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COLLECTION HORROR STORIES

We have all had those moments when working with collections that we would prefer to forget. However, each one holds in it a lesson of what not to do in the future. Below are stories and lessons from brave souls who have had their own collection horror story moments. Thank you to all of them for sharing and letting us all learn from their unfortunate incidents.



Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society. - Click [here](#) for more information about this image.

"I returned home from work one evening and realized the tips of my fingers and large portions of my hands had turned black. Not surface stains, but black splotches under the skin. Trying to figure out what they were from, I suddenly remembered having worked with an early 20th century celluloid comb with a silver handle that was in degradation earlier that day. The more I looked at my hands, the more I realized it looked like minor skin burns from silver nitrate. I don't know if it was the celluloid or the silver, but it took weeks to completely disappear! **Lesson:** Always remember to wear gloves when handling metals and other objects that are breaking down...for both the safety of the object and the safety of yourself."

~Curator

"I was working on a set of glass negatives. I placed them on a clean piece of blue board on the work table. Later in the day, I needed to move the slides and picked up the blue board to shift it to a nearby work area. As I was carrying the board, someone asked me a question and I turned around to answer. The board and I rotated, the glass slides didn't. They slid off the side of the board and hit the floor. The blue board didn't have a lip to keep the slides from falling off and my

momentum as I rotated was very different from the what was happening with the slides. I've never again moved collections objects on an un-lipped cart, board, etc. **Lesson:** Move objects carefully, and ALWAYS use trays with lips."

~Director

"Pests are always with us. One day while working in storage I opened a box containing a fur-covered Peruvian dance figurine and a cloud of moths flew into my face! No matter how I tried to imitate Baryshnikov's leaps, I couldn't kill them all. It took weeks to control the outbreak. Turns out that fumigating the outside of something doesn't guarantee the inside is pest-free; we'd recently brought in a re-created buffalo stomach water bag and the little horrors hitched a ride inside, then spread to other artifacts. **Lesson:** Be super cautious when bringing unusual objects into the collection; examine, isolate, repeat!"

~Curator



Indiana Historical Society. – Click [here](#) for more information about this image.

"My predecessor had left space in an exhibit for a replica burned-out canoe that could be used by visitors. I worked with a Native American tribe member to construct one using traditional techniques. He completed it offsite and delivered it in January, perfect timing so we could get familiar with it before spring field trips. It fit perfectly and looked awesome! One week later however, small piles of sawdust appeared under the newly installed canoe. I was confused until I

looked at the computer screens in the gallery, now covered with crawling, breeding, powder-post beetles! The warm gallery had created a "spring" for the bugs who were now reproducing in my gallery loaded with other furniture, including loan pieces. After four months of wrapping it in plastic, freezing it outdoors, applying coats of borax, freezing it again, and creating four more "springs" for it, we finally killed the infestation and thankfully nothing else was infested. **Lesson:** ALWAYS QUARANTINE!!"

~Curator

"We went to a house to pick up a large painting, and the only place we could wrap it up for transportation was on the floor. The caretaker (not the actual owner of the painting), had 2 small dogs. She was also an older woman, and asked if we could hang this other painting in place of the one we were picking up. So, we proceed to hang up the other painting before we packed the object to go on loan. We got the painting on the wall, and then all turned around and saw a small white dog standing IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CANVAS. I went to lift the dog directly up off of the surface so it wouldn't run off and potentially scratch the surface. That little bugger bit me in the wrist! I did, however, manage to remove said mongrel with minimal additional harm to the object. **Lesson:** When acting as a courier for an object from a private home, make sure all of the owner's pets are locked up. Also, be current on all your shots."

