



PRESERVATION 101

As we library professionals well know, our collections range far wider than the written word in its myriad forms. From Patrick White's specs in the National Library to the earliest known existing Australian photograph at the State Library of New South Wales, or that quilt donated by the local Guild, our colleagues are very proud of this enormously varied range of items. But it does beg a question for those of us who don't already have such specialised collections and the expertise to care for them – what should we know before we take on the responsibility of an unusual item?

Most of our libraries are generally meant to attract as high a level of use as we can manage. The lighting and temperature levels are, for the most part, geared to patron and staff comfort. That means a well-meaning donation of a fragile artefact to the local public library can be problematic for both the artefact and the library, unless there is capacity to dedicate an area to the rather different requirements of the items themselves.

According to Kay Soderlund at Preservation Australia, we should start as we mean to continue, which means breaking out the gloves immediately (and we mean nitrile or sterile medical gloves, not cotton or latex, because with cotton you lose too much 'touch' and some people are allergic to latex).

"Careless handling is one of the most common causes of damage," says Kay.

"A lot of the damage conservators see comes from poor handling, such as the use of inappropriate adhesives, sticky tape, pins and so on, or poor support for display," she says.

Naturally most of us will already be watching out for pests and mould and we do our best to control dust in our collections, but high light levels and very high, low or rapidly fluctuating humidity are factors that will also affect a fragile item, whether a book, textile or artwork. Recent design trends happily make the most of as much natural light as can be mustered, but that same direct light is an enemy of textiles and artworks. Regardless of whether such items are in your collection or part of your decor, it's important to make sure they are protected to ensure they can be enjoyed for a long time to come.

A key consideration for a library or collection that does not already have similar items is whether an offered item should even be accepted. There are both practical and collection-management questions that need to be asked. To avoid disasters the rule seems to be to approach with caution – and if you aren't sure what you are looking at, get an expert in at an early stage. This will be normal operational procedure for many special collection managers but the rest of us will need some help.

"Seek professional advice before you do anything that impacts on the object," Kay says.

Sometimes an artefact comes with tenants, in the form of a pest infestation. Not only does this have to be dealt with, there can be a risk to the rest of your collection as well. The infestation may not be visible or recognisable other than by an expert so beware the old shoebox full of treasures – keep it well away from anything else until it can be thoroughly checked.

Some donations, Kay also warns, come with other strings attached.



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"It is wise to ask if there is an expectation that by donating the item, the library is agreeing to fully conserve it," Kay advises. If it is damaged or rare (or both) this could mean a significant expense.

Consider too, how it will be

stored, where and in what. Specialist materials including acid-free paper,

boxes and sleeves are all going to add to the cost, as will insurance for very rare and valuable pieces. Photographs require colder, drier storage conditions than books, for example, while textiles require padding to avoid sharp

creases while stored. Once in the collection, Kay says we should also ask ourselves whether it is going to be practical and easy to access when required. Some

donors also expect items to be regularly exhibited and this must be budgeted and scheduled as well.

There are definitely situations and donations that probably should be avoided unless you have the environment, expertise and funding to manage them. But sometimes we will be the custodians. It's a special privilege to have. As Kay says, "each object is individual and has its own story to tell".

Lee Welch
incite@alia.org.au

FIVE HINTS TO KEEP YOUR TREASURE IN TIP TOP CONDITION

1. Store the item in archival quality materials and boxes to maximise protection from dust, pests and fluctuations in humidity.
2. Ensure the storage environment is stable. This doesn't necessarily mean air conditioning is required – it's all about stable temperature and relative humidity levels.
3. Understand the principles of appropriate handling and display for the artefact.
4. Do a Preservations Needs Assessment. Engaging a conservator to do this can help you decide the most effective and efficient use of resources for your needs – and they can also provide information to help you lobby for funding.
5. Have a comprehensive Disaster Plan and make sure all your staff know what's in it and what to do in the event of an emergency.