

*Preserving Family Heirlooms:  
A step-by-step approach to  
saving your family's treasures*



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# Preserving Family Heirlooms



## **Glassware:**

Do not leave liquids in glass containers for any length of time. The chemicals in water react with the silica in glass which leaves a cloudy residue behind. All efforts to remove the residue will fail because that residue is in fact a fine network of tiny fissures in the glass which have been permanently etched by the chemical reaction.

Store glass objects in sturdy containers that can withstand the weight of the object. Always cover object to prevent dust and dirt build-up. Wrap glassware in cotton cloths or acid-free tissue to prevent bumping and breakage. Do not use newspapers or colored tissue paper. The paper will permanently discolor the glass.

Do not submerge glassware in water regularly to clean. Instead a soft cotton cloth should be used to remove surface dust and debris. Be gentle when cleaning glassware to avoid scratching the surface. Never store in an attic or basement!



## **Mercury Glass:**

“Mercury Glass” is often a term used for silvered glass. Mercury was not used in this process, Silver Nitrate was used to coat the inside of 2 thin pieces of glass and give a mirrored appearance. True Mercury Glass has an identifiable mark where the two layers of glass were joined together to

Mercury Glass is extremely fragile and should always be handled with care. Keep away from fluctuations in heat and cold as the glass is thin enough to crack if the temperature changes too rapidly. Store glass in acid-free tissue paper away from other objects that can bump or rub against the object. Never store in an attic or basement!

## **Earthenware Pottery/Unglazed Ceramics:**

Earthenware objects are fired at a low temperature which leaves them very susceptible to water damage. Unglazed pottery and ceramics should never be submerged in water. This will draw surface stains deeper into the body. Soaking will also wick water into the object which weakens its loose structure. Salts found in dirt can cause crystallization on the outside of pots, if they are oversaturated with water. The salts re-crystallize with fluctuations in humidity.



Do not store in the basement. Do not stack multiple plates or flat pottery pieces on top of each other, store upright. Wipe clean with white cotton cloth gently to avoid scratching the surface.

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## Metals:

Corrosion is the main way metal objects deteriorate. Corrosion happens when metal is exposed to high levels of humidity, temperature fluctuations and gaseous fumes like car exhaust. Keeping the relative humidity between 50-55% will slow the rate of corrosion. Oils from human contact leave a residue that will hasten the tarnishing process. Wear gloves, when possible, to avoid leaving fingerprints. Do not aggressively polish metals, it thins the surface plating. Polish no more than once a year.

Metals should always be covered with cotton cloth or stored in acid-free boxes to prevent dust and dirt build-up. Use a silver cloth to store silver or silver-plate items. These typically last 5-8 years. Metals do well on metal shelving or metal storage cabinets. Do not store in standard cardboard boxes or wrap metals in newspaper, both will cause items to corrode.

## Wooden Toys and Gifts:



Varnished or lacquered wooden items can be “wet cleaned” to remove surface dirt, only if the finish has not begun to fissure and crack. If scaling or “alligatoring” has occurred, use a cotton cloth or soft-bristled brush to remove as much dust as you can without damaging the finish. For stable finishes, wax wood no more than once a year with wax paste such as “Renaissance Wax.” Do not use polishers that contain linseed oil, which is a drying agent. Once a finished wood object is waxed, use a white cotton cloth to remove dust and debris. Do not use feather dusters as the feathers can get caught in crevices.

Do not place wood objects in direct sunlight. It can damage and soften the finish. Do not use dust cloths on unfinished or rough wood objects, since fabric can snag and damage the wood. Vacuuming the object with a hose with brush attachment is the best solution, or use a soft-bristled brush. Wood objects should not be stored inside other wood objects (i.e. bookcases and dressers.) Store large wood items under sheets and smaller items on metal shelving units or in acid-free boxes.



## Rugs/Quilts:

Large textiles like rugs and quilts should be stored rolled if at all possible. If the fabric cannot be rolled and must be folded, then each piece should be unfolded, shaken out and refolded in the opposite direction every 6 months. This keeps the fabric from splitting at the stress points (fold marks). Check for insects like moths and silverfish that feed on fabrics at this time. Because these fabrics are sturdier, they can be vacuumed using the hose with a brush attachment (lifting the brush, not dragging the brush across the fabric).

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## Antique/Vintage Fabrics:

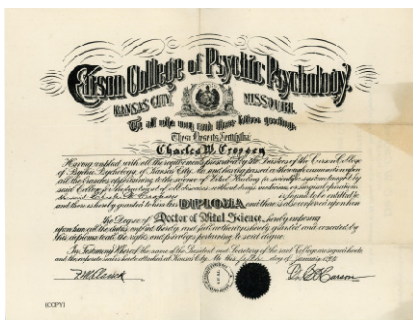
Clothing and tablecloths are more delicate and require gentler handling than rugs and quilts. Wash hands before handling fabrics to reduce transferring oils from your hands to the fabric. Also, avoid lotions and skin creams. Remove any jewelry that can snag on the fabric. Fabric is highly susceptible to light and will fade if exposed to direct light for an extended period of time. Limit light exposure by rotating fabrics on display. Do not place fabrics in direct sunlight or near incandescent lights.

