

Preservation Best Practices for Collections Stewardship

Preservation Benchmarks

These benchmarks are intended as a guide for museums, libraries, and archives in improving collections care and management. The checklists below can be used as tools for internal evaluation of collections care practices and as a framework for preservation planning.¹

The benchmarks within each of the checklists are divided into the categories of basic, good, and best. These categories are defined as:

Getting Started:	The minimum level of care necessary for responsible stewardship
Good:	Taking actions that are above the basic, but there is still room for improvement
Better:	Optimal stewardship of cultural collections based on current research and methods.

The benchmark categories are:

1. Policies and Intellectual Control
2. Building and Facilities
3. Environment and Environmental Monitoring
4. Lighting
5. Emergency Preparedness
6. Security
7. Housekeeping
8. Pest Management
9. Handling and Access
10. Collections Storage
11. Exhibition

¹ The Preservation Benchmark framework is based on the publication *Benchmarks in Collections Care for Museums, Archives, and Libraries* published by the Council for Museums, Archives, and Libraries (UK) in 2011.

1. Policies and Intellectual Control

Getting Started

- The board, staff, and institution understand the purpose and importance of collections management policies and are committed to having the necessary documents in place
- A mission statement is in place that is a true reflection of the institutional direction
- The institutional strategic plan includes goals and objectives that relate to preservation
- A collections development policy is in place
- A basic inventory of the collection has been completed

Good

- A collection management policy is in place
- A loan policy is in place
- Access policies are in place for staff and outside researchers
- A procedures manual is in place for the collections
- A rights and reproductions policy is in place for researchers

Better

- Policies are understood and approved by the board and/or collections committee
- Policies and guiding documents are reviewed and updated on an annual basis
- An institutional records management program is in place
- The entire collection is cataloged to established standards
- A system is established for regular inventory of the collections

2. Building and Facilities

Getting Started

- The building structure is sound and can support the necessary weight loads of a museum/library/archives
- The building interior is protected from water and weather intrusions
- The building is inspected on a regular basis to ensure that changes in building condition are noted and addressed
- Maintenance issues are addressed as they occur
- Contractors are informed of regulations for working around collections

Good

- A facilities maintenance program is in place
- Major building systems are inspected regularly, with special attention paid to plumbing and electrical systems
- Records are kept of all building maintenance and inspections
- Building vulnerabilities are known and checked on as necessary

Better

- A dedicated facilities maintenance position is on staff full-time
- Plans for regular building upgrades are incorporated into the institutional long-range plan

3. Environment and Environmental Monitoring

Getting Started

- Simple measures to improve environmental conditions are in place, such as closing doors, using fans, etc.
- Collections are housed in a manner that protects the materials from extremes in environmental fluctuations
- Collections are stored and exhibited in spaced that are capable of maintaining stable environmental conditions
- Monitoring equipment is available to spot check temperature and relative humidity levels
- Environmental data is regularly collected and retained

Good

- A systematic program to measure humidity and temperature is in place with hygrothermographs or dataloggers. The system is based on defined monitoring objectives
- Staff is trained in use of monitoring equipment
- Monitoring equipment is recalibrated as recommended by the manufacturer
- A record is kept of events that might affect environmental conditions, such as receptions, leaks, systems failures, outside weather etc.
- Desired set points are established that are achievable for the storage and exhibition areas

Better

- Qualified staff members or a consultant analyzes and prepares a summary of environmental data
- Environmental monitoring data is used to adjust environmental control systems and procedures
- The monitoring program is reviewed at regular intervals
- An environmental engineer is hired on an annual basis to ensure systems are working at the highest efficiency
- Specialized environments are established for sensitive collections

4. Lighting

Getting Started

- All windows in storage and exhibition areas are covered
- Light sources are not placed directly over collections materials
- Lights are turned on in storage areas only when materials are being retrieved
- Fluorescent lights are covered using ultraviolet filtering films

Good

- Light sensitive materials on exhibit are regularly rotated
- Records are kept on light exposure for materials placed on exhibition
- A schedule is in place for testing and replacement of ultraviolet filtering film
- Light sensitive materials are not left out in work areas for extended periods of time

Better

- Light meters are owned by the institution and light levels are regularly checked

5. Emergency Preparedness

Getting Started

- Centrally monitored fire and security detection and notification systems are in place and are regularly inspected
- A basic response flipchart is in place for quick emergency response
- Forms are in place for recording damage or theft of collections materials
- Basic supplies for emergency response are in central locations and refreshed regularly
- A chain of command is established for emergency situations

Good

- A risk assessment and analysis has been conducted for the institution and actions implemented to mitigate risks
- A full emergency response plan is in place
- An emergency response team is established and prepared to respond to emergency situations
- Copies of accession records, catalog records, and finding aids are kept off-site or are regularly backed up to an off-site server
- Fire suppression systems are in place
- Insurance coverage is in place to cover salvage and conservation treatment of collections

Better

- The emergency plan is updated annually
- Annual training exercises are held for staff
- Regular contact is maintained with police and fire departments
- Vendors and service providers are on contract in the event of an emergency
- Salvage priorities for the collections have been established

6. Security

Getting Started

- All storage rooms are kept locked when not in use
- Access to collections storage spaces is limited to essential staff
- All facilities in which collections are stored are alarmed with a centrally monitored security system
- Materials on exhibit are in locked cases or behind barriers
- Researchers sign in and are monitored at all times while using collections materials

