

Handling Museum Objects

Preventive conservation starts with careful handling.

Proper handling is a matter of common sense and relies on understanding the weak areas on an object and thinking through all the risks associated with lifting and moving an object. With careful thought and preparation and a respectful attitude objects, accidents and damage can be avoided.

Objects handling guidelines should be included in procedures manuals and used to train all paid staff and volunteers when they start working at the museum.

General Rules

- Ensure that people who will handle objects are properly trained
- Only handle a museum object when necessary
- Stop and think before handling an object.
- Where are the structural weak points?
- Plan the route and clear the passage before moving an object
- Prepare the space the object is being moved to before handling the object
- Do not hurry
- Use both hands to support the object
- Do not wear dangling jewellery or loose sleeves
- Make sure hands are clean and wear fitted gloves where appropriate
- Do not smoke, eat or drink while working with museum objects
- Do not use pens or sharp objects around objects
- Report and record any damage that occurs during handling
- If a breakage or damage occurs, secure loose or broken pieces in a labeled bag with your name and date

Areas of Vulnerability

Museum objects should be handled with particular care; in many cases they are irreplaceable.

Areas of vulnerability include:

- Handles which may be loose or previously repaired
- Protrusions which can catch or be knocked
- Areas of previous repair
- Top or crest rail of a chair
- Soft/powdery surfaces
- Loose components such as drawers, lids, doors, etc.
- Unwieldy shapes
- Large, floppy items
- Heavy items
- Brittle paper
- Ornate or gilded frames
- Paintings which do not have backing boards
- Unframed paintings
- Metal surfaces which are sensitive to tarnishing
- Sensitive surfaces such as photographs
- Goopy/sticky areas
- Lifting/buckling veneers
- Heavy items attached to lightweight items (such as heavy beads on a fine silk piece)

Equipment and Materials

There are equipment and materials that can help when handling objects:

- Boards for supporting flat, flexible objects such as paper, textiles and beaded objects
- Trays - shallow plastic trays to fit smaller items in
- Trolleys, dollies and pallet lifters for heavy objects
- Gloves - cotton or nitrile. Disposable nitrile gloves are preferable to use with slippery surface such as glass, ceramics and metal as they provide more grip and fit snugly.
- Copysafe or polyester (Mylar) sleeves - useful for handling single paper items
- Ziplock bags - for smaller, durable items
- Small cushions/tubes filled with bean bag beans - used as cushioning between items in trays
- Foam blocks - used as cushioning or to lift framed works off the floor if stored temporarily against a wall
- Felt covered blocks - lift framed works off the floor if stored temporarily against a wall
- Acid free tissue - used for padding or separating items
- Protectafoam/Cellaire - thin foam used to line trays/boxes or as cushioning around items
- Cotton tape - used to tie loose areas during a move

Planning the Move

- Inspect the object for areas of weakness
- Remove jewellery that could scratch or swing (including rings and necklaces)
- Look at the space you moving to - is it clear?
- Will the object fit through doors?
- Have you got a clear pathway to the new location?
- What is the safest way to lift the object?
- How many people do you need?
- Do you need a trolley?
- Do you need a tray?
- Have you got padding between objects?