Fabrics such as cashmere and silk knits should never be hung on hangers; they should be laid flat or folded. Fabrics like cotton and linen, which have a tighter weave, can be hung folded on bar hangers. Do not keep fabrics fully enclosed in any type of plastic bag. Place white cotton covers over shoulders to repel dust instead. As with other types of fabrics, refold items every 6 months. Check for insect damage regularly. Try to avoid cedar chips or bars from coming into direct contact with fabric. Do not use chemicals/mothballs to prevent insect infestations.



All fabrics are sensitive to humidity levels. Do not store fabrics in an attic or basement. High heat will dry fabrics and make them brittle. Cold damp spaces will bring mold and mildew issues. Fabrics need to breathe, loosely store fabrics in cotton sheets or in acid-free containers. Do not over pack! Do not store in cardboard boxes or plastic containers containing PVCs. Do not bleach items to remove stains, this weakens the fabric leading to holes and tears over time.

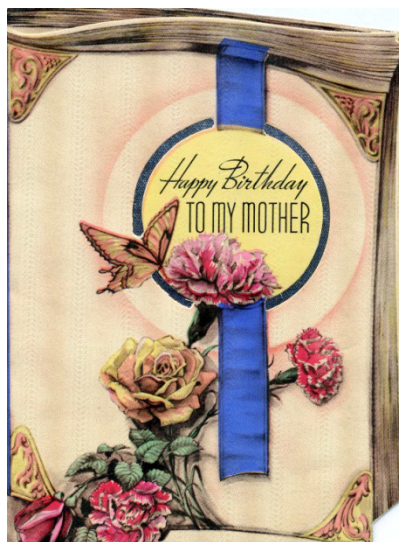
Three dimensional fabric objects like toys, dolls, lampshades etc... should be cleaned with a soft-bristled brush. You can use the hose attachment on your vacuum, but you **must** reduce suction power by covering the end of the hose with cheesecloth (lifting the hose as you go not dragging the hose across the object). Store in acid-free containers wrapped in acid-free tissue paper or neutral foam core to prevent jostling and bumping.



## Paper Objects:

Paper objects like diplomas, greeting cards, maps etc... prefer humidity levels between 40 and 50%. Paper objects are more forgiving than other types of materials. They can live contently in a temperature controlled environment up to 72 degrees Fahrenheit such as a first floor closet. Do not store paper products in the attic or basement. Exposure to high heat will cause moisture to evaporate from paper causing it to shrink and curl. For these reasons, do not store paper objects near heating elements such as floor registers and fireplaces. Exposure to moisture will cause paper to mildew and mold. Do not mount or store paper objects along an outside wall which is susceptible to drastic changes in temperature. If paper objects must be stored, do not store them in plastic bags or

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cardboard boxes. Use acid-free boxes or folders. Paper items need to breathe, be sure to store these objects in a place where there is plenty of air circulation. If the air becomes stagnant, it increases the chance for bug infestations.

## Greeting Cards:

Cards, notes and other hand-colored or handwritten loose paper objects should be stored in acid-free file folders. Exposure to light will fade the colors of the cards. Storing them in folders reduces their exposure to light and household pollutants such as smoke, dust and animal dander.

## Art Prints/Maps:

These oversized items should always be stored flat. The best location for these items is in a map cabinet. If such an option isn't available, they can be stored flat under a bed or another large surface. Protect these items in acid-free boxes or between oversized acid-free, lignin-free mats or poster board.

Do not roll large items for storage. If you have items that have been rolled you can 'train' them to lay flat by following this trick:



Find a large Tupperware crate and fill it with 3 inches of water. Find a smaller Tupperware crate to fit inside the larger one. Flip it over, so the bottom faces up away from the water, to act as a flat surface for your document. Place your document on top of the smaller container and place the larger crate's lid securely on the crate. **Do not submerge the document in water.** Let the document sit in the humidity controlled crate for up to 3 days (checking on the rolled document periodically). Introducing water to the paper will relax the fibers enough for the paper to release its curl and lay flat.

## Books:

Store books upright supported by neighboring books or book ends. Do not let books lean. Only oversized books should be stored flat. Do not stack more than 3 oversized books on top of each other. It creates too much pressure on the bottom book. Also, do not lay books open face-down on a table. This exerts an inordinate amount of pressure on the book spine which will cause the book to split.

Books are sensitive to light and will fade when exposed to direct light for an extended period of time. Do not store books in direct sunlight or display books directly under incandescent lighting.

Wash your hands before handling books or papers to prevent oil residues from staining the paper. Do not lick your fingers to turn a page or use a post-it note to mark your page. The moisture damages the paper and leaves a residue behind which eventually will stain the page permanently.

