



What is Conservation?

Many people have objects of historical, artistic or sentimental value. Over time, these may deteriorate, or accidents may happen, causing damage. Tarnished silverware, moth-eaten army uniforms, broken furniture and paintings covered with a network of cracks and yellowed varnish are examples. The conservator is a specialist who can treat damaged objects, and who can help collectors and custodians care for them in the future.

A conservator has the training, knowledge and expertise to perform a variety of conservation activities within a specialty, for example, in paintings, textiles, or furniture. These include examinations and condition assessments of objects, treatments, documentation and preventive conservation.

Examining an object is the first step to determine its composition, structure, and how it was put together. A conservator's trained eye and experience with similar objects are the most important tools at this stage. The conservator may also need to study relevant historical and present-day information. A thorough examination of the object ensures that sound conservation decisions are made during the condition assessment and treatment.

A condition assessment involves determining and recording the extent and location of damage on an object and, if possible, what caused the damage. The conservator also estimates whether the damage is ongoing or not. From this information, treatment options and preventive measures for the future care of the object can be proposed.

Conservation treatments are intended to stop ongoing damage, and often to repair damages or reveal aesthetic, historical and other important qualities of the object. A single treatment may have all of these purposes. For example, a torn silk dress may require fine hand stitching to attach it to a new backing fabric in order to stabilize it and to enhance its meaning and public appreciation. There can be a range of treatment options for a given object and condition. Based on their training and experience, and guided by a Code of Ethics, conservators are able to propose how best to treat the object in a given situation, and how far a treatment should go. Amateur restorations, on the other hand, may not follow ethical principles. They can destroy valuable information and obscure the object's authenticity. They may also cause further damage.

Conservators produce written and photographic records of their work to document the condition of the object before and after a treatment, as well as the treatment itself. This information serves as a reference for the owner, custodian, researchers or future conservators.

An ounce of prevention

Preventive conservation includes actions taken on the object's surroundings to prevent damage from fire, theft, vandalism, shocks and vibrations, water, dust, pollutants, pests, light, ultraviolet radiation, temperature or humidity. Conservators can choose from a variety of preventive storage, transit or display measures. Designing and building a shipping crate tailored to an object's needs, or a climate-controlled, dust-free display case, are examples of preventive strategies.

*Excerpted from **What is Conservation** © 1997, CAC and CAPC Written by Carole Dignard, Heather Dumka and Joan Marshall*

How do I repair my artefact or find a conservator to repair it?

Some basic improvements may be done by the owner, after consultation with a conservator. However, most treatments require a professional conservator who has the training and expertise to successfully assess the damage, determine whether it is ongoing, advise the owner and implement treatment options. Qualified conservators are highly skilled practitioners with years of training and experience. Unfortunately, there are also individuals who call themselves conservators but who are unqualified or do not abide by professional standards. Consequently, it is important to be careful in selecting a conservator.

There are several qualified conservators in private practise in the Vancouver area. The conservation staff at the Museum of Vancouver have worked with several of them, and know the local qualified conservators through professional contacts.

In order to find a suitable conservator for your artefact, please contact the Conservation Department at the Museum of Vancouver for a referral:
cbrynjolfson@museumofvancouver.ca 604-730-5315

How do I preserve my paper based materials (books, documents, prints) and photographs?

We suggest that you get in touch with the City of Vancouver archives www.vancouver.ca/archives or the BC Archives and Records Services www.bcarecives.gov.bc.ca. They are the experts on preservation of these archival materials as well as audio-visual recording media.

The Care of Silver

Silver has been used since ancient times in the fabrication of decorative and functional objects because of its working properties and pleasing color and shine. In Europe, however, silver was relatively rare; it was only with the exploitation of mines in the New World that silver became available in large quantities, and the fabrication of things like complete silver services for the middle class was possible, and affordable.

Pure silver is too soft for normal use, and so it is combined or alloyed with another metal for strength. Silver plate is made from a base metal such as copper with a thin coating of silver electrolytically deposited on or physically bonded to it. Like gold leaf, very thin sheets of silver foil can be applied to a variety of surfaces to create a decorative effect.

Aside from the fact that it is soft, and therefore scratches easily, silver is durable, and the only problem generally associated with it is tarnish. In the days when wealthy families could employ a platoon of help, the daily upkeep of silver was not a drawback. Nowadays, it is more common for silver to go a long time between cleanings, and the build-up of tarnish can be quite extreme, making the cleaning process more intensive.

Avoid touching silver with your hands; use a dish cloth or tissue as a buffer. In museums, cotton, vinyl, latex or nitrile gloves are always worn by staff handling silver and other metals to prevent the transfer of body oils and salts.

Cleaning and tarnish removal are steps where use of the wrong materials and techniques can severely damage the surface of your silver. Please contact the Conservation Department at the Museum of Vancouver, and we will send you information about the best products and methods to use for this. The brochure also discusses methods to safely store your silver and retard the production of tarnish.

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