~Art Courier

"When I started my new position at a military/university museum, one of the first things I did was to go through the entire firearms collection to make sure, for my own sake, that they were cleared completely. I examined two World War II pistols and had the scare of my life. When I drew back the toggle to check the breech all I saw was brass and stood there holding the toggle, which wouldn't lock and keep everything open, thinking the entire time 'Boy if I let this go and this thing fires somehow, I'm going to lose my job after only two days.' Finally managing to get the toggle to lock in place, I extracted the 'bullet' and found it was a snap cap that a previous owner had left in it to protect the firing pin. Problem is, there was NO notation anywhere about it being there. And lo and behold I found another, in another pistol, same exact situation, but at least this time I was sort of prepared; there's nothing more alarming than finding an accessioned firearm that looks or sounds loaded! **Lesson:** If you accession a firearm, at least make a notation that it has a snap cap in it somewhere. Future folks in your position appreciate not having a panic attack, even those that have extensive firearms training."

~Registrar/Collections Manager



Bass Photo Co. Collection, Indiana Historical Society. - Click [here](#) for more information about this image.

"As a new curator of a historic structure that lacked air conditioning and a recent transplant to New England, I felt super confident during my first spring up north that the noisy fans disrupting house tours weren't really necessary. It's New England, it doesn't get that hot! My predecessors

were being too cautious to the detriment of our older visitors. Easy fix: turn them off! Fast forward from April to early August as I was taking a potential donor and furniture-enthusiast through said house. The swampy daytime heat was making everyone sweat but worse was the stifling air in the historic home. As if melting make up and pit stains weren't embarrassing enough, I was mortified when we pulled open a drawer of a high chest to discover mold growing on the inside and underside!! There was no way to play it cool at that point and I promptly admitted my error to the donor and we spent the rest of our time identifying other pieces that needed treatment. **Lessons:** 1) It gets hot and humid in New England. More Important 2): Don't adjust climate controls until you've datalogged heat and humidity for a full year!"

~Curator

"During a massive collections move for an HVAC project, I noticed a colleague place a T-square standing up on the floor in the actual 'T' position, rather than an upside down T, which would have been more stable. As I was kind of thinking that it probably was a bad idea, and might fall, and I should probably say something ... it started to fall. And the top bar of the T struck the back of a painting leaning nearby. And put a nice tear and small hole through the back of the canvas. Didn't do too much irreparable damage to the front, and would be easy to fix in a conservation lab, but it could have completely been avoided. **Lesson:** If you see something, say something!! Even if the other person 'ranks' higher than you. Or just make sure to keep equipment with sharp edges away from painting. And always put your T square in the upside down position or flat on the floor!"

~Project Assistant



Indiana Historical Society. - Click [here](#) for more information about this image.

"A few years ago I was working on an exhibit for another gallery space that had some major Hollywood celebrity backers. We secured the loan of several pieces of movie memorabilia, and all of the original items that were selected for display were loaded on a truck in Hollywood and sent to Indianapolis, in January. The temperature changes that the items endured over the trip caused several problems, by far the worst one involving a snow globe that plays a significant role in a 1940s film. Over the course of the trip, the contents of the snow globe froze, causing it to shatter, and then re-freeze. We had to save all of the original contents of the snow globe insides (including individual pieces of glitter) so that we could send it to a company in Denver that specializes in snow globe repair. **Lesson:** Pick the right shipper. Find the money for an art shipper if possible, or at least a shipper who has temperature controlled transport vehicles! And consider the weather before you schedule."

~Exhibit Contractor

"After years of steaming costumes for exhibition, I was in the middle of working with a beautiful 1920s garment when a colleague asked me a question. I turned to answer and brought the tip of the steamer a bit too close to my arm, resulting in a 2nd degree burn on my forearm. Worst part, it was the morning of the exhibit opening and the dress I brought to wear was sleeveless. **Lesson:** No matter how many times you have done something, NEVER forget the basic rules of working

with collections. And be careful, at all times."
~Curator

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[Local History Services](#)
Indiana Historical Society, 450 West Ohio Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202
(317) 232-1882 | localhistoryservices@indianahistory.org

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