

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

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Caring for Wooden Furniture

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Wooden furniture is a staple in most museum object collections. And if that museum is a historic house, well, then it is an even more extensive part of the collection. But how do we care for these items that feel so much like things we might have in our own homes? Check out the lists below to learn about some of the basic environment, handling, and cleaning pointers to keep wooden furniture at its best.



[Furniture Store Interior](#) (Cephas M. Huddleston Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

ENVIRONMENT

- Light can bleach wood, whether stained or natural. It can also cause damage to finishes, especially those containing wax. Avoid keeping furniture in direct UV-emitting or heat-creating light, especially sunlight. In a house museum, consider the use of thick curtains that can remain closed when the museum is closed, or the sun is directly coming in a particular window.
- Relative humidity should fluctuate as little as possible. When humidity fluctuates the wood absorbs moisture and then releases it back into the environment. Because different segments of wood do this at different rates, humidity fluctuations can cause cracking. It can also cause issues where furniture pieces are joined together and cause joints to become less stable. (Think about how wooden doors and windows become harder to open in the summer when humidity is high and the wood is swollen.)
- If the furniture is painted, like a Hitchcock chair, then the fluctuation of the wood can cause the paint to crack off the wooden surface it is applied to.
- Keep an eye out for evidence of insects near wooden furniture. There are many types of insects that bore into wood and cause severe damage very quickly. It is a good idea to check frequently around furniture and never to ignore any evidence, however minute, of piles that look like sawdust on or around wood items. This is often an indicator of wood-boring insects starting to make a home. If you find evidence of frass (those tiny wood piles or insect excrement), isolate the item immediately and thoroughly check surrounding wood items. Then contact a conservator about the best way to move forward.



Moving Furniture at the Maennerchor (American Red Cross – Indianapolis Chapter, Indiana Historical Society)

HANDLING

- Although it may appear sturdy and robust, it is still best to be careful with wooden furniture.
- Furniture can have hidden weak spots that are not evident until something causes the piece to break. Never drag or push furniture across the floor, rather pick up and support furniture when moving it, no matter how short of a distance. Look for a sturdy part that does not have a join. For instance, pick up a chair from the seat, or a table from the tabletop.

- Always check for loose pieces before moving, whether intentionally loose like a Hoosier cabinet with a top and bottom, or unintentionally loose like a chair with a broken leg.
- Never sit on furniture in the collection. Again, it might not be as sturdy as it appears.
- Go slowly and carefully when moving wooden furniture and ask for help if you need it!



[Cabinet Finishing at Jasper Corporation](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

CLEANING

- Never use commercial dust sprays or furniture polish to clean antique furniture. They can create build-up on the surface and even attract dust.
- Keep water and heat away from wooden furniture, especially if it has a finish. Water can leave rings and heat can melt the finish.
- To clean wooden furniture, first check to see if surfaces are free of flaking paint or finish. If so, a soft, natural-bristle brush can be used to lift dust from the surface and a vacuum on low suction can be added to suck up the dust as it becomes airborne. If there is flaking paint or finish, avoid those areas when cleaning and do not employ a

vacuum.

- Avoid things like loose fiber cloths or feather dusters as these can snag and leave fibers caught on the surface.

Wooden furniture is a staple of many collections. By caring for it appropriately, we can ensure that it is around for generations to come.

Further Resources

- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Furniture Care and Handling](#) (Smithsonian Museum Conservation Institute)
- [How to Care for Your Furniture](#) (North Carolina Museum of History)
- [Special Care for Wooden Furniture and Objects](#) (Bernacki and Associates)
- [Curatorial Care of Wooden Objects](#) (National Park Service)
- [The Care and Preservation of Furniture and Wooden Objects](#) (Connecting to Collections Care)

Collection Trainings

[Fundraising for Collections Care](#)

Sept. 28 – (Connecting to Collections Care)

[An Introduction to the Collections Management Policy Toolkit](#)

Sept. 28 – (Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts)

[Webinars](#)

Recorded – (Indiana Historical Society)

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