

COLLECTIONS HOUSEKEEPING GUIDE

A well-designed housekeeping plan serves more than one function. It not only keeps collections clean and dust-free, but also allows staff time to regularly monitor the state of the collection. Housekeeping can also serve as a low-budget way to support other collections care activities, such as pest management.

DEVELOPING A COLLECTIONS MAINTENANCE PROGRAM

Housekeeping tasks will vary depending upon the size, use, and type of collection; a historic house has different needs than a contemporary art museum. A regular schedule of daily, weekly, monthly, and semi-annual to annual tasks ensures that the entire collection receives attention and care. It is just as important to make sure that a collection is not over-cleaned as it is to make sure that it is cleaned, which is why a housekeeping log is an important part of a collections maintenance program.

The Housekeeping Log

A housekeeping log is a great way to keep track of what has been done and what has yet to be done, and any changes in the status of a collection can be recorded. The log should be updated upon completion of any housekeeping tasks. If the collection also has a pest log, the two can support one another. Although the format can vary, a housekeeping log should include the following: task, date, notes, and staff member name.

Cyclical Housekeeping Schedules

The following schedule is just a suggestion and may be modified for the particular needs of a collection.

FREQUENCY	TASK
Daily	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empty trashcans, removing all food waste from the site • Vacuum public traffic runners and non-historic carpets • Dust-mop or sweep floors in high-traffic areas, especially near entrances • Simple site walkthrough. Note: a daily walkthrough is a good time to keep an eye out for signs of damage, pests, or mold and record it in the log.
Weekly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vacuum floors in public areas (not in collections areas) • Clean, dust, and wash building entrances, steps and landings, and areas of high traffic • Sweep leaves or other debris away from exterior entrances • Clean non-historic glass doors with glass cleaner

FREQUENCY	TASK
Bi-weekly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dust furniture • Dust all exhibition cases • Vacuum floors in collection areas
Monthly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vacuum walls and ceilings • Dust tops of doors and horizontal architectural surfaces (i.e. windowsills), interior wood fixtures, lighting fixtures, etc. • Clean all windows, window blinds/shades, and window frames • Dust picture frames, mirrors, glass panels in furniture, and picture glass • Dust exposed objects on exhibition
Quarterly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dust/vacuum books • Dust objects in storage • Wash windowpanes or dust ultraviolet-filtering film • Wash non-historic table coverings, curtains, and other non-historic textiles • Damp mop all non-wax-coated floors. Be careful not to splash water or oversaturate the mop in collections areas.
Semi-annually	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vacuum upholstered furniture with a screen • Vacuum exposed historic textiles with a screen • Dust items in exhibition cases
Annually	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professionally clean non-historic carpets if needed • Dust three-dimensional objects • Unbox historic textiles in storage to inspect for mold growth or pest infestation • Thoroughly dust under and behind furniture and into the drawers

HOUSEKEEPING SUPPLIES

- Magnetic dusting cloths—for example, Dust Bunny Cloths—are chemical-free and use electrostatic charge to attract dust. Do not use feather dusters or cloths impregnated with chemicals or cleansers, as these can potentially leave a damaging residue behind. 100% cotton, chemical-free rags (clean diaper cloths) may also be used.
- Soft, natural hair artist brushes, for dusting small or fragile areas (note: brushes used for dusting collections should only be used for this purpose)
- Cheesecloth or muslin for use as a filter to vacuum very fragile or flaking items (should be washed prior to use)
- Vacuum for collections care

- Gentle disinfectant, such as Lysol
- Dust mops
- Dust masks
- Nitrile gloves
- Distilled water
- Ammonia (note: should not be used near metals or on unstable glass)
- Isopropyl Alcohol
- Orvus cleaning solution
- Murphy's Oil soap (for mopping floors)
- Renaissance Wax or Butcher's Wax

HOUSEKEEPING PROCEDURES

The following are general guidelines. For very delicate or fragile objects, always consult a conservator before proceeding with any cleaning regimen.

1. Books

Bindings and text block edges can be cleaned with a cloth or vacuum. If the spine or boards of a book are loose or detached, avoid any cleaning procedures until they have been stabilized. If the binding is in stable condition and the text block is only lightly soiled, magnetic cloths are appropriate. If a book is very dusty or dirty (or if a book has deckled edges), it is preferable to use a vacuum to avoid pushing dirt into paper fibers or damaging delicate edges. Use a soft natural brush or brush attachment on the vacuum, and a micro-tool attachment meant for small areas. Low suction is preferable.

When books are removed for cleaning, an entire row of books should be removed from each shelf so that the books and shelf can be safely dusted at the same time. Ensure that books are handled carefully and are properly supported during this process, as it is easy to inadvertently cause damage.

