



SAVING YOUR Treasures

A Website about what you can do to protect and preserve the things of importance in your life



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WHY NOT TRY TO FIX IT YOURSELF?

When we break or damage something in our personal collections, it is only natural to want to fix it. We might get out the glue and tape and start our own campaign to fix our objects, feeling certain that we will do a great job. Unfortunately, the effects of inappropriate treatments and materials can be worse than if the piece had been left alone in the first place. It is often difficult and costly to “undue” and amateur repairs. Be aware that many types of damage can be exacerbated by a well-intentioned amateur repair, adding to the cost of professional treatment.

What to Do When Something is Damaged...

Breaks:

When an object is broken or damaged wrap each piece separately in white, acid-free tissue paper and place the pieces in a clearly labeled box. It is important to collect even the tiniest bits, which may have scattered widely across the floor, beneath carpets or furniture. The conservator will try to fit even the tiniest pieces back in conservation treatment. Do not try to fit and refit the broken pieces together. The grating and rubbing of the pieces at the edges will break off tiny portions of the object and make the repair more difficult and less effective. Do not tape broken fragments together or onto other pieces as the tape can be difficult to remove and may cause damage to the surface of the broken parts, especially gilding, painted, or finished surfaces.

The sooner a damaged item is taken to a conservator, the better. Metals, ceramics, and glass objects will not normally deteriorate whilst awaiting repair, but edges are likely to get dirty and the pieces more vulnerable to further damage if you leave them to one side and forget about them. Some low fired ceramics and many organic materials like wood, gourds, leather, and ivory can warp and become “sprung” overtime, making a good join difficult.

Stains:

No matter how careful an owner is accidents do happen. Stains are not only visually disfiguring but may also damage textiles and other materials. The longer a stain is left the more difficult it is to remove. However, stain removal is a complex business depending not only on the content of the stain but also on the composition of the object or textile.

Cleaning methods for modern textile fabrics and machine-made carpets such as dry cleaning, steam cleaning, and carpet shampoos are not appropriate for historic carpets and textiles. The first step should be to soak up as much of the spilled liquid as possible using absorbent white cloth or blotting paper. Do not be tempted to 'rub' the affected area. The next step is to contact a conservator as soon as possible. The aim of conservation is to reverse damage where possible and ensure future damage and deterioration is kept to a minimum.

A conservator will be able to tell you what method of cleaning is best for your specific material and stain. Whether or not a textile or other object is a suitable candidate for washing depends on its condition and materials and if the dyes are likely to run. Wet cleaning is an aggressive and irreversible process and is best determined and performed by a trained conservator.

Scrubbing stains off wood or other porous and soft materials can do more harm than good. Stains often soak down into the nooks and crannies of a porous material and need to be drawn back out. Scrubbing just wears away the surface and leaves scratches and other damage without removing the embedded stain.

Jewelry:

Jewelry is often very complex in both structure and materials. A poor repair can weaken the piece and can also be unsightly. Most good jewelers are able to repair modern items but only a conservator or jeweler who has specialized in antique jewelry should work on such objects. Mainstream jewelers do not generally have specialized experience and expertise.

Antique jewelry or pieces that are painted or very fragile should not be cleaned. Improper cleaning materials and techniques can actually damage antique items and can reduce their monetary value. Ultra-sonic cleaners are sometimes recommended for jewelry but they may cause some stones and pearls to shatter if care is not taken and the stones are not checked carefully with a microscope before cleaning. It is better to exercise caution in these cases and trust the item to a conservator.

Ceramics and Glass:

Do not attempt to repair damaged ceramic or glass yourself. A conservator will have knowledge of the technology, the historical styles, and the chemistry of materials used to make and mend these items. A great deal of forethought and deliberation is put into determining a treatment plan. A conservator will have to determine if the object had been repaired before, the type of surface decoration such as gilt or glaze, and the condition of the object itself. Conservators only use materials and techniques that have been proven not to damage the artifact and proven to stand the test of time.

Furniture:

Most pieces of furniture are complex structures, sometimes made with several different materials, for example and object may contain: wood (of a variety of species), metals, upholstery, leather, glass, ceramic, tortoiseshell, ivory, paint, varnishes, and metal leaf. All of these are at risk from deterioration, and each has its own preservation needs.

Compromise is inevitable with such a variety of materials but, with care, the need for treatment should be infrequent. When undertaking treatment, conservators adopt an approach of 'minimum intervention' and look for a balance between function, aesthetics and the preservation of the historic finishes and surfaces which have the potential to reveal much about the history of a piece.

Conservators are trained and skilled in cleaning, stabilizing, and repairing most types of materials. Don't worry if you are not sure which specialist conservator to approach; any conservator should be able to give you basic initial advice about your needs. A conservator will be more familiar with the composition of such objects and know how to conserve them in a sympathetic way, so that their life can be extended as far as possible.

Home Repairs:

It is worthwhile and cost-effective to have valuable (sentimental or monetary) items repaired and conserved by a conservator. If you try to repair objects yourself, you may cause more damage than good by, for example, applying too much adhesive or the wrong adhesive which can spread over the surface and become hard to remove. Pieces can easily slip out of alignment during adhesion and become fixed in the wrong position. The subsequent removal of these previous repairs by conservators is time-consuming and adds to the cost of the professional repair.

What a Conservator Can Do:

The owner or caretaker can undertake preventive care measures to clean, maintain, and protect historic, decorative, or artistic artifacts. However, there are many instances when a conservator can provide invaluable help. A conservator can assess the condition of both individual items and collections. He or she brings state of the art information on materials and technology. They can safely and knowledgeably carry out treatments to stabilize fragile artifacts, make structural repairs, and consolidate unstable surfaces. A conservator can also provide advice on the best method of display, and help with packing for safe removal and transportation.

Expect a conservator to give you options about how your piece will look if you are asking them to make a repair. Repairs can be "invisible" in some instances, but for some types of objects this may not be appropriate. The skills of a conservator are not restricted to treating individual items; he or she is also qualified to deal with collections and associated materials, and will advise about the general context, display, storage and handling. For more information about conservators and what to expect from them visit the website of the American Institute for Conservation at <http://aic.stanford.edu/public/index.html>.