WHEN TO CALL A CONSERVATOR
Robyn Haynie | Utah Museum of Fine Arts
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WELCOME & OVERVIEW

Agenda Overview

SCHEDULE
- Welcome & Overview
- Introduction to Conservation
- The Dirt
- Cleaning: Dry Methods
- Cleaning: Wet Methods
- Hands-On Activities
  - Rolling Cotton Swabs
  - Natural Rubber Sponge
  - Vacuuming Textiles
- Wrap-Up

GOALS FOR TODAY
- Difference between Preventive vs. Remedial Conservation
- Overview of wet and dry cleaning methods
- Practice with dry cleaning
- Importance of observation and documentation
- Understand limits of what you should and should not attempt on your own
Module Instructor

Robyn Haynie
Assistant Director of Collections & Exhibitions / Conservator
Utah Museum of Fine Arts
robynhaynie@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION TO CONSERVATION

What is Conservation?
MITIGATION OF CHANGE OVER TIME

All things deteriorate in time.
Virgil
Preventive Conservation

- Addresses “Agents of Deterioration”
- Focuses on object’s environment to prevent deterioration
- Preventive conservation includes:
  - Monitoring and controlling environment (relative humidity, temperature, light)
  - Using appropriate storage and display materials
  - Creating and following an integrated pest management plan
  - Creating and following a housekeeping schedule
  - Objects handled only by trained personnel

Remedial Conservation

- Addresses a critical need
  - Structural stabilization
  - Stop active deterioration
- Is irreversible
  - Although hopefully re-treatable
  - May alter object’s aesthetics
- Is NOT restoration
  - Goal is to stabilize object
  - Not to make it look better

Conservation Decision-Making

1) Why is action needed?
2) Can the use or environment be adapted instead of intervening on the object(s)?
3) Do I need to consult stakeholders, peers, other specialists?
4) What are my options for action which will produce an appropriate result with minimum intervention?
5) What effect will my action(s) have on the evidence of the factors contributing to the identity and significance of the object(s)?

HANDOUT | Conservation Decision-Making and List of Conservators & Other Professionals available for Utah-based projects

Adapted from Victoria & Albert Museum Conservation Department Ethics Checklist 2nd Edition, December 2004
Conservation Decision-Making (cont’d)

6) Do I have sufficient information and skill to assess and implement actions(s)?

7) Is my intended action(s) the best use of resources and is it sustainable?

8) How will my action(s) affect subsequent action(s)?

9) Have I taken into account the future use and location of the object(s) and have I made decisions accordingly?

10) Will my action(s) be fully documented to a known and accepted standard?

11) Will the information resulting from my action(s) be accessible?

Adapted from Victoria & Albert Museum Conservation Department Ethics Checklist 2nd Edition, December 2004

Cleaning Collections Objects

- Cleaning is an important element of collections management
- Cleaning is an irreversible conservation treatment
- Over-cleaning an object can cause irreparable harm and decrease an object’s value

THE DIRT
A Bit About Dirt

- Dirt is made up of tiny particles of hair, skin, pollen, sand, minerals, etc.
- Dirt particles can be SHARP
- Dirt can be hygroscopic (absorb water), which can make it difficult to remove from an object’s surface

Where Did The Dirt Come From?

IS THE ‘DIRT’ SIGNIFICANT?

- Dust build-up on framed works in storage at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts
- Pillow from Abraham Lincoln’s deathbed (photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

What Can We Learn From Dirt?

- Vulnerable objects
- Effectiveness of gallery maintenance / HVAC systems
- Pests
- Object history

- Food residue inside ancient Egyptian bowl (Photo courtesy of Susan Wyne, Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.)
How Often Should We Clean Objects?

- Depends on your collection, storage, and environmental conditions
- Check your collection regularly
- Don’t forget about objects in storage
- Keeping your spaces clean will help reduce the amount of cleaning necessary for your collection

When Shouldn’t You Work on an Object?

- If the object doesn’t need it
- If an object is visibly unstable or fragile (e.g., flaking, disintegrating, powdering, cracking, etc.)
- If you are unsure of the source of the soil/residue you are trying to remove
- If the object is moldy
- If you are unsure about what the object was made from or how it was made
- If you are not comfortable with the techniques you are using

Wait! I Want to Do More Than Clean!

- Remedial conservation is complex – there is no recipe book for treatments and much of the work depends on the specific context of the object and institution.
- It is best to consult with a conservator about remedial conservation projects. They can provide an idea of the scope of the work needed and what might be undertaken in-house.
- Be prepared to provide them with detailed photographs and condition information for your object (documentation).
- Conservation projects are GREAT FOR GRANTS! Think about how involving a conservator could achieve a complex project and possibly build skills among your staff and volunteers.
CLEANING: DRY METHODS

Before You Clean...

- Examine
- Document
- Assess
- Prepare

Testing

- Testing is a **critical part** of all conservation work
- **Practice** the method and materials you will use on **non-collections objects** until you are comfortable with the techniques
- Do a **small test** on your object prior to undertaking the whole treatment
Cleaning Methods: Dry/Surface Cleaning

- Do not involve chemicals or solvents of any kind – INCLUDING WATER!
- Will typically address minor dust build-up

More About Dry Cleaning Methods

How Do I Know When to Stop?

