

# **Museums & Galleries NSW**

## **Condition Reports**

Travelling condition reports are generally prepared for items travelling/going on loan, even if a condition report already exists. This way the information is clearly current at the time the item leaves your care. A travelling condition report may also contain information specific to the exhibition, such as the number the object has within the travelling exhibition, the crate the item is located in, condition check boxes at the arrival and departure from each venue, particular instructions for the handling of the item and details of who to contact if any damage has occurred to the work. Such reports are often also necessary to meet the insurance requirements for a travelling exhibition, or other circumstances where collection items are travelling between locations.

Before you start examining items in your collection, prepare a good space to work in. A generously sized empty table, with adequate lighting, and possibly a lamp, are the basic requirements for examining the collection. Prepare your condition report sheet before commencing and discuss within your organisation what sort of information you want to record. It is best to agree on a layout from the start and identify the keywords which you are going to use. Some of the equipment you might want to use, if available, includes:

- Pencil- it is best to use a pencil for working around collection items as ink from pens can stain items if accidents happen
- Tape measure- a soft dressmaker's tape measure is good to use with most collection items. Evidently a metal extendible ruler is necessary for larger object which would need to be examined in situ
- A simple magnifying lens can be useful for a closer examination of items
- A magnifying lamp can also be useful if one is available
- A light box/table can be used for examining paper or textile items, the light shining through the item will reveal any tears or weaknesses in the fabric
- A magnet can be useful for identifying if an item is constructed of iron or an iron alloy such as steel (if the surface is fragile use a barrier such as a piece of cloth between the magnet and the metal surface)
- Fine tweezers can be useful in lifting fine layers of an item
- A torch can assist in focusing the eye or providing raking light
- Gloves (cotton or disposable) can protect items from damage

## Fact Sheet

### Condition reports - the essentials

There are many sorts of condition reporting forms, some of which form a component of a cataloguing system, some of which have been designed for specific uses or collections. The following are some details which are common to all condition reports:

- Type of item, for example- a ceramic cup, a glass plate negative, a tuxedo, an oil painting or a wood cut print.
- Date of examination and who carried out the examination.
- Dimensions- generally these are recorded in millimetres. Most items will have a height, width and depth. However, a spherical item may use diameter in place of two of the measurements. Measurements need to be taken at the extremes of the item. While this may appear obvious, it can become confusing with some composite items. For example a wooden mask with feathers may have fine feathers sticking out of the edges of the mask and measurements would be taken to the outer edge of the feather, not the mask. This is so that any storage or display supports made for the item have taken into account the absolute measurements of the item. It can be useful to note this alongside the measurement. Similarly, with framed works it is often useful to measure the dimensions of the work alone and the work in the frame.
- Description- this should include details such as material the item is made of, title, provenance, date and place of manufacture, artist/maker/manufacturer, inscriptions, stamps, imprints, whether it relates to other items in the collection, how many parts there are and whether there are any accessories (such as frames, covers or cases). With more complicated items, it may be useful to include a diagram or photo.
- Condition- Often a single word or number is used at the beginning of the condition section which summarises the object's condition. Such terms can be very subjective hence it is a good idea to agree within the group what terms are being used and provide a definition of each word for anyone who will be carrying out condition reports. For example you may use the following: Excellent (as new condition with little or no sign of use), Good (some signs of wear but physically sound), Fair (minor damage, some losses/deterioration more aesthetic than physical), Poor (wear, damage, deterioration and loss to a large proportion of the item), Very Poor (extremely deteriorated, weakened condition with very extensive loss/damage which greatly impacts the integrity of the object). The details of the condition section are discussed below

### Condition report - examination

Before examining an object, think about your own safety, some objects can be toxic. Some of the materials which we now know to be toxic were in common use in all sorts of materials which may now be in your collections. Some items to look out for include: taxidermic specimens (right through to the 1970s toxic pesticides including arsenic, mercuric chloride and strychnine were in common use in taxidermy), corroding lead items (for example figurines on a ship model which have a powdery white surface), mouldy items (some moulds can be toxic), items containing asbestos (including hair dryers, lagging, tiles, sealants) and medical kits (many early kits contain dangerous substances such as picric acid, arsenic and scalpels). If you have any doubts, discuss the object with a conservator before handling it.

Generally when examining and documenting the condition of an object, it is best to look from the broad and then move into the specifics. Hence, after providing a single word to

## Fact Sheet

summarise the condition, you would then discuss the overall appearance and condition and finally move into the specifics.

