

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
COLLECTIONS ADVISOR
A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

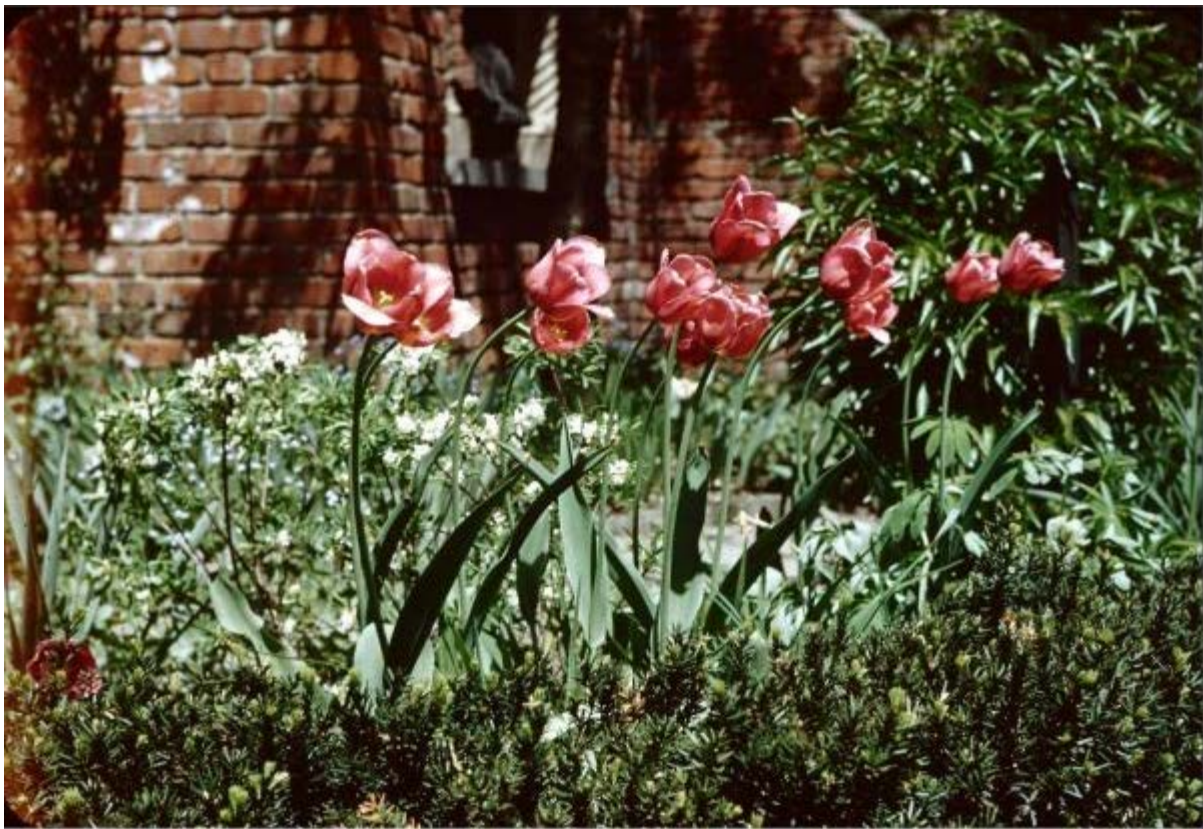
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Spring is in the air

By Karen DePauw, Manager, Local History Services

The sun is shining, the flowers are blooming, and the pollen is everywhere. Unfortunately, for some of us, that includes our museums. Air pollutants are something we do not often think about when considering the health and safety of our collections, but we should. Everything from chemicals to particles that float around in the air can cause issues when it comes to collections care. The good news is, there are things you can do about it. Whether you want to prevent the problem or if you need to solve a problem you already have, below are some tips to make sure Spring stays in the air and out of your museum.

Most of us think of dust as just a vague annoyance that we must clean up every few days, I know I do. But there is much more to it than that. I won't go into all the gross things that dust contains but suffice it to say you don't want to look too closely. The two things I do want to mention though are tiny particles that can cut and scratch things like textiles and wood finishes, and the previously mentioned pollen that can stain. When you notice a layer of dust has accumulated on collection items, it is important to clean it as soon as possible. The best thing to do is to make cleaning off dust part of your regular museum cleaning schedule. (Note: before undertaking any type of cleaning it is important to check the object for any condition issues that could be made worse and to proceed with caution. If you are concerned about the safety of the object while removing dust, reach out to a trained conservator.)



