

Handling Practices

Introduction

Museums have long been aware that handling increases the possibility of damage to objects. The use of gloves, supports, and carts decreases the risk of accidental damage. Safe handling of cultural items is a relatively inexpensive preventive care measure; most of the procedures described here cost little or nothing. In addition, safe handling can lead to further savings by minimizing the need for repair of items. Following these guidelines is a practical, cost-effective way to extend the useful life of items.

Anyone who handles an item should first wash his or her hands. Body oils leave disfiguring fingerprints on items that are difficult to remove and can lead to discoloration or corrosion. The grime transferred from hands to an item mars it visually, causing abrasion to its surface or damage to its decoration. Also, the use of hand lotions should be avoided because the oils and other substances in these can be transferred to items and cause damage.

Gloves

Gloves should be worn when handling most items, even if hands are clean, to protect items from the damage caused by body oils and perspiration. In general, clean white cotton gloves work well for handling most items. These gloves must be changed as soon as they become soiled so that the dirt is not transferred from the gloves to items. Be aware that the gloves may catch on rough surfaces of such materials as beads, basketry fibers, and leather bookbindings and must be used with care. If items are too smooth, heavy, or slippery to grip securely with cotton gloves, or if surfaces snag severely on the gloves, clean hands without gloves are safer. Bare hands may also be better when handling items that have oily or tacky surfaces that hold cotton fibers. Two alternatives for these situations are white cotton sure-grip gloves, which have gripping dots or nodules on the palm and fingers that stick to surfaces, and non-powdered nitrile or latex surgical gloves. Be sure to use only non-powdered gloves. The powder can fall out of the gloves, get on the items, and lead to harm. Nitrile gloves are preferred over latex because many people have severe allergic reactions to latex. Some preservation

professionals say that gloves with dots should not be used when handling metals because these dots can corrode metals. Also, the dots have been observed to leave patterns on glass, ceramics, and polished wood.

All gloves should be changed frequently, as soon as they become soiled, to prevent dirt from being transferred to items. Even when wearing gloves, wash hands first. No matter what type of gloves you choose, they should fit snugly enough and be thin enough so that the wearer can feel through them and securely grip the item.

Handling An Item

When you handle an item, lift it from its base or strongest point. Do not pick it up by the handle, rim, or other projection. Use two hands. If an item is heavy, oversized, or otherwise difficult to maneuver, it should be handled by two people. Do not push or drag it. Before you pick up an item, examine it for previous repairs, new cracks, missing pieces, or other weak points. Remove detachable parts, and move them separately. Never rush. Move slowly, avoiding sudden, jerky movements. Handle only one item at a time, no matter how small it is. Never eat, drink, or smoke when handling items; accidents happen, and the resulting damage may be irreparable. Note that dangling jewelry, protruding rings, large belt buckles, hanging eyeglasses, identification badges, breast pocket contents, full loose sleeves, and the like also lead to damage. When taking measurements of an item, use a cloth tape measure rather than a metal one.

Some museums find it helpful to have a handbook that describes handling procedures. The handbook should have photographs or drawings of the appropriate ways to handle certain items and of ways to *not* handle them. All types of items in your collection should be covered.

Moving An Item

Always plan ahead, even if moving an item only a short distance. Make sure you have the help, equipment, and space you need. Be certain you have a clean, available place to put down the item, and that, if necessary, the surface on which you put the item is padded. Also, know the path you will take when moving the item, and be sure the item will fit through all aisles and doors.

Support non-rigid items, such as garments, with rigid supports under them that are larger than the item and made of acid-free corrugated board or similar material. These supports or carrying cards can be cut to the standard sizes of drawers or other storage units. Rigid storage mounts to which items are attached with ties have the advantage of protecting items both in transit and in storage. Padded acid-free boxes work well for some items. An alternative to a rigid support is the use of a muslin sling, which can work especially well for large textiles or hides.

Whenever possible avoid carrying objects, and use carts instead. Carts should be specifically designed for the transport of items: easy to maneuver, provided with protective rails and bumpers on the corners, and fitted with large wheels that minimize vibration. The center of gravity of the loaded cart should be low to help stabilize it. Carts for transporting loose items should contain shelves with a rim around their edge to prevent items from sliding off. Objects should be placed on padded surfaces. For transporting boxed items, carts with rimless shelves may be preferable. For large items, a low, flat, open cart, without a rim or walls, works well. Some museums have carts custom built to accommodate the standard sizes used in the building or to fit into special conveyances, such as dumbwaiters. Ideally, items being moved should not extend beyond the edges of the cart, and all walkways should be clear to prevent collisions. Remember to take into account aisle, hallway, and door widths.

Damage Incident Reports

If an item is damaged in handling, document in writing and photographs the nature of the damage and how, when, and where it occurred. Notify the appropriate curators and conservators on staff. If there is not a curator who is responsible for the damaged item, notify your supervisor. If your museum carries insurance, the insurance company should also be notified.

Visitor Procedures

Objects are particularly vulnerable to damage when they are being used by visitors who may not have experience in handling procedures. Such visitors can include distinguished community members and students. Standard museum practice is to

establish procedural guidelines for all visitors. Sometimes a written copy of these guidelines is given to visitors, and they are asked to sign an agreement to abide by them. The guidelines are often posted in the study area as a constant reminder to visitors and staff alike of the importance of careful handling.

Coats, briefcases, book bags, backpacks, umbrellas, and other extraneous articles should be checked at the front door of the museum or cultural center and never brought into the study area. Lockers or other secure storage can be provided for these articles. Ideally only research materials should be allowed in the study area, and these should be limited in quantity. Only pencils should be used; pens and other types of writing or sketching materials should not be allowed. Food, beverages, chewing gum, and candy should not be permitted.

In museums, visitors are often asked to sign a logbook upon arrival in the study area and to wash their hands prior to handling items. They are instructed in the best way to view and handle items, and a staff member demonstrates. Visitors always should work at a clean, uncluttered table. They should avoid pointing toward an object with a pencil, and they should be alerted to the hazard of standing over an object and looking directly down on it, inadvertently causing damage with hanging jewelry or eyeglasses. At no time should items protrude over the edge of the table. Oversized items should be handled by a staff member.

Fragile drawings on paper and brittle documents present special handling problems. Drawings should not be touched but should be handled by their storage container instead, such as a mat or folder. If the drawing does not have its own container, a folder should be provided. The same is true for documents. In the case of brittle documents, they can be placed in sleeves of polyester film. The document can be viewed through the polyester and handled without risk of being torn. It should be noted that polyester film has a static charge. Documents with media such as pencil that may be smeared or lifted by the static charge should not be placed in polyester film.