

Examination

Before you start prepare a good space to work in. A large, empty table with non-slip surface and cloth padding if items are fragile. It should have with good lighting and a lamp for detailed examination. You may like to use a loupe or magnifying glass.

Prepare your condition report sheet before commencing and ensure you know which information you want to record. Have an agreed layout and identify the keywords and their meanings before you begin. This keeps information consistent over time and different examiners.

Equipment

- Pencils to use when working around objects to avoid permanent marks from pen ink
- A soft dressmaker's tape measure
- A metal extendible ruler for larger objects
- A magnifying lens or loupe can be useful for a closer examination of items
- A magnifying lamp can also be useful if one is available
- A light box 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 for identifying if an item is made 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 quite useful in lifting fine layers of an item
- A torch can assist in focusing the eye and provides raking light
- Gloves (cotton or disposable) can protect items from damage and the handler from hazardous materials. Do not use cotton gloves when handling fragile or slippery items. Nitrile gloves are preferable in many cases
- Face masks with suitable filtration for objects containing mould, particle dust or unknown substances.

Before examining an object, think about your own safety, as some objects can be hazardous. The following materials are known to be toxic and may now be in your collection.

What to look out for

- Taxidermy specimens (up until the 1980s 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, old machinery)
- 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 specialist before handling it.

Describing damage

The Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials website features a AICCM visual glossary of images and definitions used to describe the condition of an object.

Some terms commonly used when completing condition reports include:

Abrasion: roughening or wearing away of an object's surface due to repeated friction or contact with other surfaces.

Accretions: A solid piece of foreign matter 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.

Breaks

Brittle/embrittled: a loss of flexibility causing the material (e.g. paper, parchment, leather) to break or disintegrate when bent or curled.

Cockled: wrinkling or puckering that occurs when paper, fabric, or any sheet of support material dries unevenly.

Corrosion: chemical reaction between a metal and other substances leading to deterioration of the metal. Rust is a common form of corrosion.

Cracks

Crazed: fine hairline cracks through a glaze which often appear darker than the glaze due to discolouration.

Creased: where a sheet material (e.g. paper) has been unintentionally bent over on itself.

Dent: a defect in the surface caused by a blow; a simple concavity.

Discoloured: overall change in the colour of a material, usually to a darker, more yellow or brown appearance.

Distorted: a concave, convex or twisting change of form, used to describe stiff organic materials that have become misshapen, such as paper, card, plant fibres and wood.

Dirty/dusty

Faded: loss of brightness or intensity of a colour

Flaking: where extreme cracking causes small, thin pieces of varnish, paint or other layers to become completely detached from the main support material.

Fly speck: spots left by a fly on the surface of an object, generally small and black/brown in colour

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: dust-like debris or excrement left behind by wood eating larvae or borers

Frayed/fraying: unravelled or worn spot indicated by the separation of threads, especially on the edge of a fabric.

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: where the uppermost surface of an item (particularly paper or textiles) has been eaten in patches by an insect, frequently silverfish.

Holes

Insect damage

Lifting: one surface lifting away from another, such as a timber veneer or a plated metal item.

Loose

Loss: areas/small sections which are missing

Mould/mouldy

Odorous: having a distinctive smell, such as cellulose acetate which gives off acetic acid as it degrades, giving a vinegar type smell.

Powdery: see friable

Rust stains: see corrosion

Shredded: 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.

Split Stained Torn Warped

Yellowed: discolouration that affects the whole surface of an item.

You might also like:

Condition Reports: the Essentials

Museums & Galleries of NSW

<https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/collection-care/condition-reports-essentials/>

Museum Note #6: Handling Museum Objects

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<https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/35127825?q&versionId=43625430>

reCollections-Caring for Collections Across Australia. Heritage Collections Council pp.48-54, 1998

The Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material

<https://aiccm.org.au/conservation/collection-care>

Hazardous Materials in Museum Collections

Museums & Galleries of NSW

<https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/risk-management/hazardous-materialswritten-referencelist/>

Hazardous Materials Assistance & Advice Organisations

Museums & Galleries of NSW

<https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/risk-management/hazardous-material-assistance-andadvice-organisations/>

Condition Reporting National Services Te Paerangi

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/sites/default/files/26-condition-reporting_1.pdf

Condition Reporting Form Template

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

<https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/learn/for-museums-and-galleries/how-guides/collection-management/conservation-guidelines#Condition%20reporting>