[Gardens at Home and Abroad. Slides, ca. 1940s-1950s](#) (Clowes Family Collection, 1842-1998, Indiana Historical Society)

How to clean off dust is different depending on the type of item you are cleaning.

Vacuuming –

Removing dust with a vacuum is a very effective method for many types of objects. There are different methods of vacuuming depending on what the object is made from. One of the most general methods is to use a fine, natural-bristle brush to gently sweep the dust from the surface of the item into the air and then suck up the airborne dust with the vacuum. The vacuum should never come into direct contact with the object in order to keep it safe and make sure the only thing being sucked up is dust. Use a vacuum with adjustable suction and a HEPA filter to ensure that dust particles do not just spit back out and return to the air (see the Further Resources section for links to more tips on vacuuming.) In general, vacuuming is great in any situation where wiping the dust might cause small scratches or abrasions, or when small cracks or crevices might trap dust, such as finished and unfinished wood, textiles, or the outsides of books.

Dusting cloth –

There are instances where a dusting cloth works just fine for removing dust. Use a soft, untreated microfiber cloth to remove dust, those designed for electronics often fit the bill. Be mindful that dusting cloths can sometimes snag on rough surfaces and leave behind fibers, if you notice this happening, switch to the vacuum method. Never use a feather duster or any cloth that simply flips dust into the air because what goes up will just come down again. Additionally, avoid using any type of dusting spray or commercial chemical product when removing dust. A dusting cloth works well for items not susceptible to scratches, such as ceramics and glassware.



[Train Engineer and Fireman](#) (Otto White Collection, 1910-1920, Indiana Historical Society)

Another option is to prevent dust from settling on collection items. This is easiest in storage as you can keep small items in boxes and drape larger items, like furniture, with cotton sheets or fabric to keep dust off in the first place. In exhibit spaces the best preventative option is to put items in sealed cases so the dust settles on the case and not the objects. However, this is not the most feasible or visitor-friendly option, especially in a space such as a house museum. In these cases, other types of prevention can be put into place.

Make sure you are frequently checking, cleaning, and replacing the air filter on your HVAC system. When the air filter gets clogged with dust and debris it cannot filter effectively, so keeping it clean is easy preventative maintenance to ensure your HVAC system runs well, but also that it traps as much air pollutants as possible. Additionally, make sure your system is fitted with a HEPA filter. These types of filters can catch minuscule particles and help prevent the build-up of harmful dust and pollen on objects.

It can also be helpful to understand the airflow in exhibit spaces. Knowing where dust tends to settle can help when designing gallery spaces or even setting up rooms in a historic house. If you know where airflow is lacking and the dust settles on surfaces, you can arrange spaces to display objects in those areas that are either less susceptible to harmful air pollutants, like ceramics and glass, or that will be protected by an exhibit case.

The same precautions can be useful near doors to the outside. The dust and pollen that come in when the door is opened will first settle on items closest to the door. Although we cannot keep doors from being opened to let visitors in (that is why we exist after all!), we should do what we can to seal any cracks or gaps in doors or windows so when they are shut there is nothing unwelcome entering. Placing a rug at the entrance can also help keep dirt and debris from entering the building that may later go air born and deposit onto objects. When choosing items for display near doors thinking about any special protections for these items can also help manage future problems.



[Small Girl in Apron and Dust Cap Sweeping the Floor. stereograph](#) (Oran Henley Collection, ca. 1900-1938, Indiana Historical Society)

Unfortunately, in our museums, just like in our houses, air pollutants in the form of dust and pollen are just a part of life. But, by knowing how to clean objects properly and doing what we can to mitigate potential harm from them, we can continue to care for our collections for decades into the future.

Further Resources

- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Dust and Brush Vacuuming](#) (Western Australian Museum)
- [Dust to dust. Access to access.](#) (Conservation Journal)
- [Dust and Particulates in Exhibits](#) (American Institute for Conservation)
- [Dusting Wood Objects Conserve O Gram](#) (National Park Service)
- [Handling and Cleaning Museum Objects](#) (Leicester Museums)
- [Keep it Clean: The Dangers of Dust](#) (Science and Industry Museum)

Collection Trainings

[Beyond the Bake Sale: Fundraising for Local History Organizations](#)
May 4 – (Texas Historical Commission)

[Tools for Emergency Planning #MayDayPrep 2022](#)

May 5 – (Connecting to Collections Care)

[OSHA 101: The Occupational Safety and Health Administration and Your Museum](#)

May 17 – (Texas Historical Commission)

[Webinars](#)

Recorded – (Indiana Historical Society)

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