- a) Hold the book firmly but gently closed, to avoid pushing dirt or dust in between the pages. The book should be tilted forward so that the spine is higher than the edge of the text block; this will prevent dirt from getting pushed down into the spine or the text block.
- b) Wipe or brush away from the spine, cleaning the top of the book first. After dust has been removed from this area, the other edges of the book can be dusted, including the cover.

2. Bookshelves

Work from the top shelf to the bottom shelf to avoid pushing dust onto surfaces that have already been cleaned. Transfer an entire shelf to a book truck a few volumes at a time, ensuring that the books are supported as they are moved. Once all of the books on a shelf are safely out of the way (and kept in order!), the shelf can be wiped down with a clean rag or vacuumed. A damp, clean rag can then be used to wipe the shelf down with a dilute solution of a disinfectant.

If a damp rag is used, the shelf must be completely dried before books are returned. For this reason, it may be best to avoid using a damp wipe on wooden shelves due to longer drying times.

3. Ceramics

Dust ceramics with a soft natural brush monthly; consider covering the ferrule with something soft to avoid scratching the ceramic surface. Inspect the object for weaknesses or areas of concern before proceeding. Do not wash ceramics without consulting a conservator.

4. Ivory, Bone, Horn, Antler

Dust objects with a soft brush once a year. Some ivory and smooth non-porous bone may be cleaned with water and mild soap, however this should not be done without consulting an objects conservator first to determine whether this is appropriate.

5. Framed Paintings

After checking that the surface of a frame is stable (not flaking or crumbling), use a soft brush or wool duster to gently dust from the top down. If necessary, gently buff the glass or Plexiglas covering the surface of the painting with a soft, clean cloth. **Never touch the surface of a painting.**

6. Glass Objects

Glass with painted or gilded decoration should not be cleaned, except to dust with a dry cloth every two weeks. Dirty glass objects may be washed once yearly in a diluted solution of warm water and Orvus (1/4 teaspoon per gallon of water) or a solution of ammonia and water. Ensure that there are no previous repairs or areas of stress before washing. (Note: ammonia should not be used near metals or on unstable glass).

When preparing the cleaning area, pad a dishpan with towels to avoid breakage. Wash one object at a time and change the water frequently. Drain the object on paper towels and use a soft, clean cloth for drying, taking care not to put pressure on the object or hold a glass by the stem.

7. Historic Textiles

Stable textiles may be gently vacuumed through a fiberglass screen. If washable, textiles may be hand-washed in a solution of Orvus and warm water and rinsed with distilled water. Do not wash or clean historic or very fragile textiles without consulting a conservator.

Upholstery on furniture may be vacuumed quarterly through a fiberglass screen, using a row-by-row movement to ensure that the surface is covered. Take care not to drag the vacuum across the upholstered surface.

Textiles should ideally be removed from their housings in storage once a year and inspected for signs of infestation or damage.

8. Metal Objects

Handle metal objects with clean gloves to avoid depositing body oils during cleaning. Metal objects may be lightly dusted with a soft natural brush no more than three times a year; more than this and the potential for damage increases. Metal objects may be polished once a year with specially designed treatments, however this should not be undertaken without first consulting a conservator.

9. Mirrors

Before cleaning, ensure that the mirror is safely secured to the wall or can be held steady by an assistant and dusted with a soft brush from the top down. Clean with an isopropyl alcohol-based glass cleaner only. Consult a conservator before using any cleaning solution on historic mirrors. Mercury mirrors should be cleaned by a conservator only.

10. Wood Objects

Before beginning any cleaning procedure, check the condition of the object's finish—if it is cracking, flaking, or lifting, do not dust. Objects may be dusted with a clean, soft rag or Dust Bunny cloth. Never use cloths with raw edges or loose threads. Vacuuming is the most effective and least damaging way to remove dust from stable finished wood surfaces and unfinished wood; for stable furniture surfaces, the soft brush attachment on the vacuum may be used, wiping in the direction parallel to the grain.

On very delicate surfaces, a soft brush can be used to sweep dust into the vacuum on low suction. Objects may be waxed with Renaissance Wax only after consulting a conservator.

HOUSEKEEPING FOR SPECIAL EVENTS

For the many historic houses, libraries, and museums that host events, special attention will need to be paid to housekeeping before and after the event. Take precautions when bringing plants and food into the space. Dark or colored liquids such as red wine, soda, or juice should never be brought into collections or exhibition areas.

Plants and Flowers

Potted plants and floral displays must be free of disease and pests and in sterilized soil. They should be inspected by a designated staff member. Stamen, which produce pollen, must be removed from flowers. Plants and flowers brought in for special events should be removed from the building within 24 hours after the end of the event.

