

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

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Why Can't We...

By Karen DePauw, Manager, Local History Services

Sit in the chair? Drink from the teacup? Wear the clothes?

As someone who works with collections, this is a question I hear frequently. Although the question often comes from members of the public, it is also not an uncommon question among those who are just starting to learn about and undertake the care of collections. There is such a difference between how we treat items in our own homes and how we treat them in historic collections that it's easy to understand the confusion. So, let's try to clear up the mud.



Formal Wear Fashion Show at Glendale Mall (Indiana Historical Society, P0732)

Museums work within the public trust. This means that even though a museum might be the legal owner of the objects in its collection, the entire reason it owns the items is to hold them for the public. The museum is charged with caring for and preserving them in order to use them to educate the public about our shared stories. Therefore, museums are obligated to make choices that affect these items very carefully because in protecting the items they are helping protect our history.

According to museum ethics, the moment an item enters a historical collection the museum makes a commitment to care for and preserve that item. If a museum is going to take all of the steps to care for objects - control the temperature, humidity, and light in a storage area, house objects in expensive acid-free storage containers, catalogue the items and track their history and stories - it only makes sense that the museum would also strive to protect the item in other ways.

We need to put in place things that protect items from one of the most dangerous elements of all in a museum...ourselves. One of the biggest threats to objects is mishandling, and one of the best protections against this is limiting how often we touch an object. We need to be very careful when we have to handle objects.



Teacher Corps Student Shows Liberian Clothing to Attucks Students (Indianapolis Recorder Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

While it can feel very odd not to use items for their "intended purpose" once they enter the museum collection, it is such an important part of their long-term preservation. By treating these items differently, by not wearing the clothing, sitting in the chair, or drinking from the teacup, we give them a better chance of surviving to the next generation and continuing to share their stories. This is a very special job that historic collections have. There is nothing wrong with wearing vintage clothing or using antiques in your home, but part of the reason those things are safe to do is because we know that museums all over the world are taking care of collections entrusted to their care and the valuable, irreplaceable stories imbued in them.

Further Resources

- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Museum Collection Ethics: Acquisition, Stewardship, and Interpretation](#) (Steven Miller)
- [A Practical Guide to Museum Ethics](#) (Sally Yerkovich)

Collection Trainings

[Understanding and Upgrading Your Collection Preservation Environment](#)

June 7 – (Texas Historical Commission)

[Surface Cleaning Techniques for Paper-Based Materials: A “Hands-On Webinar”](#)

June 14 – (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

[Preserving History Through Podcasting](#)

June 23 – (Texas Historical Commission)

[Storing Audiovisual Collections](#)

June 30 – (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

[Webinars](#)

Recorded – (Indiana Historical Society)

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