



## NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

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# The Care and Handling of Objects

Twelve illustrated ways to prevent damaging works of art

By Robert Hauser, Museum Conservator

The word “care” here denotes “attention to detail” and the word “handling” is defined as the “skillful or artful management of physical things”. The care and handling of works of art require knowledge about the condition and materials that objects are made of. It requires planning ahead for all aspects of the process (i.e. environment, insurance, packing, photography, security, storage, supplies, etc.).

This article shares with our readers some of the common mistakes made when handling objects. The following twelve descriptions and illustrations review unsafe care and handling practices contrasted with alternative methods for the safe care and handling of objects.

1. Dirty hands have natural oils and grime that can stain and corrode materials. “Wash hands and limit handling and/or wear gloves that provide for safe handling.”



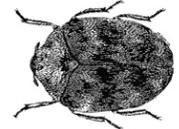
2. Prolonged exposure to excessive temperatures and humidity can promote mold, physical and chemical damage. “Avoid storing and exhibiting objects in hot attics and humid basements and bathrooms.”



3. Continual exposure of light-sensitive objects to daylight and artificial light can fade colors and desiccate organic materials. “Reduce all types and levels of light exposure by using products that can shade, diffuse and filter ultraviolet, visible and infrared sources. On a sunny day watch for light strikes on objects that over time can cause damage”.



4. Pest and insect infestations can decompose and stain materials. “Materials stored out of sight and mind should not be assumed safe. Periodic inspection of stored materials is the best prevention against infestations. Work with pest and insect control professionals who have experience with safely eradicating infestations”.



5. Be aware that your four legged pet if given a chance may want to chew, scratch or jump on a valued treasure. “Be vigilant and keep your treasures away from damaging claws, teeth and wagging tails. Display or store objects at a safe distance they cannot reach.”



6. Routine housecleaning can put many objects in “harm’s way” that attention to detail can prevent. “When using a vacuum cleaner be careful that it doesn’t collide with and dent furniture or drag and tear an expensive rug. Be cautious of spray bottle cleaning solutions that may contain chemicals that could react with and damage objects. Understand the limitations and use of cleaning products and that no product is meant to clean all things.”



7. Avoid placing an object “just for now” in a temporary location without considering the potential risks. “The consequences of a decision made while distracted can result in the object becoming damaged. It is common in these circumstances to forget about the location of an object and back into it with your elbow.”



8. When leaning over an object be aware of what is in your shirt or suit pocket and how the contents might be a hazard to the object being examined. "A pointed pencil in a pocket or behind an ear or loose eyeglasses could fall and puncture or stain a print, painting, photograph, etc."



9. The removal of a book from a shelf of books is usually done incorrectly by placing a finger at the head or top of the spine and pulling and dragging the book off the shelf causing the top of the spine to tear and pull away from the text block. "A safer method involves placing your thumb and finger around the middle of the spine and lifting the book off the shelf while supporting the bottom of the book with the other hand. In some instances it is necessary to slightly push back with your fingers the two adjoining books in order to gain access to the middle of the spine of the book being remove".



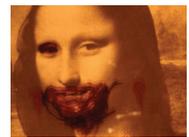
10. When hanging a picture many factors have to be considered to prevent the picture from falling off the wall. "Understand the condition and weight of the picture and the type of wall involved to determine the proper hardware and method of attachment to be used on the back of the picture and on the wall."



11. One of the most dangerous moments in the life of a work of art is when it is being moved. "When moving an object all contingencies must be planned. The condition of the object needs to be considered before handling. Should the object first be wrapped and placed in a carrier before moving? The use of two hands is usually best. Are other people needed? If more people are involved be sure there is agreement about who is doing what, when and how. Does everyone understand the purpose of the move and has the final destination been prepared for safely accepting the object?"



12. When careful handling and exhibiting of objects are followed accidents are less likely to happen. Likewise, careless handling and "showing off" your priceless objects to friends, colleagues and strangers can put your objects at risk. "During these moments a wedding ring might chip a porcelain vase, a glass of red wine might be spilled on a print, a pointing finger might puncture a brittle canvas, an uninvited guest might be up to mischief and add graffiti to a valuable painting".



### Summary:

These twelve care and handling examples are only a few among potentially hundreds that could be considered. The purpose of this article has been to describe unsafe and safe care and handling practices and not the actual treatment of works of art. To learn more about preservation and treatment approaches please refer to the selected resources.

The care and handling terms are from The American Heritage Dictionary, 1970.

### SELECTED RESOURCES:

#### Bibliography:

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Caring for Your Collectibles: How to Preserve Your Old and New Treasures.  
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#### **Organizations:**

American Institute for Conservation: [www.conservation-us.org](http://www.conservation-us.org)  
American Association for State and Local History: [www.aaslh.org](http://www.aaslh.org)  
Canadian Conservation Institute: [www.cci-icc.gc.ca](http://www.cci-icc.gc.ca)  
Getty Conservation Institute: [www.getty.edu](http://www.getty.edu)  
Heritage Preservation: [www.heritagepreservation.org](http://www.heritagepreservation.org)  
Library of Congress: [www.loc.gov/preserv/treasurebrochure.html](http://www.loc.gov/preserv/treasurebrochure.html)  
National Center for Preservation Technology and Training: [www.ncptt.nps.gov](http://www.ncptt.nps.gov)  
National Park Service: [www.nps.gov/hfc/conservation](http://www.nps.gov/hfc/conservation)  
New England Conservation Association: [www.neconservationassociation.org](http://www.neconservationassociation.org)  
New England Museum Association: [www.nemanet.org](http://www.nemanet.org)  
Northeast Document Conservation Center: [www.nedcc.org](http://www.nedcc.org)  
Regional Alliance for Preservation: [www.rap-arcc.org](http://www.rap-arcc.org)  
Williamstown Art Conservation Center: [www.williamstownart.org](http://www.williamstownart.org)

#### **Suppliers:**

Archival Products: [www.archival.com](http://www.archival.com)  
Archivart: [www.archivart.com](http://www.archivart.com)  
Conservation Resources: [www.conservationresources.com](http://www.conservationresources.com)  
Gaylord: [www.gaylord.com](http://www.gaylord.com)  
Hollinger Corporation: [www.hollingercorp.com](http://www.hollingercorp.com)  
Hollinger Metal Edge: [www.hollingermetaledge.com](http://www.hollingermetaledge.com)  
Light Impressions: [www.lightimpressionsdirect.com](http://www.lightimpressionsdirect.com)  
University Products: [www.universityproducts.com](http://www.universityproducts.com)  
Talas: [www.talasonline.com](http://www.talasonline.com)

The term "archival quality" infers that the most appropriate materials and best care practices will be used in promoting the preservation of an object. For further definitions refer to: The Society of American Archivists "Glossary of Archival Terminology." [www.archivists.org](http://www.archivists.org)

#### **NOTE**

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