Good

- Security procedures are in place and are followed by all staff
- A system is in place for tracking everyone that enters a secure collections storage location
- Exhibit galleries and research spaces are monitored with security cameras
- Regular contract is maintained with local law enforcement

Better

- Security procedures are reviewed and assessed annually
- Exhibit cases are alarmed

- A security specialist has analyzed the institution and has made recommendation for mitigating security risks
- Security personnel are on staff and monitor facilities 24 hours a day

7. Housekeeping

Getting Started

- Storage and exhibition areas are cleaned on a regular schedule
- All garbage containing food is removed from the facility on a daily basis
- Cleaning supplies and tools are kept in stock
- Staff are trained in what techniques are appropriate when cleaning around collections

Good

- A conservator has been consulted about what cleaning products are appropriate for use around collections materials
- A formalized housekeeping policy and manual are established
- Staff are trained to notice and report changes in the collections observed during cleaning (pests, missing pieces, damage)

Better

- A system is in place for basic cleaning of stacks/boxes/artifacts
- An annual training session is held for those staff members involved in housekeeping for collections areas

8. Pest Management

Getting Started

- Storage areas and furniture are cleaned on a regular basis
- All trash containing food is removed from the building on a daily basis
- Staff keeps food in airtight containers and cleans all eating areas daily
- All incoming items are examined for pest and mold infestations. Remedial action is taken to prevent the spread to the rest of the collection
- Any items exhibiting signs of pests are isolated from the rest of the collection until treated

Good

- Vulnerabilities for an infestation are mitigated, such as sealing possible infiltration areas, use of outside lighting, correction of drainage problems, sweeping gaskets on exterior doors, and use of screens
- Storage and exhibition areas are monitored for the presence of pests with glue boards
- All pests are identified and records are kept about location, number found, as well as records of special events that might affect environmental conditions, such as receptions, leaks, systems failures, etc.
- The institution's selected pest management company understands the specific pest control needs for the safety of staff, visitor, and the collection. No insecticides are used consistently as a pest deterrent
- Advice is sought from a conservator before treating any affected collections materials

Better

- Instructions for cleaning storage and exhibition areas are written and followed
- An integrated pest management program is in place for monitoring and responding to an infestation
- Selection of pest infestation treatments, traps, and baiting are appropriate for safety of the collections and people
- A specialist in integrated pest management programs for cultural institutions reviews the IPM program at regular intervals
- A separate space is available for segregation of infested materials or those suspected of infestation.

9. Handling and Access

Getting Started

- There are written handling guidelines for both staff and researchers
- Carts are available to move collections throughout the building
- Staff members are trained in appropriate handling techniques
- Landing spaces are available in collections storage spaces to aid in retrieval and return to storage
- Gloves are available for use as necessary

Good

- Mounts and supports are available to staff and researchers using the collections
- A system is in place for reporting and recording damage to collections materials
- Enclosures are marked for collections that are fragile and/or require special handling instructions
- Only specially trained staff move collections materials
- Access to fragile materials is limited until rehousing or conservation treatment can be completed

Better

- Collections materials are in protective enclosures for transportation, handling and research
- Conservators and art handlers are consulted and retained for moving large, awkward, or particularly fragile materials

10. Collections Storage

Getting Started

- There is sufficient space to store all collections materials according to established standards
- Shelving is in place and all collections are stored at least 3 inches off of the floor
- Non-collections materials are not stored with collections materials
- Collections are housed using conservation-grade materials
- Aisles are of sufficient width and are clear of collections materials
- Materials can easily be retrieved from shelving and necessary step stools and ladders are available

Good

- Storage furniture is made from powder coated steel and accommodates collections of various sizes and shapes (rolled, oversized, etc.)
- There is room for collections growth
- Subject specialists and conservators are consulted regarding optimal storage for collections materials
- Collections materials are stored by format
- Collections housing is refined and all materials are secure within boxes/enclosures

Better

- Collections pieces are stored on or with specialized mounts than can be used for access and/or exhibition
- A space plan/evaluation has been conducted to ensure that the space is being used at its maximum capacity
- Specialized storage environments are in place for collections materials with specific needs
- Storage enclosures are regularly inspected to ensure they are still meeting the needs of the collections

12. Exhibition

Getting Started

- Materials that are fragile or in poor condition are not placed on exhibition
- Only conservation-grade materials are used for exhibit mounts and mounts fully support the object on exhibit
- Food and drink are not permitted in exhibition areas and galleries are not used as special events spaces
- Exhibit cases are secure and are not harmful to collections materials
- Sensitive materials on exhibition are regularly rotated

Good

- Materials on exhibit are regularly checked for condition during the exhibition period
- Advice regarding mounts and appropriate exhibition methods is sought from qualified specialists
- Lighting levels can be and are adjusted to meet the needs of specific materials
- Cases are designed to maintain specific environments for the collections
- Condition reports are completed for materials before and after exhibition

Better

- An exhibition policy is in place that outlines guidelines for length of exhibition, lighting, and mounts
- Records are kept for length of time and light levels for each collections piece placed on exhibition
- All collections materials to be exhibited are examined, treated (if needed) and mounted by a conservator who is part of the exhibition team
- Plans for what materials will be exhibited are made at least 1 year in advance so that mounts and conservation treatments can be planned