



INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

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FUR AND FEATHERS IN COSTUME COLLECTIONS

By Karen DePauw, coordinator, IHS Local History Services

Fur and feathers in museum collections bring along with them a special set of circumstances. Besides the obvious taxidermy, natural history and ethnographic collections, many museums house fur and feathers in their costume and textile collections. It is this segment of the collection that serves as the focus here.



[Singer Judy Starr](#). (Indiana Historical Society)

One of the major issues for museum items containing fur or feathers is that of care. Both have a tendency to be very fragile and require extra care and handling. Fur prefers colder conditions than most museum items for storage (34 to 55 degrees Fahrenheit), which is why people with fur coats often have them put into cold storage for the off season. Since most museums are not equipped with the necessary storage for fur, keep current collection items containing fur as cold as possible and monitor for deterioration.

Another issue with both fur and feathers is their attractiveness to pests. Not only are these types of materials easy places to hide in the short term, but also warm, inviting spots to set up for long-term living. Because pests are so drawn to these types of collection items, it can be useful to house them all together in the museum in order to monitor for infestations and keep them from spreading if one does occur. Similarly, before bringing a fur or feather item into the museum's permanent storage, isolate it first (even just in a clear tub if it fits safely) and carefully examine it for any evidence of pests hitching a ride.



ONLINE RESOURCES

[Laws/Treaties/Regulations](#)
(US Fish and Wildlife Service)

[The Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Explained](#)
(Audubon)

[The Care of Leather and Fur](#)
(Connecting to Collections Care)

FROM OUR LENDING RESOURCE CENTER

[A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections](#)
(Marie C. Malero and Ildiko Pogany Deangelis)





[Portrait of a Woman in a Feathered Hat.](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

Fur and feathers in collections also bring along legal issues.* A variety of laws exist to protect and regulate the use of fur and feathers, with many of these laws also extending to flora, fauna and fish. The most common laws with implications to museum collections are the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act of 1940, and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Each of these acts seeks to provide a legal framework in which items made from the fur or feathers of certain animals can be legally procured, sold and bought. Often it is in the selling and purchasing of historic items that museums run into issues concerning these laws, especially when dealing across state lines or country borders. Some auction houses even refuse to sell deaccessioned items containing certain fur or feathers because they cannot guarantee the items were created legally.

Many of these laws contain provisions for historic items (usually more than 100 years of age), but if further information is requested the burden of proof is on the owner to prove that the item was legally hunted and created - a difficult task for many. There are also sometimes exceptions for fur and feathers legally obtained prior to the laws' creation even though they are now considered illegal.



[Ermisch Cleaners Fur Cleaner](#). (Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

Fur and feathers take special care and consideration in costume and textile collections. When choosing whether or not to accept an acquisition containing these items consider if what they add to the collection outweighs the special issues they may bring along with them.

*Note: the contents of this article are not legal advice, they are simply meant to make the reader aware of some of the generalities about these laws. Ultimately any question concerning how a specific law affects a museum should be handled by a lawyer and the consultation of the law in its original, legal form as produced by the government.

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