

WORKSHOPS AND CONFERENCES

Federation Workshop Highlights: Collections Care (Part Two)

By Laura Ketcham, Editor of the Federation Bulletin

Part One of the article on the Federation's recent spring workshops focused on protecting artifacts from deterioration by providing proper storage and display conditions. This article will focus on other aspects of collections care such as cleaning textiles; polishing metals; flattening folded documents; and safely handling artifacts. Please note that the article cannot serve as a replacement for attending the workshop; instead, it attempts to summarize the main points.

Cleaning Artifacts

Ms. Rowe noted that the goal of conservation should be to stabilize an artifact, not to restore it to its original state. Signs of wear and tear reflect the use of an artifact over time and are part of its story. However, there are times when you would like to clean an artifact; for those times, Ms. Rowe offered some general guidelines.

Cleaning Textiles

Ms. Rowe strongly discouraged taking any textiles to a dry cleaner. As an example of the dangers of having items dry cleaned, she described what happened when she took a 1920's dress to the cleaners—the dress was returned without its Bakelite buttons. The buttons had apparently dissolved during the cleaning process. Ms. Rowe also discouraged putting any textiles in a washer and dryer. The agitation of the washer and the high heat produced by the dryer can damage old, brittle textiles.

In general, Ms. Rowe recommended that you not wash fragile textiles

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such as silks because the fabric could disintegrate. It may be safe to rinse white linen or cotton items if there are no tears or rips, the stitches are sound, and there is no fraying or rough edges.

Ms. Rowe noted that she does occasionally wash white underwear items such as linen or cotton chemises and petticoats. To wash these items, you would fill a clean large sink or bathtub with lukewarm water and dribble in a little Orvus Textile WA Paste, which is a low-sudsing cleaner sold by Gaylord. Submerge the fabric in the water using a gentle up and down motion, being sure not to wring or twist.

After letting the fabric soak for a half-hour to an hour, you would check it to see how much dirt has come out. To do this, pull the fabric toward you in the sink, and let the water drain away. Fill up the sink again, add more Orvus Paste, soak for another 30 minutes to an hour, and then drain. Continue this process until the water rinses out clear. You would then lay the fabric on a series of towels, roll the towels into a tube and squeeze.

The textile can then be draped over parallel vinyl- or plastic-

covered clotheslines to allow for air circulation. Do not use clothespins or an outdoor clothesline. The Cape Fear Museum has parallel clotheslines installed indoors just for this purpose.

If you are unable to set up a similar configuration, lay the textile flat on clean towels to dry. After a day, you may have to turn the textile over to allow for air circulation. It's best not to use a wooden drying rack unless you protect the fabric from the wood with a towel.

Ms. Rowe noted that she generally does not wash colored textiles. Colored fabrics must first be tested to make sure they are color fast—in other words, to make sure the color won't wash out. It would be best to consult with a professional conservator about washing colored fabrics.

Likewise, Ms. Rowe stated that if you are at all hesitant about wet cleaning an item, then don't wash it. Call a professional textile conservator for their advice.

Other ways to clean textiles include brushing wool items using a clothes brush and vacuuming up surface dust and dirt through a

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screen. To make a screen, simply buy a fiberglass screen from a store such as Home Depot; cut it to the size you want; cover the cut edges with twill tape such as the kind sold by Jo Ann Fabrics; and place the screen over the textile. You would then take the hose extension from a vacuum cleaner with a brush ending and vacuum with that extension, using an up-and-down motion to eliminate suction drag.

Please note that cleaning textiles by surface vacuuming is acceptable only for textiles that are sturdy and in good condition. You do not want to vacuum a textile that is powdering, splitting, or fragmenting or that has loose threads or broken seams.

Ms. Rowe strongly suggested that you consult with a professional conservator if you have any concerns about cleaning an artifact.

Cleaning Metals

Many people assume that tarnish on a metal artifact is harmful. But Ms. Rowe noted that tarnish on a metal actually provides protection, and she cautioned that polishing is an abrasive process that removes parts of the metal. She said she polishes metal artifacts only when they are about to go on display. Otherwise, if an artifact is in storage and is tarnished, she simply covers it with silver cloth to prevent further tarnishing.

To polish an artifact before putting it on display, Ms. Rowe recommends using a low-grit polisher such as Rubi-Brite or Pre-lim, which is sold by Gaylord. Following the directions on the container, work the substance on and wipe it off,

repeating the process until the item is polished. When the item is clean, you would coat it with Renaissance Wax, which is also sold by Gaylord; let it dry; and then buff. The wax will help protect the item from tarnishing for about a year. When storing polished items, cover them in silver cloth, which is available from stores such as Hancock Fabric. You can even sew your own bags of silver cloth to customize them for particular objects. Ms. Rowe said that bags are ideal for trophies.

To clean wrought iron before putting it on display, you could carefully brush it with a soft-bristle brush. However, if there is any rust, call in a professional conservator to stop further damage.

