

Note #6: Handling Museum Objects

Introduction

A major concern of all museum staff is protecting the collection from the detrimental effects of the museum environment. Much attention has been paid to controlling temperature, relative humidity and light levels. However, equally important is the need to ensure that artifacts are given adequate physical protection through safe handling procedures.

Proper handling is essential for preservation of museum artifacts. It reduces the likelihood of physical damage to the artifact being moved. Once a textile is torn or a pot broken, the damage is permanent. Such loss is avoidable and unnecessary. Establishing and implementing handling procedures in a museum promotes professionalism in the staff. The benefits include greater safety for the collection, staff pride, and an enhanced reputation for the museum.

Every museum should have a set of handling procedures which is taught to all staff members as soon as they begin work at the museum. An orientation and training program will alert paid staff, volunteers and board members to the dangers of thoughtless handling. Supervision will be required until new staff are experienced enough to manage safely on their own.

Once training is completed, it is important to foster ongoing good artifact handling. People in positions of authority should serve as role models. Refresher courses and periodic evaluations are recommended.

Museum artifacts require a special kind of care and respect. The following list serves as a guide to assist with safe handling practices, but in the long run, each artifact presents an individual challenge. Before handling a museum artifact, you must evaluate its special needs. By combining common sense and the following rules, you may determine the best solution to each case.

Unfortunate consequences can be avoided by careful thought and preparation and a positive approach towards artifact care.

General Rules

- Handle museum artifacts as little as possible.
- Handling should be done only by properly trained staff.
- Do not hurry.
- Handle each object as if it were precious.
- Cleanliness is essential.
- Do not smoke, drink or eat around objects.
- Do not use pens or sharp objects around objects.
- If a mishap occurs record the damage in a condition report. Keep and label detached parts.

Before you pick up an object...

- Determine whether your hands are properly protected. Are they clean? Should you be wearing gloves?
 - Cotton gloves should always be used when handling metal, paper, textiles, unglazed pottery, marble and other porous materials.
 - Cotton gloves should not be worn while handling glass and glazed ceramics. To prevent slippage, hands should be clean and dry or latex/vinyl gloves should be worn.
- Examine the object carefully and learn its strengths and weaknesses. Be wary - there may be internal weakness or old (and weak) repairs that are not obvious to the naked eye.
- Are you wearing a belt buckle, likely to scratch the artifact? Should you remove your jewellery?
- If it is too heavy to handle on your own - Get help! Discuss each person's role before moving the artifact.

When you pick an object up...

- Use both hands.
- Never pick it up by the handle, rim or a projecting part.
- Pick it up by its most solid component.
- Handle only one object at a time.

When you move an object...

- Plan your route (be sure all doors will be open) and prepare a place ahead of time to receive the artifact.

- Support all objects while in transit by making use of a carrying tray (for small objects), rigid supports (for paper or flat textiles), or a trolley (for heavy or large objects).
- Never carry dissimilar materials together (e.g. metal and paper).
- Place an object on its most stable surface.
- Provide adequate padding to minimize vibration and abrasion.
- Never drag an object.
- Never walk backwards.
- Nothing should protrude beyond the edges of the container or cart.

Small delicate objects

- Carry in a padded carrying tray.
- To avoid abrasion make use of tissue paper and/or polyethylene padding materials.

Flat flexible objects (e.g. paper documents, textiles, beaded items)

- Always support these types of artifacts from below with a rigid support. Materials for rigid supports might include a piece of fabric-covered plywood, matboard, fluted polyethylene or polypropylene board. Your choice will depend on the weight of the object.
- The rigid support should be slightly larger than the artifact. For light artifacts (e.g. a document) place a piece of mat board on top, to prevent air currents from lifting the artifact off the support while being moved.

Large flat textiles (e.g. quilts and carpets)

- Avoid folding. Roll the item around a large diameter tube (minimum 4") which has been covered with polyethylene sheeting and acid-free tissue. Once the artifact is rolled, secure it by tying with cloth tape.

Books

- Books with damaged spines should be tied with a wide piece of cloth tape (e.g. twill tape) before moving.
- Do not force book spines open while reading or photocopying.

- Do not fold over corners of pages.
- Do not lick fingers while turning pages.

Furniture

- Always lift furniture -- never drag it. Make use of a dolly if the item is too heavy to move on your own.
- Lift by the solid parts of the framework (e.g. chairs by the seat, tables by the legs).
- Remove drawers and tie doors shut before moving.
- Keep furniture upright.

Framed items

- Always carry upright, unless the painted surface is fragile in which case keep the picture plane horizontal at all times.
- Be wary of projecting decorative elements.
- Carry with the glass side towards you, with one hand at the bottom, and the other at one side.
- Place artifact on a well-padded surface. (Carpeting is useful for this purpose.)
- If vertical stacking is necessary, place oversized pieces of cardboard between each frame. Never touch or lean anything directly on the front or back of a painting.

List of Useful Supplies

From archival or art supply stores:

- Acid-free paper
- Cotton Gloves
- Polyethylene/Polypropylene Board
- Polyethylene Foam

From hardware, cleaning or building supply stores:

- Polyethylene Sheeting
- Latex Gloves

From sewing supply stores:

- Twill tape (undyed cotton or polyester)

Bibliography

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