

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

Issue 136 | February 2023

## **Caring for Jewelry**

By Karen DePauw, Manager, Local History Services

Jewelry has been a popular gift for centuries. Something you buy to treat someone special in your life, or to treat yourself. But once these tiny mementoes of love make their way into our collections, how can we care for and keep track of them?

Jewelry is an area of our collections that we often group all together when we think about it. However, when it comes to the best ways to care for jewelry, their needs can vary widely depending on the materials used to make a particular piece.



*Dinah Washington* (Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

## **PRECIOUS METALS AND STONES**

The most robust pieces of jewelry to care for are those made of precious metals and precious stones. The gold, silver, and platinum used to construct these pieces is stable in most storage environments. As long as they are not exposed to high humidity or extremely high temperatures, the risk of corrosion is low. These materials are also not prone to light damage, but some, like silver, can be scratched if mishandled.

## **OTHER METALS**

There are other metals used to make jewelry besides precious metals. While they are also fairly stable, different metals can have different problems to keep an eye out for. Pewter and lead are soft metals easily susceptible to micro-abrasions from mishandling or even dust. Copper is known to be sensitive to off-gassing from items like rubber mats and carpet pads because of the sulfuric gases created as those items age.

## SHELLS AND CORAL

Jewelry pieces made of shell or coral are stable in terms of temperature and relative humidity. They are, however, quite fragile and need to be handled carefully. Shell and coral are also far more light sensitive than metal or precious stones and should be displayed and stored with this in mind.



*[Modeling Jewelry for H.P. Wasson and Company](#) (Indiana Historical Society, P0569)*

## **PLASTIC**

As plastic became more plentiful it found its way into a variety of accessories, including jewelry. There are a myriad of compositions that make up plastic and each has its own special needs. However, a few general precautions can be taken to help preserve plastic jewelry. Plastics are happiest at moderate temperatures and relative humidity. Some plastics can become brittle at low temperatures, while high temperatures can speed up chemical degradation or cause melting. So, if the type of plastic is unknown, it's best to keep things moderate.

It is best to store plastics together, but not with other materials, whenever possible. This is because as plastics degrade and off-gas they can create environments harmful to other items – for instance, the sulfuric gases coming from plastic jewelry could corrode nearby copper jewelry. By storing plastic jewelry together, it also makes it easier to monitor. Checking in regularly on items is important because as they degrade some materials, like cellulose acetate, can become toxic. Or they can simply break down, become sticky, and stain or ruin items stored too closely. Plastic jewelry should also be properly supported in storage so it does not lose shape over time.

Two of the most commonly found plastics in jewelry collections are celluloid and Bakelite. Both increased in popularity between about 1900 and 1960. Celluloid jewelry should be checked regularly for crazing, cracking, and a vinegar odor. All of these are signs of significant degradation and can actually jump start deterioration in other items stored in the same box. Additionally, celluloid items - whether jewelry or celluloid nitrate film - are highly combustible as they degrade, so keeping a careful eye on their condition is important. Bakelite, on the other hand, is considered chemically stable, but is prone to scratches if mishandled and can change color as it degrades.

## **HAIR**

Many collections have jewelry items that contain, or are made entirely from, human hair. This type of jewelry can be fragile depending on how the hair was woven or braided together to create the item, and whether or not the hair has been encased in something like a locket or brooch. The biggest threat to hair jewelry is pests. Clothes moths and carpet beetles are drawn to items containing human hair. For this reason, it can be a good idea to store these items together and check them frequently for evidence of pests.



*Barsan Studio Display, Talbot Street Art Fair (Indiana Historical Society, P0569)*

## **GENERAL CARE AND STORAGE**

Nitrile gloves should be worn at all times when handling jewelry. While gloves might be worn for different reasons depending on the material, from keeping body oil off silver to protecting us from degrading plastics, it is rarely advisable to handle any type of jewelry in a museum collection without gloves. It is also necessary to protect other items from jewelry when on display. If using jewelry to accentuate an article of clothing, it is best to cut a small piece of acid-free tissue or mylar to place as a barrier between the piece of jewelry and the item it is displayed on. This will help keep any degradation happening on the jewelry from harming the item below.

Jewelry often accounts for some of the smallest items in our collections. Because of this, it can be difficult to number and store safely. While keeping in mind the information above, it can often be necessary to tag small jewelry items with acid-free tags rather than try to permanently affix a number on such a small item. The tag can either be loosely attached to the item with cotton string, or it can be placed in the same polypropylene bag or small box with the item. Another way to ensure that the number and item stay connected is by taking photographs of the jewelry items in the collection and naming the file with the number. This way the number and photo will always be together and if the jewelry is ever separated from

its tag, for instance while on exhibit, the photo can be used to confirm which item goes with which number.

Additionally, the size of jewelry can make it quite easy to misplace or have walk away. It can be a good idea to do a general inventory of the jewelry collection every few years to make sure everything is accounted for. It can be helpful to keep a small list of the items in each storage container printed and in each container, so a quick check through the jewelry can be done each time it is taken out and returned to storage. Just to make sure nothing was accidentally left out.



*Mary and Charlotte Kruzan (Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society)*

Although jewelry feels common in our lives today, it is important not to forget the special needs it has in museum collections. By caring for these items, we can make sure the love

they represent lasts as long as possible.

## Further Resources

- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Timely Tips](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Care of Collections Resources](#) (Minnesota Historical Society)
- [“Care and Identification of Objects Made from Plastic”](#) (National Park Service Conserve O Gram)
- [“How to care for your jewelry”](#) (The Dowse Art Museum)

## Collection Trainings

[A Discussion of Cold Storage Theory and Practice for Photographic and Paper-based Records](#)

**Feb. 16** – (Connecting to Collections Care)

[Handling Book and Paper-Based Collections: A Primer for Staff, Interns, and Volunteers](#)

**Feb. 16** – (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

[Social Media Best Practices for the History-Focused Organization](#)

**Feb. 22** – (Texas Historical Commission)

[Webinars](#)

**Recorded** – (Indiana Historical Society)

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