not present.
- Trashcans used to dispose of food products should be clearly labeled and supplied with tight fitting covers. These trashcans should be emptied daily and the covers should be kept in place at all times. Housekeeping activities should be scheduled immediately following any food related events near collection areas.
- A clear description of the duties of the cleaning staff, including any activities that relate to the collections, should be prepared in writing. All cleaning activities in collection storage areas and in exhibits should be specifically discussed in advance to avoid accidental damages to collection objects.
- Training should be provided for the staff performing the cleaning and include topics relevant to collection care issues such as handling and emergency response. A conservator and a curator, archivist, or librarian should work together to develop staff training. In the home, these guidelines are also valid.
- Frequent oversight and supervision by professional collections and conservation staff should be included in any housekeeping operations.
- A crucial part of any housekeeping plan is a formal reporting system for the cleaning staff to report back to the supervisor and/or conservator any observations or concerns about the collections or spaces where collections are found. A simple system for cleaning staff to leave notes or messages for the supervisory staff is important. Dates and locations of problems should be recorded and any follow up or corrective measures should be noted. A system like this can also be set up in the home.

Tools of the Trade:

Appropriate tools and materials are required to do the cleaning work properly. Clean cotton gloves and cloths, soft natural bristle brushes, high tech dusting cloths, and a HEPA filter variable speed vacuum cleaner are essential. The most important tools are the vacuum and the brushes.

Vacuuming is the method of choice for removing dust and dirt from the collection environment. Vacuuming makes it possible to actually remove unwanted dust and dirt from the immediate environment. Sweeping and dusting with a cloth just disperses and redistributes dust and dirt.

In order for the vacuum to remove even the finest dust, the vacuum must have a suitable filtration system, otherwise the dust sucked up by the vacuum will simply be blown right back into the room via the vacuum system exhaust.

High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filters are required for museum, library, and collection applications. These are readily available from many sources today. An essential feature on a vacuum for continued collection use is a variable speed motor that can be used to dial the suction power from low power suction to full power for different applications. This will make it possible to use the vacuum to clean fragile collection objects.

Another important feature of a good vacuum cleaner is the availability of a micro tool set of attachments for the nozzle. Micro tool attachment kits can be purchased separately and will fit most standard size nozzles. (See the supplier list.)

Note the location and power of the exhaust port on the vacuum. It is important to be aware of this port as air blown out of the vacuum can knock objects off of tables or blow them over.

Remember to change the vacuum cleaner bag frequently. Never let any part of the vacuum nozzle or hose contact the objects. It is often advisable to work in teams when cleaning around and in collection storage locations. One person can move objects and act as a spotter while the other can focus on the cleaning activity. Always have two people present when a ladder is in use.

Brushes used for cleaning in and around collections should have natural bristles. The bristles are better if they are white or light colored so that it becomes obvious when they have become soiled and need to be washed.

The brushes should have soft plastic or fabric covered ferrules. Metal ferrules will scratch and snag materials and objects and can be very dangerous. Cloth adhesive tape can be used to cover metal ferrules.

Best Method for Dusting and Vacuuming:

The cleaning of objects 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 objects in question. These procedures should **not** be used on any objects that have:

- delicate or fragile 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,
- 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)
- a 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 object that opens and closes like a box or a book, 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 some ceramics and glass items can be cleaned with liquid cleaning solutions, but only after they have been carefully examined and specific additional instructions have been provided. See additional information under other materials.

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