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SPRING CLEANING ARSENAL

By Karen DePauw, coordinator, IHS Local History Services

Spring cleaning is a necessary activity this time of year. Everything from our houses to our museums are opening after being closed for the last few months. When we clean our houses, we often pull out our chemical cleaners and everything that gives our interiors that “clean” smell. However, those are the exact things we want to avoid around our historical collections. The chemical components and harsh scrubbing can cause irreversible damage. So how exactly do we clean the dust and dirt without harm? By having the right tools in our arsenal and keeping other items out of it.



[Cleaning at the Maennerchor Building.](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

VACUUM

A HEPA vacuum with adjustable suction is one of the best tools in a museum's cleaning arsenal. It can be used to clean historic textiles, like rugs, costumes and more (a description of how to vacuum these items correctly can be found [here](#)). The vacuum hose extension and low suction can also be utilized to carefully suck dust out of the cracks of woven baskets, rushed seats and even the insides of large heavy crocks.

NATURAL BRISTLE BRUSH

Soft natural bristle brushes of various sizes, such as those used for painting, are a go-to for cleaning historical collections. Large ones can be used to remove dust from furniture without



ONLINE RESOURCES

[Caring for Your Treasures](#)
(American Institute for Conservation)

[Silver Care and Tarnish Removal](#)
(Canadian Conservation Institute)

[Historic Housekeeping Handbook](#)
(Minnesota Historical Society)

[Vacuuming Textiles](#)
(Museum Textile Services)

[Dangers of Abrasive Cleaning to Historic Buildings](#)
(National Park Service)

[How to Care for Your Furniture](#)
(North Carolina Museum of History)

[Cleaning Textiles](#)
(Victoria and Albert Museum)

UPCOMING TRAINING AND PROGRAMS

[Is Your Organization Ready for STEPs?](#)
May 1 -
AASLH webinar.

[Cleaning Gravestones](#)
May 8 -
Wisconsin Historical Society webinar.

[An Introduction to Herbaria and Herbarium Practices](#)
May 9 -

pressing the dust particles into the wood and scratching the finish. Medium and small ones are useful for loosening dust from textiles and baskets before sucking it up with the vacuum. Natural bristles are soft and do not scratch or leave behind bits of fibers as some disposable dusters tend to do.



[Washing Jars.](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

WATER-ONLY CLEANING CLOTHS

Chemical cleaners should always be avoided with historical artifacts as they can leave behind residues that may negatively interact with the artifact itself. With the increasing popularity of eco-friendly cleaning practices, many products have come onto the scene from companies like e-Cloth and Norwex who both have cloths for cleaning glass with only water. This helps eliminate the possibility of chemicals being sprayed on or near collection items. These cloths are great for cleaning window glass, display cases, picture-frame glass, and even glass or ceramic items. It can be a good idea to use distilled water rather than tap water if cleaning the inside of a display case, since particles from water treatment methods could get trapped inside.

MICRO-FIBER CLOTHS

Using natural bristle brushes can be great for scratch-prone surfaces, however, micro-fiber cloths can work to remove dust from items that are not prone to scratching. Items made from earthenware and pottery are great to clean with microfiber.



[Woman Washing Clothes.](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

When cleaning historic articles and spaces, knowing what items to employ in a cleaning arsenal is important. Just as important, however, is knowing what not to use. Besides chemical cleaners and dust cloths that may leave fibers, other cleaning supplies often found in homes should be avoided. Dust spray, furniture polish or other oil-based cleaners and polishes can attract more dust than they dispel and can mess with some historic finishes. Silver polish may work to clean tarnished silver, but it does so by removing fine layers of the tarnished silver, thus exposing more silver to oxygen that can tarnish it and restart the entire process (information on how to safely clean tarnished silver can be found [here](#)). Detergents can also be harmful, from dish detergent to clothes detergent. These can all leave behind residue, but in some cases, like with textiles, they also require the item to go through multiple rinses, which increases handling and the potential for damage (to find more about cleaning textiles visit [here](#)).

One important consideration when determining what and how to clean is to decide whether something can and should be cleaned. Our modern sensibilities tell us that everything should sparkle, shine and smell fresh. But remember that the items in our museums are no longer new. It is okay for them to sometimes look worn with age and imperfect, it is part of their story. As long as items are clear of dust, dirt, debris, mold and pests, it is all right for old things to be old.

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