

# Art Conservation 101

Contributed by Carol Chua

After you've spent precious time and resources building up an art collection, it would be a shame to have its value depreciate because of a lack of knowledge of proper care and conservation for works of art. Some ageing is natural and acceptable to a certain degree, but deterioration or damage due to negligence is not, especially when it can be avoided.

You've probably seen what humidity, light and mold can do to photo prints and film. The same environmental conditions which inflict this kind of damage threatens your art pieces. In fact, with the worsening environment, art works are more in danger than ever before. Even modern lifestyles pose a threat. Have you noticed how art galleries and museums discourage the use of flash cameras and other artificial light sources in the presence of their exhibits?

As the curator of your own collection, you would be well-advised to protect your art pieces from the following hazards:

## Pollution

Dust, dirt, human bodily fluids and oils (such as perspiration) and acids are corrosive and discoloring to art. The first three elements are obvious, but where do acids come from? These can be found in household cleaners, air fresheners, chemicals found in furniture, carpets, curtains, appliances, packaging and even the air. Direct skin contact is also damaging to art, which is why handling art works with bare hands should be avoided.

## Humidity

This may be good for the skin but the same cannot be said to be true for art. Humidity, moisture or dampness cultivates mold and causes foxing, or brown spotting on the art. Storerooms are typically humid and poorly-ventilated, the perfect breeding ground for these evils, as well as vermin like silverfish and cockroaches. Even paintings and prints displayed on walls can be destroyed by the wormholes or worm tracks of silverfish. Check any art on display regularly for any potential problems.

## Heat

A very dry environment can also be damaging to art. Constant humidity of less than 40% can make art works, especially paper or textile-based ones, brittle and very fragile. Humidity should range from 40% to 60%. Modern living environments in cooler climates widely use central heating or radiators which may make conditions far too dry for delicate art. To minimize the problem, try placing bowls of water on radiators.

Radical fluctuations in temperature can cause items to expand and contract. Art should preferably be kept at a constant temperature, just like in special exhibition rooms in museums.

## Light

Art cannot be appreciated without light but too much light is detrimental to art, as the UV found in both natural and artificial light fades colors and details.

## Protective Options

So what can you do to protect your art collection?

You can try to keep your art pieces in a relatively pollutant-free, temperature, light and humidity-controlled environment. This may involve:

- \* purchasing and installing special boxes, chests, cabinets or folders
- \* designating a special purpose-built room or area for your collection
- \* renting specialized storage space designed for housing delicate art

Some protective options, such as metal cabinets, are rather ugly, but they will protect your valuable items more effectively than, say, wood. Not all materials are equal; acrylic plastic is preferred to glass, and acid-free paper is better than normal paper. You'll find some examples here:

[http://www.home-museum.com/How-To-Arts/how-to\\_contents.htm](http://www.home-museum.com/How-To-Arts/how-to_contents.htm)

The variables can be confusing, so seek the advice of an art specialist or archiving expert to get started on the right foot.

If you keep your lovely art works safely tucked away under lock and key, you will not have the pleasure of displaying and admiring them. That would be like having the cake and not being able to eat it. Find a balance that suits your requirements.

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