



Conservation March 2001

On The Block: Art Storage

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Whether your collection is large or small, Impressionist paintings or toy trains, high valued or low valued, it requires special consideration and attention. One of these issues is the storage of valuable articles. Although fine art professionals agree that each item is extremely different depending on its medium, and should be treated as such, there are several basic principles that can be useful in controlling these objects' environments and ensuring their security for posterity. There are six basic principles that should be considered when evaluating storage of a valuable object: planning, location, climate control, lighting, storage materials and methods, and handling.

Planning:

Before a collection is moved into storage, especially if it is large, it is important to properly prepare. In choosing the intended space for the storage of your valuables (whether it is in private storage space or fine art commercial space), careful consideration should be given to the nature of the object. For instance, if the collection consists of only one type of item, such as paintings, then the choice of storage space may simply be slat racks. However, if the collection consists of several kinds of artifacts, such as works on paper, paintings and textiles, the preparation and selection of a space will require more planning and a variety of solutions.

Before the artifacts are placed in storage, it is recommended that you keep a complete inventory of the items—complete with catalogue/inventory numbers, type of artifact, and destination. In addition, it is strongly suggested that you clearly mark the objects with a code that corresponds to your catalogue/inventory numbers. This inventory can be computerized on your own PC's or written in a hardbound notebook. The overall objective is for you to have clear documentation of the items in storage.

Location:

The chosen location for the storage of valuable artifacts should be in a centralized room or designated space. It is imperative that the artifacts be kept away from outside walls, HVAC plants, plumbing mains, daylight, or doorways which may be subject to drafts and flooding. In private homes, the chosen spots for the storage of fine arts are generally the attic or the basement. These are generally the worst locations because they are closest to the exterior of the building and are therefore subject to extreme temperature changes, relative humidity changes, flooding, insects and rodents.

Climate Control:

Most conservators agree that the ideal climate for valuable objects is 65-75 degrees F (18-21 C) and 47%-55% relative humidity. Although sophisticated climate control systems, such as centralized climate control, are available for residential use, they are usually cost prohibitive. In the event there is a large amount of fine arts being stored, a localized climate control system may be considered. Generally, the localized system is a type of air conditioner that cools the air at a constant temperature as well as absorbs some of its moisture while filtering out some air particles.

Typically, most collectors will not want to install a specialized system. If the collection is not large, then it should be located in areas which are not subject to dramatic changes in temperature or humidity. In addition, all vents, doors, windows and passages that allow air to flow from an exterior environment to an interior environment should be closed. In addition, the HVAC systems should be regularly cleaned to try to reduce any air pollutants.

If you are considering placing the collection in commercial storage space, one of the deciding factors in choosing the space should be the presence of climate control systems. Try to become familiar with fine art warehouses in your area.

Lighting:

Light may be damaging to artifacts in two ways-by its level of illumination and its wavelength. Conservators generally recommend that artifacts of fragile nature, such as textiles, works on paper, and photographs, be stored in areas with a background illumination less than 5 foot-candles-or illuminated by a 100 watt bulb at a distance of more than 10 feet. Artifacts of moderately sensitive nature, such as paintings and some sculptures, should be stored in areas with background illumination of 15-20 foot-candles, or equal to greater than 100-watt bulb. Since light is so detrimental to any type of object, it is preferable that the storage space remain dark unless in use.

Although extended exposure to artificial light can be damaging if not properly controlled, exposure to natural light can be devastating to artifacts. Natural light contains ultraviolet radiation, which can cause damage to many materials. Therefore, natural light should be completely eliminated from the chosen storage space. All windows should either be closed off or covered with heavy black curtains or shades. In addition, any artificial light emanating from florescent lights and/or tungsten lamps should be covered with ultraviolet filters. In addition, these lights should be located at a relatively far distance from the stored objects.

Storage Materials and Methods:

Choosing the appropriate materials for the storage of delicate artifacts is often difficult due to the variety of items available on the market. It is always suggested that for extremely valuable objects, you consult with an accredited conservator. Conservators specialize in the type of objects they treat-photographs, paintings, objects of combined media, textiles, furniture, and work on paper-and should be requested as such. It is strongly advised that you avoid "generalists" in the field since there is no national licensing or accreditation requirement for conservators and therefore there is a wide variability of skill in the field.

Resources: There are many types of storage materials that are designed by specialty companies such as Gaylord, Masterpak, and Conservation Resources International that you can recommend to your clients. These companies, and many others, make acid and sulfur free storage boxes, cabinets, flat-drawer files, bins and shelves. In addition, a local architect or contractor could design slot racks (which are built-in vertical racks commonly used for paintings, looking glasses and other framed items).

Materials: Open shelving is an inexpensive option and is perfectly acceptable. These shelves should be padded with either foamed polyethylene or cotton to cushion the objects. If the shelves are wood, it is preferable that they are made of hardwood, such as oak, and should be lined with non-reactive polyester sheeting (popularly produced by Mylar). The lining will prevent any invisible chemical reactions between the wood and the artifact.

Any breakables, objects d'art or small artifacts, should first be placed inside a specialized storage box. The most important criterion for these boxes is that they are acid free in addition to being durable and easily

accessible. All textiles and prints should be stored flat, either in flat-fire drawers or in boxes and sandwiched between tissue paper.

Method: All of these storage materials should be raised 6-12 inches above the floor to prevent damage due to flooding. Any large objects such as sculptures or furniture should be placed on raised platforms that are covered with carpeting.

Handling Artifacts:

There are some simple precautions in handling objects that can be taken in order to avoid accidents. Hands should always be freshly cleaned before moving the object. Objects should not be moved until the space has been properly cleaned and prepared. Heavy objects should be moved by a minimum of two people. In the instance of high valued items, professional art movers should be utilized.

Conclusion:

These basic principles are invaluable to the protection of your collection. They are meant to suggest general guidelines that should not be used as hard and fast rules. When in doubt, rely on the professional advice of a specialized conservator.

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