

Guide to Preserving African American Artifacts



Source: Markecia Koulessner

WHAT IS AN ARTIFACT?

Artifacts are objects created by human beings and are typically tied to a specific culture or historical interest. Artifacts come in many forms and offer insight into how people lived in specific times and places. They often provide information on day-to-day life, interactions, beliefs, and values. Without artifacts, much of what we know about the past would be lost to time. It is because of artifacts, that we can piece together the lives and experiences of those that came before us, teaching us about ourselves and the world around us.

TYPES OF ARTIFACTS

As mentioned, artifacts come in many forms. Some are paper-based or archival, and include literature, some art, birth certificates and death records. Others are object-based such as textiles and clothing, furniture, house-hold items, and personal belongings. To best care for your artifacts, it is important to know what you have and what kind of artifact it is.

Examples of Paper-based Artifacts:

- Photographs
- Newspapers/Newspaper articles or clippings
- Deeds, wills, birth certificates, death records, marriage licenses
- Books/Bibles
- Prints, drawings, works on paper
- Ephemera
- Recipes

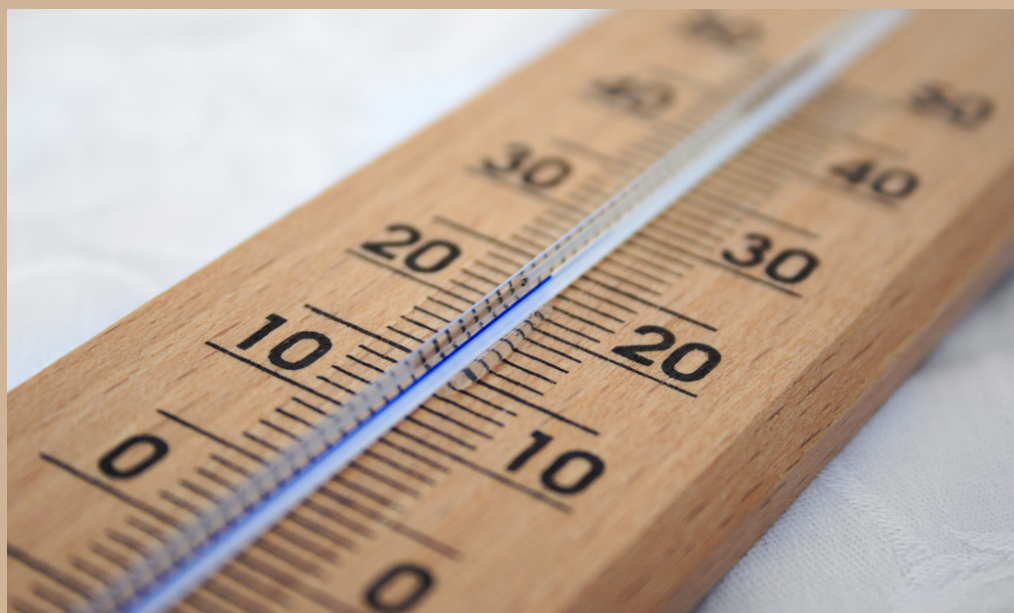
Examples of Object Artifacts:

- Textiles/clothes/quilts
- Furniture
- Personal items (ex. A hairbrush, cooking utensils, radio)
- Military memorabilia/armaments
- Art
- Jewelry
- Pottery



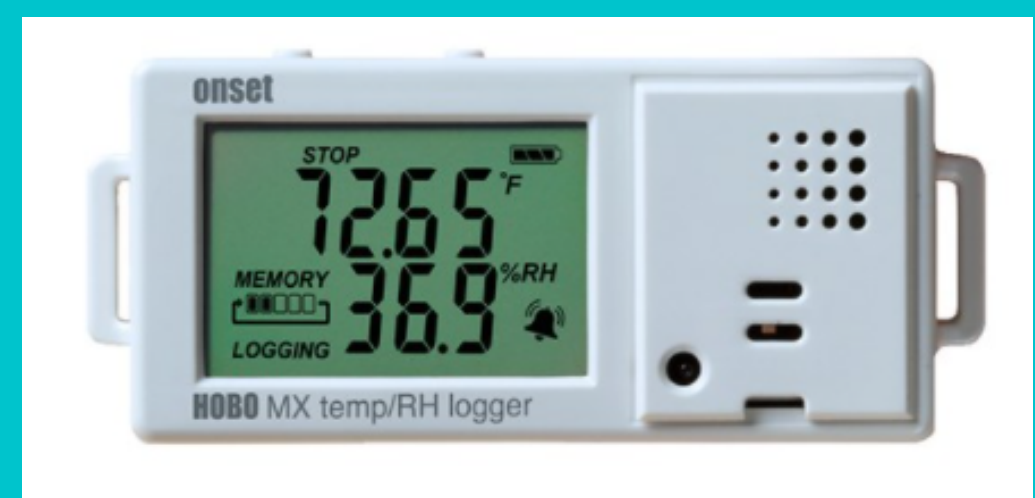
IMPORTANCE OF ENVIRONMENT

When storing artifacts, it is important to maintain proper environmental conditions to ensure long-term preservation. A cool, dry, and stable environment is crucial for both paper and object collections. When heat and moisture levels rise, metals can tarnish, paper can break down, and wood can expand ruining the integrity of each item. With lower temperatures and relative humidity (RH), you can minimize the risk of degradation over time.



Temperatures should be no higher than 70°F, and relative humidity should sit between 30 and 50 percent. When the humidity drops below 30 %, it can cause paper to dry out, and humidity above 50% can cause some woods to warp, so it is important to maintain this range. Try to avoid storing artifacts in attics or basements as this is where extreme climate changes can occur. Remember, moderate conditions are always best.

