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# INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

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## "USING" MUSEUM OBJECTS

By Karen DePauw, Manager, IHS Local History Services

When working in a museum day in and day out with collections all around it can sometimes be difficult to remember that these items are special. In our homes we use objects every day. Their primary purpose is to be used and used up. However, objects in museums have the primary purpose to be preserved and teach the stories of history. These objects are held in the public trust and the public trusts museums to protect these items for future generations.



[Elizabeth and Meredith Nicholson Jr. Playing with a Tea Set.](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

Through the years we have learned increasingly more about collections preservation and the ways to implement it to protect our collections. One of the largest threats to museum collections is the physical use of objects by people. Wearing clothing or accessories from the collection increases the potential of tearing and introduces damaging body oils; using ceramics, glassware, or pottery increases the likelihood of being dropped or broken; and even using furniture can result in breakage, water stains, or scratches.

Although it is now a widely held belief by museums that once something enters the threshold of our collections it is no longer used for its intended purpose, that does not mean the object ceases to be useful. Rather, museums activate their collections in ways different than initially intended. We no longer store sugar in that sugar dish, but instead use it to tell the stories of history. The story of tea during the Revolution; the story of the craftsman who made it; the story of trade

### ONLINE RESOURCES

[AAM Code of Ethics for Museums](#)

(American Alliance of Museums)

[StEPs Workbook: Section Four: Stewardship of Collections](#)

(American Association for State and Local History)

[Mission Statement](#)

(Costume Society of America)

[Code of Ethics for Museums](#)

(International Council of Museums)

[NPS Museum Handbook Chapter 1: Evaluating and Documenting Museum Collections Use](#)

(National Park Service)

### FROM OUR LENDING RESOURCE CENTER

[A Practical Guide to Museum Ethics](#)

(Sally Yerkevich)

### UPCOMING TRAINING AND PROGRAMS

[The Ethics of Deaccessioning](#)

Dec. 5 -  
Indiana Historical Society  
free webinar.

[Introduction to Audio, Visual and Film Media and Their Care](#)

Dec. 5 -  
AASLH webinar.

with China; even the story of the slaves on sugar plantations. The catalyst to all these stories becomes the most important use of the sugar canister. We prioritize its wellbeing above "traditional" usefulness. We realign its usefulness with its new role as a museum object rather than a daily houseware.



[Furniture Store Interior](#). (Indiana Historical Society)

Furniture is the most likely type of object that continues to be used as it was intended. While we no longer sit on the chairs, we might find it necessary to place objects on tabletops or store things in chests of drawers. When we do this, it is important to make sure it is necessary and that we protect the furniture as best we can. For instance, in most museum settings we still place objects atop furniture for display purposes. By placing a piece of Mylar or muslin between the object and the furniture we protect the furniture from being scratched. Similarly, if a drawer will not close, we carefully figure out what is preventing the closure and negate the issue, rather than the usual household trick of slamming it with your hip and hoping that gets the job done.

For most objects in our collections, we look past the uses they were created for and look to the uses we are saving them for. As museums we should constantly work to actively use our collections, but recognize that the definition of "use" changes over time. So instead of being tempted to use a collection item as if it were "just any old thing" consider if the risk is worth the reward. It is probably better to buy a cheap sugar dish from the thrift store to use at the annual luncheon and leave the collections piece on display.

[Insurance: How to Manage Your Organization's Risk](#)

Dec. 5 - Connecting to Collections Care free webinar.

[Celebrate with Collections! Utilizing Collections in Your Community's Anniversary Celebrations](#)

Jan. 9 - Northeast Document Conservation Center free webinar.

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[Local History Services](#)

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

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