



Collections Advocacy Toolkit

Understanding the Technical Aspects of Collections Care

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Why Save Art and Historic Artifacts?

Societies worldwide have identified many reasons for supporting cultural organizations and preserving historically significant collections.

With such acts as the establishment of the State Library and the founding of the Historic and Museum Commission, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has acknowledged the value of archives, libraries, and museums to the state. These institutions play key roles in the economy and in sustaining the prosperity of communities. They help preserve the history of the state and nation; provide valuable educational experiences to citizens of all ages; educate the young about state history; attract significant amounts of tourist dollars; and offer low-cost, family-friendly attractions.

Cultural organizations can express community or group identity, generate consensus and historical continuity, and provide neutral environments for the examination of traditions, cultural norms, and ideologies. They can convey scientific and technological progress, discovery, and knowledge gained in the past but still relevant today. Every museum, historical society, historic house, library, and archive commits to one or several of these objectives. What role does your institution play?

Collections and individual objects held in cultural organizations have aesthetic, commemorative, patriotic, legal, and/or evidentiary value. Some items are treasured for their survival or longevity, especially in the face of intentional destruction or social disintegration. Some objects have substantial market value.

Individuals who want to learn more about the proper care and storage of their own fragile family keepsakes and heirlooms—which often have sentimental, if not significant market, value—may turn to professional conservation staff for help. Contact the [Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts](#) for assistance, or use this [Find a Conservator](#) tool from the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works.

Collections Care

Museums, historical societies, historic sites, libraries, and archives share a common characteristic: They acquire, organize, interpret, display, and preserve collections for the benefit of the public. The

collections contain unique treasures that hold personal memories and associations, many of national significance.

The public entrusts cultural organizations to serve as guardians of this material evidence, with the expectation that the organizations will model responsible stewardship of collections. This complex task requires the attention of all staff members and the cooperation of visitors and guests. Collections care activities include oversight of administrative and management policies, finance and budgeting, building system design and controls, appropriate handling of collections, and treatment of objects when necessary.

Collections care is an umbrella term that covers preservation and conservation.

What is Preservation?

Preservation consists of a coherent administrative strategy to minimize vulnerabilities and reduce the rate of natural deterioration of collections by improving the environments in which an organization displays and stores objects.

Artifacts in cultural organizations are made of paper, metal, glass, ceramics, wood, fibers, plastics, and adhesives. These materials are all subject to processes of natural deterioration and damage. Natural disasters, accidents, poor handling, pollution, insects, and mold as well as exposure to light, extreme temperatures and humidity, and fluctuations in climate cause damage and accelerate deterioration that would otherwise be preventable. Cultural objects are also vulnerable to theft, vandalism, and neglect.

The needs of cultural organizations and their collections are multifaceted and complex, and should be strategically addressed. A preservation strategy involves assessing conditions; listing and prioritizing remedies and actions; and planning. These steps should culminate in a strategic preservation plan.

Assessment takes into account an institution's mission, policies, practices, staff training, user demands, and security and emergency preparedness issues. It also examines climate, condition of buildings, and control over environments in which the collections are held. Knowledgeable staff can carry out these assessment steps with expert help. Expert advice is used to determine the adequacy of policies and procedures, building systems, environmental conditions, pest control, housekeeping, security, disaster response services, and storage conditions.

The assessment process usually yields a list of needed remedies and related actions. The list may include relatively inexpensive actions such as staff training; rethinking policies about loans; rotating and limiting exposure of items on exhibit; or altering handling, shipping, and housekeeping practices. The assessment may also indicate the need to install fire suppression, lighting, security, and monitoring systems; to improve display and storage furnishings; or to control collection environments. Invariably, the list of remedies exceeds the resources available to complete them. To maximize available resources, administrators need to select and prioritize the list of remedies to be carried out.

Priorities are set based on the ease and cost of implementing certain actions, on the amount of time that can be invested, and on considerations about which actions would have the greatest benefit for the stability and longevity of collections. Benefits are measured according to the values, structure, and long-

term aspirations of the organization. For example, if the organization plans to move to a different facility, then it would not be in the organization's best interest to invest in the installation of new systems in the current building. On the other hand, if the institution intends to attract new audiences with borrowed exhibits, then installing and monitoring building systems on par with the demands of the lending institutions becomes a priority. The priority-setting process requires the time and attention of executive or top administrative staff, and it is essential to developing written preservation and emergency preparedness plans.

A detailed preservation plan directs and guides the ongoing care and management of collections by outlining the management, care, and future goals for the collections, with preservation addressed as a stated goal. The plan should be based on the mission and vision of the organization, the institutional goals, and projected use and growth of collections. The preservation plan should outline goals, objectives, and strategies for the next three to five years. It should focus on staffing, funding, space, building, environment, security, emergency preparedness, collections development, access, intellectual control over collections, and more detailed topics that relate specifically to collections preservation. The plan should also outline the actions necessary to provide adequate staff and funding, assign responsibilities, and set a schedule for implementation.

The plan can serve as a useful tool in justifying preservation grant funding requests. Funds may be requested for projects often included in preservation plans, such as installations of building systems, upgrades to storage units, or rehousing of individual items by outside contractors and vendors.

Another activity that is helpful to the preservation planning process is surveying collections and evaluating the condition of valuable objects. Depending on the size and scope of your collections, a survey may include all the items in the collections or be limited to a statistically derived number of samples. To determine the sampling frame to be used for the survey, consult an experienced preservation specialist or a statistician.