To ensure the conditions of your space you will want to monitor the temperature and humidity on a regular basis. Investing in a data logger or temperature log will help you do so. HOBO is a great brand for data logging and comes with software to track changes in temperature and humidity over time. In addition, it may also help to keep a couple dehumidifiers on hand for the summer months when humidity starts to spike. Dehumidifiers help pull additional moisture out of the air to limit the risk of mold growth and deterioration and maintain a healthy RH for your artifacts.



HANDLING

Special care must be taken when handling all artifacts. To mitigate risk when handling artifacts, it is important to consider factors that contribute to the damage and deterioration of the items in your collection. First and foremost, there should be no eating, drinking, or smoking around your artifacts. Keeping things like food and drink away from artifacts decreases the chance of immediate damage. Pens and other sharp objects should also be kept away from artifacts to avoid permanent injury or destruction to a piece.

Artifacts of all kinds are precious and sensitive in nature and should be treated as such. Assessing objects for areas of vulnerability will help inform you on how an artifact should be handled. With this, try to avoid unnecessary handling if possible. In addition, be intentional with your handling. If you are moving an object from one place to another, plan your route or movement prior to picking up the piece. Also, consider an object's weak points. Picking up a hundred-year-old jug by its handle when it weighs 20 pounds may not be the best way to handle that object. Instead, consider collecting the object at its base, with careful consideration of hand placement to ensure the weight of the object is fully supported. Other signs of vulnerability to look for include:

- Brittle paper
- Areas of previous repair
- Ornate frames
- Sensitive surfaces (e.g., photographs/film)
- Floppy objects
- Unframed paintings



Using specific equipment and materials can assist in the proper handling of objects. Corrugated board or foam board can support flat, flexible objects such as papers and textiles. Trolleys and dollies are safe ways to move heavy objects, and foam or felt covered blocks can be used to add additional support during movement or when housed. Cotton or nitrile gloves are a staple for collection handling. Disposable nitrile gloves are great to use with slippery surfaces found with ceramics, glass, or metal. Cotton gloves are useful when handling delicate surfaces such as photographs and film.

HOUSING

Selecting the best materials for artifact housing can be tricky. When it comes to plastics, not all types are suitable for collection storage. Commonly found collection storage items include:

- Polyethylene plastic (containers, sheets, or foam roll)
- 100% natural cotton (unsized, unbleached, and undyed)
- Linen
- Acid-free tissue paper or board



Stable plastics that do not off-gas overtime (such as polyethylene) can be ideal for housing collection items and can be easily handled. Polyethylene plastics come in the form of containers, sheets often known as Mylar, and foam rolls. Containers are most useful for storage or packing for transport and provide a sturdy option for object handling. Polyethylene sheets, also known as Mylar, can be used for both object and paper-based collections. They can create a barrier between artifacts on display or separate objects from one another in storage. Polyethylene foam rolls are also great for packing and can absorb shock from movement.



Unbleached and undyed cotton is another useful material for object handling. Cotton gloves are best for delicate objects, usually photographs or film to ensure no smudges or handprints and oils are left behind. Cotton rags are also great to have on hand for cleaning objects as they are abrasive enough to remove dirt and grime without causing damage to the artifact. They can also be used on any material. Linen is similar to cotton and can be use for the same purpose, however, linen fibers tend to be more abrasive than cotton and should not be used to clean objects in very poor condition.



Acid-free tissue paper is a staple in collections management and can be used for all your housing needs. Acid-free tissue has a neutral pH (pH 7.0) and can be used for wrapping artifacts for storage or transport and padding. Used for both object and paper-based collections, acid-free tissue can be used to wrap books and layered between documents or works on paper. You can also line storage boxes with it and maintain the shape of uniforms and other textiles if used it as stuffing.

REMEDIATION

Despite the many measures we take to ensure the safety and longevity of our collections, damage can take place. Damage can come in different forms, and most commonly can be caused by:

- Poor handling
- Poor climate conditions

In the event of an accident, causing an item to break, crack, split or tear, a conservation and/or restoration specialist should be consulted. Conservation and restoration specialists specialize in the management and treatment of museum objects such as paintings, pottery, books, furniture and more. Using microscopes, x-rays, and special lighting they can examine objects thoroughly to determine the best course of action for repair or to combat preservation issues.



Another form of damage can come from poor climate conditions. When relative humidity spikes it can cause mold to bloom in areas where organic material is present. We typically find mold on clothing, wood, paper, and some metals. While some mold damage can be irreversible leaving permanent damage, there are ways to combat this damage early on.

In order to clean artifacts affected by mold you will need a few things:

- Nitrile gloves (for handling)
- Hog hair or Bamboo brushes (useful for book cleaning and those delicate, hard to reach places)
- 100% cotton Rags
- Cotton Q-tips
- Aprons
- HEPA filtered vacuums (cleans artifacts and the air too!)
- 70 % isopropyl alcohol (for mold and stubborn dirt)
- Particulate respirator (for personal protection)



Isopropyl alcohol is ideal for removing dirt and cleaning mold as it is able to penetrate the cellular membrane of the fungus causing the mold to remove the problem from the source, yet it is gentle enough to use on fragile materials. **DISCLAIMER:** Isopropyl alcohol may not react the same way on all materials or surfaces. For this reason, it is important to do a patch test to see how the alcohol will respond with the artifact. Using your cotton rag, add a small amount of alcohol to the rag and test on a small, hidden surface of the object if possible. As the alcohol dries/evaporates, pay close attention to how the surface changes, if at all. If no changes take place, then you may continue to use the isopropyl alcohol to clean.