INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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The Science of Object Conservation

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Spiceland Academy Women Students Demonstrate a Chemistry Experiment *(Indiana Historical Society)*

One of the primary tasks of historical organizations is to research, interpret, and share the stories of the communities we serve. One of the most powerful ways to do that is through objects that connect people today with people in the past. We spend a lot of time

and resources on preserving those objects by providing physical environments that make them happy. Researching the right lighting levels, temperatures, archival storage, etc. and making collections stewardship decisions based on that knowledge is important to preserve our objects. That's when science and museum work come together into the field of conservation.

Objects conservation is the treatment and care of objects that have historical and cultural significance. Conservators spend years learning and working in the field to stabilize, clean, and repair objects. They work to help us maintain the objects that engage us with our varied pasts. Conservators very often study multiple disciplines – history, art, anthropology, archaeology – so that they can preserve and conserve objects bearing in mind the context of the object.

Conservators study science so that they understand the chemical composition of our objects as well as the factors – inherent vice, agents of deterioration, environmental pressures – that affect those objects. Conservators examine each object and look beyond the surface of peeling paint and worn textiles to figure out what is causing the object to degrade. Increasingly, conservators are working with communities to learn how to address cultural sensitivities in collections stewardship. They document all of their findings as well as every step of – and materials used in – the treatments that they apply to our objects.

Conservators learn to use a variety of tools that help them to test, research, and analyze the specific materials and chemical compositions that make up each object. They work to improve older object treatment methods and tools and often have to develop new methods and field-specific tools to conserve more recent objects. Their work helps us to extend the lives of our collections objects and strengthens our ability to connect visitors with history through objects.

In the next few issues of Collections Advisor, we'll gain some insight into the work of conservation and explore the science behind object conservation using examples from some of the common agents of deterioration.

Resources

- The Science of Museum: How Cutting-Edge Research and Expertise Shape Our Cultural Heritage (Wonderful Museums)
- The Art and Science of Museum Conservation (LACMA)
- Museum Conservation Institute (Smithsonian)
- Collection Conservation (Field Museum)

Further Resources

- Collections Advisors (Indiana Historical Society)
- Timely Tips (Indiana Historical Society)

Collection Trainings

- Restricted Materials – **March 2** (Backlog)
- Indigenous Collections Care Speaker Series: Physical Care of Collections – **March 3** (Gilcrease Museum)
- Writing Grants for Audio Preservation and Reformatting – **March 3** (Northeast Document Conservation Center)
- Three-Part Introductory Course for Environmental Monitoring for Collections of All Sizes – **March 25, April 22, and May 13** (Connecting to Collections Care)

Recorded Webinars

- Connecting to Collections Care
- Indiana Historical Society
- Texas Historical Commission

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