

Heirloom Preservation

Many people have family heirlooms that they wish to keep safe for their descendants. This fact sheet outlines general guidelines for preserving heirloom objects. Advice for displaying objects is available on a separate fact sheet.

Handling heirloom objects is the most common cause of deterioration and destruction and should be minimised. Metal objects, porous ceramics, plaster and photographs will show fingerprints and so should be handled with care. Food, liquids, sticky tape, and writing instruments should be kept away from all heirlooms. A trained conservator can attempt stain removal but with no guarantee of success.

The right storage environment for heirloom objects will keep deterioration to a minimum. There are specific things to be aware of: light, heat, moisture and pH levels, dust and mould or insect infestation. Humidity (the level of moisture in the air) and temperature in the storage environment should be kept as constant as possible.

Textiles as well as wood, leather and paper items do not respond well to changes in either humidity or temperature. Humidity over 60% may cause mould growths which damage and stain. Ultra Violet (UV) light causes fading, particularly in textiles, and an acidic pH is associated with both corrosion and discolouration, depending on the type of object. Insects and dust cause holes and stains.

For good storage, heirloom objects should be covered by acid-free tissue in a cool, dry, dark, and well ventilated place that has minimal temperature changes. Objects should be kept well-supported and stable and stacking should be avoided. When objects are in storage they should be checked regularly for insects, dampness, mould and dust. Conservation framing and covering or wrapping objects in a layer of acid-free tissue paper can help to keep them acid free.

When stored, a textile (fabric) object should be kept flat, rolled or hung to avoid creasing. Ideally a textile should be laid flat on acid-free tissue paper in its own box, with any folds padded with more tissue to stop creases forming. If flat storage is impossible, the textile object should be rolled around a cardboard cylinder that has been covered by bubble-wrap padding and then a few layers of acid free tissue paper. Folding should be avoided. Three-dimensional textiles, such as garments, can be hung on padded hangers, made by padding a wire hanger with polyester fill and covering with clean calico. Textiles should not be stacked. When routine checks are made, collapsed padding should be replaced.

Local art supply stores and art framers will be able to provide archival quality material, and some will offer specialist conservation services. There are several private conservators in Dunedin that may be able to give advice on heirloom items. These names are available at the Otago Museum Search Centre.

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