Food and Drink

Areas where food and drink are prepared or served should be thoroughly cleaned before and after use. If food is served in areas which also display objects—for example, in a gallery—the use of corrosive chemicals and large amounts of water for clean-up should be avoided.

DUST: (NOT SO) HIDDEN MENACE

Dust is composed of a variety of organic and inorganic material, including pollen, human skin and hair, paper and textile fibers, dirt and road dust, and millions of dust mites. This makes it especially destructive for vulnerable objects; hard or sharp particles can abrade

surfaces, while organic particles can cause chemical damage. In addition, dust can increase the relative humidity (RH) around an object. The large surface area covered by dust particles attracts water vapor from the air, slightly increasing the RH in the exact place you don't want it. Dust is also unsightly, and its presence suggests neglect to visitors.

What's In Your Dust? Using a Dust Atlas

One of the best, and most cost-effective, ways to manage dust is to identify what it is and where it's coming from. This allows collections care staff to pinpoint the source of dust in order to manage it, and is also an effective way of allocating resources to the areas that need them most. It also ensures that cleaning occurs only as often as necessary, since over-cleaning can put a collection at risk. The National Trust UK has created a Dust Atlas which can be used to identify the substances in a dust sample. It provides instructions for sampling, examination, and identification of the dust collected. *The Identification of Dust in Historic Houses*, by Brimblecombe and Grossi, is available to download at <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/documents/the-identification-of-dust-in-historic-houses.pdf>. Clear, microscopically photographed images of dust components are provided for comparison. Monitoring dust is also a good way to track the effectiveness of a newly-implemented housekeeping program.

A basic dust monitoring kit includes:

- A microscope or hand magnifying lens (10x)
- Adhesive labels—paper, Tyvek, vinyl, or Teflon
- A slide case for storage
- Slide frames to make samples
- Microscope slides

Preparing the samples is simple; dust deposits may be collected by touching the deposit with the sticky surface of an adhesive label. Alternatively, a label can be left sticky-side-up for several weeks until a sample accumulates. Once a sample is collected, the label may be attached to the back of a microscope slide so that it can be stored and examined. Samples can be prepared for multiple areas in order to compare dust levels in various parts of a collection.

Choosing a Vacuum for Collections Care

A good vacuum is the most effective way to manage dust. Choosing a vacuum for collections care is very different than picking one for facilities maintenance; there are many brands and models, from hip-vacuum to backpack and floor styles, and the style chosen will vary depending upon the needs and budget of the collection. In general, the following features are important to look for when choosing a vacuum:

- Variable suction—cleaning fragile objects will necessitate using less suction than more stable items
- Micro-tool set to vacuum very small areas
- HEPA (High Efficiency Particulate Air) filter, which will remove 99.97% of particles 0.3 microns in diameter or above

- For even finer particle removal, an ULPA (Ultra-Low Penetration Air) filter will remove 99.99% of particles 0.12 microns in diameter or above
- Fiberglass screen for vacuuming textiles

If possible, avoid using the same vacuum to clean the facilities and clean collections, unless all parts are cleaned thoroughly between uses. If the same vacuum is used to clean both floors and collections, separate hose and tool attachments should be available and the bag and filter should be replaced before use on collection items. Never vacuum any flaking or particularly delicate object without consulting a conservator first.

It is important to note that having an efficient HVAC system with a HEPA filter can also drastically reduce dust. This doesn't replace the need to vacuum, but it does help to control the amount of dust in collections.

RESOURCES FOR SUPPLIES

Aerovex Systems

6370 Copps Avenue
Madison, WI 53716
(608) 535-6239

www.aerovexsystems.com

Conservation Resources

5532 Port Royal Road
Springfield, VA 22151
(800) 634-6932

www.conservationresources.com

Conservation Support Systems

PO Box 91746
Santa Barbara, CA 93190-1746
(800) 482-6299

www.conservationssupportsystems.com

Gaylord Bros

PO Box 4901
Syracuse, NY 13221
(800) 448-6160

www.gaylord.com

Micro-Mark

340 Snyder Ave
Berkeley Heights, NJ 07922-1538
(800) 225-1066

www.micromark.com

Museum Services Corporation

385 Bridgepoint Way
South Saint Paul, MN 55075
(651) 450-8954

www.museumsservicescorporation.com

Talas

330 Morgan Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11211
(212) 219-0770
www.talasonline.com

University Products

517 Main Street, PO Box 101
Holyoke, MA 01040
(800) 628-1912
www.universityproducts.com

FURTHER READING

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