

## **Care of Family Heirlooms: General Tips**

Jenn Babiarz, Archaeology Lab Manager, Anne Arundel County  
pzbabi22@aacounty.org

The most important things to think about in the care and preservation of your heirlooms:

- Light
- Temperature
- Water
- Contaminants/Pollution

### Light

Light not only causes colors of items to fade, but can also physically break-down, or even destroy your heirloom. UV light from natural sunlight and fluorescent light have the highest energy of light sources, and are therefore the most destructive. Keep heirlooms covered (if possible) when not in use and use the lowest wattage light possible when you have them out. Keeping objects away from windows will help control both light and temperature.

### Temperature

Cooler is better than warm or hot. Mold growth happens over 60 degrees, and the energy from heat speeds up the break-down of objects. A good rule of thumb is to keep the temperature of where your heirlooms are stored between 60 and 70 degrees (the lower end is better). You also want to avoid major temperature changes, particularly to wood, ceramic, or glass, as the stress can cause the object to fracture or crack.

### Water

Humidity over 60%, especially when combined with high temperatures, can cause warping, mold/mildew, and generally speeds up the deterioration of your stuff. This is why museums are kept cool and dry, and you can usually spot humidity monitors in every room (though they're pretty good at hiding them). Try and keep your collection off the floor and away from pipes; water saturation can destroy some things, or stain them permanently.

### Contaminants/Pollution

The chemicals and tar from cigarette smoke can discolor and speed up the break-down of your stuff. Plastic wrap contains chlorides that can corrode metal. Everything contains chemical elements, and some elements don't like each other. It's best to get information about your specific type of item (wood, plastic, brass, etc) for storage, especially if it seems fragile.

### Risk Chart for Collectibles

	<i>Light</i>	<i>Insects/Mold</i>	<i>Handling</i>	<i>Contaminants</i>	<i>Normal Use</i>	<i>Temperature</i>	<i>Moisture</i>
<b>Rag paper</b>	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹
<b>Pulp paper</b>	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹
<b>Glass and ceramics</b>	☺	☺	☹	☹	☹	☹	☺
<b>Metals</b>	☺	☺	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹
<b>Wood and baskets</b>	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹
<b>Textiles—natural</b>	☠	☠	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹
<b>Textiles—synthetic</b>	☠	☺	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹
<b>Photos—prints (pre-1970)</b>	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹
<b>Photos—B&amp;W prints (1970– )</b>	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹
<b>Photos—color prints (1970– )</b>	☠	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹
<b>Photos—film (pre-1950)</b>	☹	☹	☹	☠	☹	☹	☠
<b>Photos—film (after 1950)</b>	☹	☺	☹	☺	☹	☹	☹
<b>Oil painting</b>	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹
<b>Acrylic painting</b>	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☠	☹
<b>Watercolor</b>	☠	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☠
<b>Pastels—charcoal</b>	☹	☹	☠	☹	☹	☹	☹
<b>Plastics</b>	☹	☺	☹	☹	☹	☠	☹

#### Legend

- ☺ Generally no practical risk or immediate threat under normal conditions
- ☹ Some risk that can usually be minimized, depending on specific circumstances
- ☹ Fairly high risk of damage; pay particular attention
- ☠ Immediate risk of catastrophic damage

Taken from p.13 of Don Williams and Louis Jagger's "Saving Stuff: How to Care for and Preserve Your Collectibles, Heirlooms, and Other Prized Possessions". 2005 Touchstone Press

## Care of Family Heirlooms: Resources

### Books

“Saving Stuff: How to Care for and Preserve Your Collectibles, Heirlooms, and Other Prized Possessions” By Don Williams and Louis Jaggard

“Caring for Your Family Treasures: Heritage Preservation” By Jane S. and Richard W. Long

### Free Online Professional Resources

“Caring for Family Treasures” published by the Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts in Philadelphia (This a good basic guide for everything from photos to quilts. PDF is at the bottom of the page):

<https://ccaaha.org/resources/caring-family-treasures>

“Caring for Family Treasures: A Basic How-to from Storage to Donation” by Anne A. Salter:

<https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/refserv/pdf/aaslh.pdf>

“Caring for Belongings: Guides on Caring for Your Belongings” by the American Institute for Conservation (A little technical sometimes, but still useful):

<https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-conservation/caring-for-your-treasures>

“How to Preserve Family Archives” by the Library of Congress (For family papers and home movies):

<https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives>

“Caring for Private and Family Collections” by the Northeast Document Conservation Center:

<https://www.nedcc.org/assets/media/documents/Preserving%20Family%20Collections%202021.pdf>