

WHAT IS COLLECTIONS CARE?

This factsheet is for those new to museum work. It explains what collection care is, the reasons behind it, why it is important, the activities involved and the responsibilities of the museum managers and governing body.

Caring for collections is central to the work of any museum and one of the main responsibilities of its governing body. You might also hear **conservation** discussed in relation to the preservation of collections. This term covers the management of the environment surrounding collections (preventive conservation) and the treatment of individual objects (remedial conservation).

WHY IS COLLECTIONS CARE NECESSARY?

Collections are the most important resource of a museum: they are what make museums unique and, without them, the museum would not exist. Caring for collections makes them safely available to the public now while helping to preserve them for future generations.

Caring for collections means putting objects first, in other words, treating each object with respect. For individual objects, especially the finest specimens, it is easy to have respect. It can be harder when the object looks like something you use at home, and even harder to learn to respect the unknown contents of boxes and containers. Respect starts with treating all objects in a collection as being irreplaceable and every box or container as perhaps containing something very fragile. With this in mind, you will start to plan everything that you do in the museum with consideration for the effect it may have on objects.

HOW DO WE CARE FOR COLLECTIONS?

Many people working in the museum have collection care responsibilities. The ultimate responsibility for caring for collections lies with the museum managers and governing body.

Many people can and should carry out collection care activities: they should never be left to just one or two people. In fact, everyone working with collections has collections care responsibilities. This ranges from the cleaners, who keep an eye on the displays while they go about their work watching for signs of pest activity, to the museum manager or curator. The manager must make sure that a budget is found for buying materials such as acid-free boxes and tissue, as well as ensuring that agreed procedures are followed. Volunteers working on documentation projects have

a responsibility to handle objects safely and to use techniques that won't cause damage. Everyone should make sure that food, rubbish and other hazards are kept out of the display and storage areas.

Caring for collections is something you have to do and keep on doing, not something you can set up and leave. Collections care activities are about making sure objects are safe at all times, on the basis that prevention is better than cure.

PREPARING TO MAINTAIN COLLECTIONS

Collections do not look after themselves: you need to plan and carry out a number of necessary and often routine tasks in a particular way. The result you are aiming for is a collection that is maintained in good order and for this you will need to make preparations. The routine tasks that need to be done are housekeeping, monitoring, handling, packing and unpacking and labelling.

Housekeeping

Housekeeping covers a variety of tasks that help you to maintain the museum environment in a clean and safe manner, including:

- cleaning the collection environment
- cleaning protective clothing and dust sheets
- taking quarantine measures (for pests)

Monitoring

The information gathered through monitoring programs can be used in forward planning. Factors that should be monitored include:

- maintenance of building, facilities and equipment/plant
- internal environment
- pests
- suitability of furniture, fittings and containers
- condition of collections

Handling

Good handling by all staff involved with objects will reduce physical damage to the collection. This should include:

- avoiding touching objects: wear gloves for almost all handling
- using handling aids as much as possible to avoid having to touch objects or to assist with awkward or heavy items
- making sure that your storage and work environments are organised to encourage good handling
- preparing guidelines for the use of the collection by researchers and the public.

There are also health and safety reasons for using personal protective equipment (overalls, masks and gloves) during handling.

Packing and Unpacking

Good packing protects collections. The packing may be different for moving an object, protecting it or placing it in long-term storage.

Whenever an object is packed, you should bear in mind that it is likely to be unpacked by someone else so use padding, layering and cushioning, rather than wrapping. Then include instructions on the top of the box or tray.

Labelling

Labelling reduces the need for handling and each individual object should have its own label attached to it. Identification labels should be placed on storage boxes and shelves and then be linked to the collection documentation and location system.

Tasks for managers and planners

- find out what the routine tasks are and make sure staff put together a procedures manual so that standards can be maintained
- develop staff skills in collection care and train staff in collections care work making use of existing skills among staff and volunteers
- find a work space that can be used solely for inspection of collections and preparation of objects for storage, display and loan
- stock up on materials and supplies needed to look after the collection. Ask those involved what they will need and plan budgets to take account of this.
- assess the risks to staff associated with routine work and tasks in the museum (eg: moving objects)
- set aside an annual budget for collections care and include collections care as part of any forward plan for the museum

FURTHER INFORMATION AND ADVICE

Further information on collection care can be found in *Museum Methods* (Museums Australia (NSW) Inc) and in *ReCollections* (Heritage Collections Council).

ReCollections is available on-line

<http://www.amol.org.au/recollections>

Museums Australia (Vic) can provide assistance with the location of further information on collections care and conservation for small museums.

Contact: 03 8341 7344 or mavic@mavic.asn.au

Further conservation information can be found on the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials (AICCM) website www.aiccm.org.au

This factsheet has been adapted for use in Australia by Sarah Slade for Museums Australia (Victoria) with kind permission from the Scottish Museums Council.