

Gloves or No Gloves? When to Wear Gloves When Handling Museum Collections

You will need:

- Nitrile gloves
- A clean, obstacle free space to handle your collections
- Your collections

We handle our museum collections objects on a day-to-day basis for tasks such as cleaning, cataloguing, exhibiting, and interpreting. But are you familiar with when you should use gloves while handling your museum's objects and what types of gloves you should use?

In this two-minute technique, we will share with you up-to-date best practices as they apply to handling a variety of objects you are most likely to come in contact with at your small museum or historic site.

Up until recently, most museum professionals used cotton gloves to handle objects. Today, the National Park Service and other reputable organizations discourage using cotton gloves. Instead, many institutions have replaced white cotton gloves with nitrile gloves.

We'll show you why!

Before you work with collections, remove any accessories or clothing such as rings and watches that may damage your collections. Clear the your workspace of foods, liquids, markets, or other items that may damage collections. No matter whether you plan to wear gloves or not, wash your hands thoroughly with a neutral soap so you do not transfer oils or other contaminants to your objects. Do not apply hand lotion after washing, as the lotion may damage the object.

Why use gloves to handle some museum objects?

- Wearing gloves protects you from injury and the object from damage.

What type of gloves should you wear?

- Before handling your objects, first, you need to consider what types of gloves to use. We recommend keeping Nitrile gloves on hand. They are



made of a synthetic rubber that does not irritate many people's hands. Depending on what types of collections you are working with, you may need to consider an alternative glove type. See the National Park Service Handout linked on the pdf associated with the video for more information.

Why shouldn't you use cotton gloves?

- Cotton gloves are traditionally associated with museum object handling. But in fact, cotton gloves can abrade objects and therefore damage them. For example, if you wear cotton gloves, you are more likely to accidentally remove a painted surface from a chest of drawers. Cotton gloves can also make it more difficult to get a grip on an object, which means slippery objects such as a silver tumbler could easily fall out of your hands and onto the ground.

When should you use gloves? You should use gloves when you're handling...

- Metal objects (teapot), photographs (daguerreotype), or objects that are made from a combination of media such as firearms or hand tools made of wood and metal
 - Wearing gloves will prevent you from transferring oils and dirt from your hands to the metals. These contaminants can accelerate the deterioration of your objects.
- Dirty or potentially hazardous objects (*whig box*)
 - In this case, if you don't know what type of substance you are handling, you are protecting yourself from unanticipated negative consequences of handling a toxic artifact.
- Leather objects (other than books) (*cartridge box*)
- Paintings and other framed fine art
- Other objects as determined by the keeper of the collections with which you are working
 - Some museums may request that guests use gloves for all handling purposes. Always respect the policies of the institutions you are visiting!

When are gloves unnecessary? When you're handling (with clean hands)...

- Ceramics and glass (green bottle and lusterware w/handle)
 - Using your bare hands will help you keep a firm grip on these particularly fragile objects. Be sure to handle them over soft, padded surfaces to prevent damage if you do accidentally drop the object.



- Textiles
 - Gloves can easily catch on fragile textiles or textile decoration such as embroidery or spangles.
- Paper and Books
 - Gloves can easily catch on paper and do more harm than good.
- Ceramic and glass archaeological artifacts

There are always exceptions to these rules, depending on the objects with which you are working. For example, you may want to handle a heavily beaded dress with gloves to prevent transferring oils or other contaminants to the metal decoration. Or, you may choose not to wear gloves when handling a leather trunk that may have components that could catch on your gloves and get damaged. Use your best judgment when making handling decisions with objects like these, or consult with another colleague to get a second opinion before handling objects like these.

After you have worn your gloves for two-three work days or after they become visibly soiled, replace them with new gloves.

When in doubt, wear gloves!

After you have selected your gloves, stop, look, and study. As the steward of your collections' objects, remember to treat each object as if it is precious and irreplaceable. Never handle or move an object if you are concerned for the safety of the object or surrounding objects, yourself, or others. Always check to see if your object has any loose or fragile parts. If you detect any physical vulnerabilities, take care not to make them worse. Never handle objects by fragile or otherwise physically compromised parts such as handles on pitchers or decoration on a textile. If you cannot lift an object safely on your own, seek assistance.

Most media have special handling instructions with which you should familiarize yourself. For more guidance on this subject, see the Museum of London's "Handling Museum Objects" tutorial, listed on the pdf of resources we consulted for this video.

For more detailed information about the variety of gloves on the market and the types of gloves you should use with a given type of collections object, check with the National Park Service Glove Conserv o Gram and other resources listed in the sources consulted/further resources pdf associated with this video for more collections-friendly glove options.



Further Resources/Sources Consulted

National Park Service, Ch. 6: Handling, Packing, and Shipping,” *NPS Museum Handbook*, PART I: Museum Collections,
<http://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/MHI/CHAP6.pdf>.

This chapter of the *NPS Museum Handbook* covers all aspects of collections handling. Keep this resource at hand for when handling questions arise!

National Park Service, “How To Select Gloves: An Overview For Collections Staff,” *Conserv O Gram*, September 2010 (Number 1/2),
<http://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/consveogram/01-12.pdf>.

This *Conserv O Gram* includes a chart of a variety of gloves and museum collections uses for them.

Beck Fifield, “Museum Monday: Get Rid of Those White Cotton Gloves. Time for Nitrile,” *The Still Room* blog, February 25, 2013,
<http://thestillroomblog.com/2013/02/25/museum-monday-get-rid-of-those-white-cotton-gloves-time-for-nitrile/>.

Fifield’s blog post gives readers a concise and accessible explanation as to why more museum professionals prefer nitrile gloves over white cotton gloves.

Museum of London, “Handling Museum Objects,” 2013,
<http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Resources/e-learning/handling-museum-objects/index.html>.

This illustrated tutorial, produced by the Museum of London, walks you through the reasons why museum objects should be handled “differently” and best practices in handling and moving for a variety of objects. This is a great tutorial to share with museum volunteers, staff, and board members that will reinforce the need for taking special precautions when handling your museum’s collections.



Cathleen E. Baker and Randy Silverman, "Misperceptions about White Gloves," *International Preservation News* No. 27 (December 2005),
<http://raglinen.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/White-glove-myths.pdf>.

In this essay, Baker and Silverman explore the origins of the "myth" that all rare books and documents should be handled using white cotton gloves, concluding that the best policy for handling these objects is to wash one's hands with ordinary soap and water.

Mary Coughlin, "Handling Guidelines," February 28, 2013,
<http://www.connectingtocollections.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/ObjectHandlingPowerPoint.pdf>

These illustrated slides provide a great introduction to collections handling and moving. Coughlin covers everything from why and when to wear gloves and what types of trays and baskets you can use to move objects from room to room.

The final three resources provide good overviews of how to handle and move specific types of museum collections.

Heritage & Libraries Branch, Ontario Ministry of Culture, "Note #6: Handling Museum Objects," *Museum Notes*, 2005,
https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/hrb/pdf/handling_museum_objects.pdf

Prepared by Bruno Pouliot and Lauren Fair, with the contribution of Lauren Kaplan, "Object Handling Procedures," Excerpted from *Procedue Manual for the Objects Conservation Laboratory of Winterthur Museum and Country Estate and Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation, Academic Year 2012-2013*,
http://www.connectingtocollections.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Handling_Winterthur.pdf.

"Chicago Historical Society—Chicago History Museum Artifact Handling and Transport Procedures,"
http://libraries.delaware.gov/documents/policies/CHM_Handling_Guidelines.pdf.