- When you do not see any more dirt or dust on your swab or sponge or brush.
- Through observation – pay attention to the object’s surface. Regularly take breaks and assess your progress.
- If you notice unexpected changes in the object’s surface.
- Listen to your instincts – be cautious and stop if you are unsure.
CLEANING: WET METHODS

Cleaning Methods: Wet

- Involve chemicals or solvents (including water!)
- Should not be undertaken unless advised by a conservator
- Remember, like dissolves like (if you don’t understand the chemistry of your object, you could be in trouble…)

Think Back to Chemistry Class…
Products to Avoid

- Silver polishes
- Windex
- Commercial detergents and leather dressings
- Compressed air
- Bread

How Do We Know When to Stop?

- Careful observation
- Don’t force it!

Clean Your Cleaning Supplies!

- Don’t forget
- Make it a part of your maintenance procedures
You’re Not Done Yet!

- Make sure the condition information you recorded before you cleaned the object is attached to your object file.
- Add information about the cleaning you undertook.
- Keep a log of your collections maintenance activities – note how frequently your spaces get cleaned, the methods and supplies used, and any observations during the cleaning.

What’s in Your Cleaning Kit?

- Vulcanized rubber sponge (aka ‘Smoke sponge’)
- Microfiber cleaning cloth
- Bamboo skewers & cotton wool
- Baby nasal aspirator
- Brushes
- Mesh
- Orvus paste

HANDS-ON ACTIVITY
HANDS-ON ACTIVITY #1
BASIC DRY CLEANING TECHNIQUES = 60 mins

1) Instructor demonstrates techniques (20 minutes):
   a) Rolling Cotton Swabs
   b) Cleaning with Smoke Sponge
   c) Vacuuming

2) At your table, choose an object to clean (on your own or in pairs).

3) Practice techniques using handout provided (40 mins):
   a) Smoke Sponge (20 mins)
   b) Vacuuming (20 mins)

HANDS-ON ACTIVITY #1 – section A
ROLLING COTTON SWABS

1) Use cotton wool and bamboo skewers:
   - Take a long, thin strip of cotton wool in one hand.
   - Applying pressure between the fingers and thumb of your non-dominant hand, twist the bamboo skewer until all of the cotton is wrapped around the stick.
   - The size and shape of the swab can be customized by the amount of cotton used.

2) Hands-on practice

HANDS-ON ACTIVITY #1 – section B
CLEANING WITH SMOKE SPONGE

1) Using instruction sheet, record your observations about the object (5 mins)

2) Clean object (10 mins)
   - After assessing your object, test a small area
   - Dab soiled surface gently to remove dirt and debris
   - Move to clean area of sponge as you work on your object

3) Record your treatment and observations (5 mins)
HANDS-ON ACTIVITY #1 – section C

DRY VACUUMING

1) Using instruction sheet, record your observations about the objects (5 mins)

2) Clean objects (10 mins)
   - After assessing your object, test a small area
   - Set vacuum to lowest setting and ensure nozzle does not drag across object surface
   - Vacuum through mesh screen

3) Record your treatment and observations (5 mins)

WRAP UP

Quick Recap

What We Have Covered Today:
- Preventive vs. Remedial Conservation
- Overview of wet and dry cleaning methods
- Dry cleaning techniques for object maintenance
Key Takeaways

- Preventive conservation is a cost-effective and minimally impactful way to prevent object deterioration
- Routine maintenance of collections spaces and collections objects is a critical part of collections management
- Any treatment of an object—including cleaning—should only be done after careful observation and documentation

What principles and/or strategies have you gained from our work today that you can apply to your museum?

Recommended Resources for Today

- American Institute for Conservation (AIC) www.culturalheritage.org
- Association for Registrars and Collections Specialists (ARCS) http://www.arcsinfo.org/
- Canadian Conservation Institute Notes https://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/conserveogram/cons_toc.html
- Northwestern University Press, Art Handling, Collections Care Information Network (PACCIN) www.paccin.org
- National Park Service, Conservation and Collections Care Information Network (PACCIN) www.paccin.org
- Preservation, Art Handling, Collections Care Information Network (PACCIN) www.paccin.org
Wrap Up! Thanks for Coming!

- This workshop is part of the Utah Division of Arts & Museums’ Office of Museum Services Skills Lab training series. Subscribe to our newsletter to learn about new topics in coming months!
- This workshop is part of STaPeS-UT, a partnership between the Utah Division of Arts & Museums, Utah Division of State History, and Utah Humanities, with funding from the Utah Department of Heritage & Arts, the State of Utah, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Emily Johnson | Utah Division of Arts & Museums
emilyjohnson@utah.gov | 801.245.7209
Jennifer Ortiz | Utah Division of Arts & Museums
jenortiz@utah.gov | 801.245.7288
Megan van Frank | Utah Humanities
mvanfrank@utahhumanities.org | 801.359.9670