

Caring for your collections: Overview

This brief information guide covers the general care of library and archival document collections including books, diaries, documents, letters, and photographs. Material in this category may also include works of art on paper (e.g. prints, watercolours, charcoal, pastels, pen and ink, and pencil drawings) and family history material (e.g. certificates, newspapers, maps, letters, and land deeds).

There are many different types of materials used in the creation of paper based collections however most objects consist of three basic components; the paper support, a sizing medium (used in paper production), and writing or printing media – ink, paint, biro, pencil, gelatine, silver halide, etc.

What causes damage?

- Poor quality materials used in production/creation and poor processing or printing methods.
- Unstable storage environment – fluctuating temperature and relative humidity, pollution.
- Inappropriate shelving and enclosures.
- Long term light exposure.
- Pests and mould.
- Careless handling.

What can you do?

The most important thing you can do to preserve your collections is to create a stable storage environment. There are a number of aspects involved in achieving this, including climate control, appropriate storage furniture, enclosures, and general collection maintenance procedures.

Stabilise the environment by storing and displaying collections away from outside walls. This will minimise any extreme temperature and relative humidity fluctuations. Choose a well-insulated room away from sources of moisture, heat, and direct light (i.e. avoid kitchens, bathrooms, and areas near heating systems and water pipes).

Reduce light exposure on paper based collections. Light damage is cumulative so avoid displaying material for long periods. If you do want to display an item for a prolonged period of time, it is advisable to duplicate it and display the copy. Use curtains or blinds to assist in minimising light levels.

Good housekeeping will reduce pest activity and the chance of mould growth. Keep the room clean, dust free, uncluttered, and well ventilated. Screen windows and seal doors to keep larger pests out. Avoid storing collections on the floor as they are more at risk to damage by pests or water leaks. Regularly check collections for early signs of pest or mould

activity particularly during wet, humid weather.

Archival storage enclosures provide extra protection when handling or transporting and a barrier against pests. Several layers of protection are recommended to maximise insulation. Never laminate objects. This process is damaging and irreversible. A safer alternative is to store objects in clear, chemically stable polyester (i.e. Mylar) or polypropylene sleeves. Also acid-free, lignin-free paper or board folders can be used. Avoid storing objects in tea chests and tucked away in cupboards. This practice causes the build-up of harmful pollutants from the furniture.

Mounting & Framing flat paper objects such as watercolours, photographic prints, maps, and plans, use archival quality mat board and protect the object with a window mat. A mat prevents direct contact with the glass or acrylic glazing. Insist your framer use appropriate materials and techniques. Collections should not be mounted with spray adhesives or double-sided tape. They are often acidic and badly stain items. The safest mounting option is to use archival photo corners, or hinges made of Japanese paper secured with wheat starch paste.

Handling objects will greatly affect their long-term stability. Careless handling is one of the most common causes of damage to collections. When moving a paper item, particularly if it is fragile and brittle always support it from the bottom. It is a good idea to slide a piece of board underneath for extra support. Never write on objects with felt pens or biros. Any inscriptions should be in soft pencil (e.g. 4B). Avoid the use of paper clips, rubber bands, adhesive tape, and Post-it® notes. Metallic clips can leave rust marks on the paper surface. Post-it® notes and sticky tape tend to leave a damaging adhesive residue. Always handle objects with clean hands or cotton gloves.

For more information about caring for specific items refer to our full list of Info Guides at <http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/preservation>

The procedures described here have been used by State Library of Queensland in the care of its collections and are considered suitable by State Library as described; however, State Library will not be responsible for damage to your collections should damage result from the use of these procedures.

Need further information?

(07) 3840 7810 | <http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/preservation>



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