Flattening Paper Documents

At the Museum of the Cape Fear, staff members often flatten folded documents before storing them to avoid the risk of documents cracking along the folded line.

Documents can be flattened by putting them in a humidity chamber. Ms. Rowe stated that you can create your own chamber using a large sink or bath tub. She then described the process that she has used to flatten documents.

Using PVC pipe, Cape Fear staff created a framework to suspend fiberglass screening in a sink. They cut the screening to size and lashed it to the pipe frame, with the pipe legs holding the screen and its frame about midway in the sink or tub.

When Ms. Rowe wants to flatten a document, she places dish tubs

containing about 1 inch of water underneath the screening. She then places the document on the screen, which is suspended over the tub of water. A heavy piece of Plexiglass is placed over the top of the sink as a lid to keep the moisture in. Ms. Rowe stated that if you do not have Plexiglass, you could try draping heavy plastic over the sink or tub, like a tent—anything to keep in the moisture.

After 24 hours, when the moisture has had a chance to relax any folds or creases in the paper, Ms. Rowe checks the document; removes it, and places it between layers of blotter paper, being sure to smooth out any folds or creases. Over the blotter paper she puts another piece of heavy Plexiglas as a uniform weight, which helps dry and flatten the document at the same time.

Once the document is flattened and dry, Ms. Rowe sprays it with deacidification spray from Gaylord and then encapsulates the item in a Mylar pocket, as described in Part One of this article.

Pictures from Ms. Rowe's presentation showing the process of flattening documents will be available on the "News" page of the Federation's web site at www.fnchs.org/fund/news.htm; look under the "Workshops" heading.

Handling Artifacts

One aspect of collections care that is often overlooked is how to handle artifacts. Ms. Rowe noted that the oils in one's hands can damage sensitive materials; the oils can even etch into metal. Ms. Rowe recommended using cotton or latex

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gloves when handling sensitive items such as furniture, textiles, wooden objects, and metals.

In general, it is not necessary to wear gloves when handling glass and ceramic items, because these items are almost impervious to the oils on hands. If you do choose to wear gloves when handling those items, be sure to wear plastic latex gloves, which provide a better grip on an object. Avoid wearing cotton gloves, which can be slick and can result in an artifact slipping through your fingers.

Ms. Rowe noted that she usually does not wear gloves when handling paper items, even though paper is affected by the oils in one's hands. She avoids wearing gloves because they hinder her ability to feel when she is about to tear or chip brittle edges. If you do not wear gloves when handling paper, be sure to wash and dry your hands before touching each artifact. If you do want to wear gloves when handling paper items, Ms. Rowe recommended wearing latex gloves, which can give you a better "feel" for the paper.

Ms. Rowe also mentioned some general guidelines on picking up artifacts. To avoid putting stress on weak parts of an object, she recommended that you lift an object using its strongest part. For example, instead of picking up a teapot or cup by its handle, which could break, you would lift it by holding its body. Likewise, instead of picking up a side chair by its arms, you would lift it by the seat. Your goal is to safely support the artifact's weight without putting undue stress on it.

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Some Final Notes

There are many resources available to help you care for your collections. Part One of this article mentioned several web sites and books that can be useful. Another resource Ms. Rowe recommended is the Canadian Conservation Institute. This institute publishes useful technical bulletins, *CCI Notes*, newsletters, and more. The newsletter is free, as is a database by which one can search a portion of the many articles the institute has written on collections care. Ms. Rowe highly recommended the *CCI Notes*, which can be purchased individually or as a set. The institute offers 105 notes covering the care of textiles, metals, paper, paintings, books, and more. To learn more about CCI, you can visit the web site www.cci-icc.gc.ca or write to the institute at 1030 Innes Road, Ottawa ON K1A 0M5, Canada

Ms. Rowe also recommended the American Institute of Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, which publishes a directory of conservators. This organization also offers free online brochures on caring for objects; a free online guide to selecting a conservator; and an online form through which one can request information about conservators in your area. To

learn more, visit <http://aic.stanford.edu/about/index.html>.

Finally, Ms. Rowe recommended applying to Heritage Preservation's Conservation Assessment Program to get a conservation assessment of your museum or historic site's collection, environmental conditions, and site. More information about this grant can be found on page 9 of this newsletter.

Ms. Rowe is willing to answer questions from Federation members about conservation care. You can reach her by email at browe@nhc.gov.com or by mail at Cape Fear Museum of History and Science, 814 Market Street, Wilmington, NC 28401.

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Paper Preparation (Flattening Folded Documents)

Humidity Chamber

Large sink

Screening on
framework



Tubs for water

Humidity Chamber

Lid to keep
moisture in

Wait 24 hrs.;
then check



FLATTEN

Blotter paper

Large heavy
weight

Wait 24 hrs.;
then check

Deacidify

Encapsulate

