

# Museums & Galleries NSW

## Surface Cleaning

Apart from the fact that it looks bad, dust can be quite damaging to collection items. Dust particles can scratch soft surfaces such as photographic emulsions, hold moisture against metal objects causing corrosion, provide a food source which will attract insects and may mask other damage masked by a layer of dust.

Before removing dust from an object, it is a good idea to inspect it and have a written record of its condition. By inspecting the object, you will build up a picture of its condition which will help you decide what sort of cleaning process is appropriate. Look at what condition the surface is in-

- Is there a fragile/friable surface (for example loose paint fragments, deteriorated fabric such as silk, dirt which is significant to the object, poorly bound pigments such as some Aboriginal pigments or pastels)
- Are there lifting areas on the surface which might catch (such as loose veneer or flaking plating on a piece of EPNS)
- Are there old repairs?
- Are there loose attachments such as beading?
- Are there signs of insect attack, does it appear current or old?
- Are there signs of corrosion, is it active? BEWARE- corroded lead will produce a white powdery surface which is toxic.

You should also think about whether it is appropriate to remove the dust/dirt from the item, ie is its dusty/dirty condition significant? Some examples of where the dust/dirt form part of an object's significance include: a shovel with dirt from a trench in Gallipoli used during the First World War, a makeshift altar covered with ash from incense burning, a pack saddle from a work horse covered in dried mud from the road. Remember, there is a difference between the dirt which has built up over an object during its time of use and a layer of dust which has collected on it during its time in the museum.

Clearly if you already have a good condition report and photographic record of the object, it is not necessary to go through this again, however as you prepare to clean the object, look at the report to check that there are no changes in its condition from its last inspection.

Looking at the object's condition may not take long but it will mean you approach the cleaning in a more informed way. Knowing what the surface is like, is it strong enough to be brush vacuumed, without risking loss of material?

## **Fact Sheet**

### **Brush Vacuuming**

The most common method of surface cleaning in museums and galleries is brush vacuuming. This involves brushing the dust off the surface with a soft brush into a fine nozzle attached to a vacuum cleaner, thus avoiding the dust simply being brushed into the air and landing back on the object. The size of brush and approach will depend on the dimension and stability of the object. Generally the brushes used are paint brushes of various sizes. Label them clearly on the handle as dusting brushes so that they are not accidentally used for other purposes. Every now and then they will need to be washed in warm soapy water and left to air dry.

You can make a fine tube attachment for the vacuum cleaner using a piece of silicone tubing. However, attachments are available at a reasonable price from electronic stores. Often called micro attachments, they are more commonly used for cleaning computer key boards and will fit onto the hose of most vacuum cleaners.

Open all the vents along the vacuum cleaner hose to reduce suction. If you have a more fragile surface, place some gauze over the end of the nozzle to avoid losing fine fragments of the object. Clearly, if the surface is very fragile or there are many loose areas DO NOT attempt any cleaning without discussing the situation with a conservator.

1. Hold the nozzle close to the brush so that the dust is lifted up and into the nozzle
2. Move across the surface as though following an imaginary line
3. Ensure that your passes overlap so that there aren't any small areas which are missed (use the approach you would use for mowing the lawn)

### **General Surface cleaning**

For the routine surface cleaning of furniture, sculpture and other large items with smooth surfaces, where there is only a light layer of dust, use a lint free cloth (such as a washed cotton cloth or a Dust Bunny). This will pick up dust without spreading it about the room. DO NOT use these on surfaces which are fragile or where the cloth may catch on small lifting areas.

Hake brushes (a very soft, wide brush made in Japan) can be used on delicate surfaces such as paintings (check that there aren't loose areas of the paint layer first) and gilded frames.