Data from a collection-level survey will help identify overall condition of related items in a collection and guide discussion and planning about treatment, item housing, and storage. Discussion and planning based on systematic observation of the selected items are indispensable for setting priorities and estimating time and costs of supplies and equipment.

What is Conservation?

Whereas preservation refers to holistic, collection-wide protective measures, conservation suggests active intervention to repair or reduce signs of damage and to halt deterioration processes of single items. At the item level, a conservator will prepare a condition report and suggest possible options for treatment. The steps and possible consequences are discussed with the collections staff and a course of action is agreed upon.

Conservation activities before treatment include laboratory examination, documentation, and planning guided by research and consultation. Development of a treatment plan precedes actual work. Treatment of fiber-based objects may include dry surface cleaning, removal of mold and insect residues, humidifying, flattening, rehousing, or mending, as well as more invasive actions such as washing,

relining, or rebinding. Objects made of other or mixed materials may undergo other treatment processes, pre-planned and tested in order to prevent additional damage. Before- and after-treatment photographs and a final report provide a record of the process.

Conservation must be carried out by trained and experienced specialists. Conservators are knowledgeable about the chemistry and physical dynamics of the materials, the historical and production contexts of the objects, and the professional codes of ethics that guide the work. Employment of these individuals requires adequate allocation of funds.

Funding Preservation and Conservation Projects: Case Studies

Institutions have found creative ways to obtain support and funding for ongoing preservation projects. Several of the projects listed below received [Conservation Assessment Program](#) grants through a cooperative agreement between Heritage Preservation and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). Other examples can be found in publications such as [Capitalize on Collections Care](#) and [The Heritage Health Index Report to the Henry Luce Foundation on the State of American Art Collections](#).

[Martin Luther King, Jr. Archive Collaborative](#)

Several large corporations and foundations contributed millions of dollars for the acquisition, arrangement, preservation, digitization, and publication of the Martin Luther King, Jr. papers and personal artifacts. Scheduled for auction by Sotheby's, the collection was purchased in 2006 on behalf of Morehouse College, where it was processed and organized by the archival staff of the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center. The collection includes close to 100,000 items. In 2007, the Bank of America Charitable Foundation funded renovations of the Woodruff Library's archives and special collections reading room, intending to attract researchers to this historically significant collection and to drive economic development to Atlanta. Also in that year, Morehouse, the Howard Gotlieb Archival Center at Boston University, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University formed a collaborative partnership in order to coordinate efforts to preserve historical materials related to King.

[Saving St. Augustine's Architectural Treasures](#)

With a National Parks Service grant, conservators and technicians at the University of Florida Libraries stabilized and digitized 260 drawings by renowned late 19th-century architects John Carrère and Thomas Hastings. Possibly the only remaining items left after a fire destroyed the offices of the famous firm, the drawings were discovered in extremely bad condition. A unique result of the 18-month conservation project consists of a blog detailing the historical context of the drawings, their condition, and conservation treatment. The Libraries' exhibit coordinator produced an informative [digital poster](#) to promote the project.

[Jack Hadley Black History Museum](#)

Two years after their 2006 re-opening in a new facility, the Hadley Black History Museum was awarded a Conservation Assessment Program grant by Heritage Preservation and IMLS to develop their collections

policies and establish a long-range institutional plan. In 2009, with a grant from the Walmart Foundation and stimulus funds from the Georgia Department of Labor, the museum purchased equipment and software to digitally photograph and catalog over 2,000 objects to make them accessible for research to students and those interested in African American history but unable to visit the small museum in Thomasville, Georgia. By committing to their long-range plan, the museum has obtained the trust and respect of the community as well as significant gifts from donors. In 2012, the National Endowment for the Arts designated the Hadley as a Blue Star Museum. The designation secured sponsorship from Metlife Foundation to subsidize free admission to military personnel and their families.

[Pottery Project](#)

With the help of two major federal grants and donations from dozens of individuals, the Arizona State Museum set up a climate-controlled vault and a conservation laboratory to house more than 20,000 ceramic pots and treat the most fragile or damaged among them. The ceramic pots represent over 2,000 years of ceramic production in the American Southwest. The vision for the project brought together as partners the Ak-Chin, Gila River, and Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Communities; the City of Tucson; and the Arizona State Museum.

Documenting Preservation and Conservation Projects

As people become more knowledgeable about the deterioration of artifacts, they gain a greater appreciation for the obligations that cultural organizations take on. This growing appreciation can cement relationships between community members and cultural organizations, resulting in added donations and stronger advocacy for the institutions' efforts to seek public funding. Spark your constituents' interest in preservation and leverage their knowledge to gain support for your needs.

Publicly documenting results is one way to increase the appeal of preservation projects and raise awareness about the need for ongoing public support. Museums, historic sites, libraries, and archives create websites, blogs, press releases, and social media links in order to highlight project needs, seek support, demonstrate results, and inspire others.

Additionally, cultural organizations large and small have been drawing new audiences by providing public conservation consultations, demonstrations, and workshops. Examples include these [demonstrations](#) given by the National Museum of Australia. In another project, Temple Contemporary, an art gallery associated with Temple University in Philadelphia, hosted conservators in October, November, and December 2013 to open the conservation process to the public. They received visitors both in-person and [online](#) via a live "conservation cam."