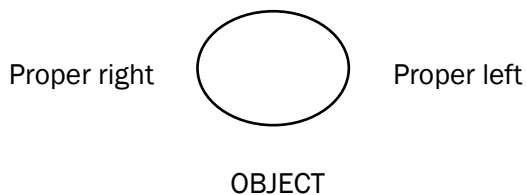
For example, when discussing a cane basket you may say:

Fair, generally dusty with paint splatters overall. Some of the cane work is loose at one end of the handle causing it to be weakened. There is a hole in the base of the basket which may have been caused by a rodent (edges appear to have been chewed).

If you are uncertain about the cause of damage, make this clear terms such as “possibly”, “could be”, “may be”, allow you to convey what you think is happening without confusing issues. If you can document what you think is/has caused the damage and whether it appears to be active, this is also useful information.

Some other things to consider include:

- Proper left and Proper right- these terms are often used when documenting collection items to avoid confusion about locations. Essentially, imagine you are the object, proper left is the object's left, proper right is the object's right.



- Old repairs- while some repairs may be detrimental to the object, old repairs can form a significant part of an object's history. When you identify that an object has been previously repaired try and establish who carried out the repair and why. Inspect the repair to ascertain whether it is still sound.
- Insect/mould attack- Where possible examination of new items into your collection should be carried out in a “quarantined” area, away from the main collection. In this manner, if you do see signs of active insect attack, you can deal with it before the item enters the collection, thus preventing an infestation.
- Corrosion- Many metal objects will show signs of corrosion. What is the extent of corrosion- is it only on the surface, or has it weakened the object? What colour are the corrosion products (e.g. red/brown rust or green/blue with bronze/brass/copper)
- Paintings on stretchers/strainers- is the canvas slack, this can lead to damage of the paint surface if the work is going to travel.
- Friable/fragile surfaces- these can lead to handling difficulties and needs to be taken into account if the item is being framed
- Loose or missing areas- if you find components which are loose it is often a good idea to put them in a small zip lock bag or wrap them in acid free tissue so that they don't get lost. Mark clearly on the outside of the package what the item is.

## Fact Sheet

### Glossary of Terms

The following are some terms which may be of use when carrying out condition reports:

- Accretions- any solid material attached to the surface of an object which is not part of the object.
- Acidic- often used in relation to paper items which become more acidic as they deteriorate, causing embrittlement and yellowing.
- Cockled- most often used in reference to paper which has wrinkled/puckered by taking in moisture and then drying out unevenly.
- Corrosion- chemical reaction between a metal and other substances leading to deterioration of the metal. Rust is a common form of corrosion.
- Crazed- fine hairline cracks through a glaze which often appear darker than the glaze due to discolouration.
- Crosslinked- a chemical reaction within a polymeric material (such as a plastic) which leads to brittleness
- Fly specks- By products left by a fly on the surface of an object, generally small and black/brown in colour, although can be translucent.
- Foxing-Brown coloured spotting on paper induced by one or more of the following factors- fungus or mould, impurities in manufacture, dampness and airborne acids
- Frass- debris/excrement produced by insects. Often this is fine and powdery.
- Friable- loose and powdery. For example, coloured pigments which are not well bound to the surface (such as some Aboriginal artefacts or pastel drawings) will be friable.
- Grazed- When the uppermost surface of an item (particularly paper or textiles) has been eaten in patches by an insect, frequently silverfish.
- Hairline fracture/crack- fine crack through a piece which is only just visible.
- Lifting- One surface lifting away from another, such as a timber veneer or a plated metal item.
- Loss- areas/small sections which are missing
- Odourous- having a distinctive smell, such as cellulose acetate which gives off acetic acid as it degraded, giving a vinegar type smell
- Paint splatters- numerous paint spots on a surface which are not part of the work
- Powdering- The surface of an object has become friable and powders to the touch
- Shattered- long splits through the body of fabric, most often used in reference to degraded silk.
- Slack canvas- a canvas which is on a stretcher/strainer and is loose in some areas.

## Fact Sheet

### References

Allen, Errol J, *Condition Reporting and Conservation Guidelines for Touring Exhibitions*  
National Exhibitions Touring Structure for Western Australia, Perth, 1992

Heritage Collections Council, *Recollections-Caring for Collections Across*, HCC, 1998

Kelly, Sara, *Travelling Exhibitions- A Practical Handbook for Non-State Metropolitan and Regional Galleries and Museums*, National Exhibitions Touring Support for Victoria, Melbourne, 1994

Richard, Mervin, Mecklenburg, Marion & Merrill, Ross (edit), *Art in Transit- Handbook for Packing and Transporting Paintings*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1991

Stolow, Nathan, *Conservation and Exhibitions: Packing, Transport, Storage and Environmental Considerations*, Butterworths, London, 1987

Thompson, John, *Manual of Curatorship: A Guide to Museum Practice*, Butterworths, London, 1994