

Some important considerations

- Shelved books may be charred on the outside but intact inside. Vacuum the edges before you open the books – don't worry if some of the charred bits come off.
- Photograph albums may be stuck together – do not try to open them by force. You will need to take them to a conservator for advice.
- Heat can make glass, ceramic and metal items very brittle – remember handle carefully.
- Fabrics in particular might look intact but may fall apart without very careful handling.
- Supports that you can slide underneath your belongings (e.g. sheets, boards, plastic) will enable you to safely carry more fragile items.

You have now essentially done all you can to stabilise your items. It is likely that they will need further attention from a qualified conservator as they still may be in a fragile state. Please contact your nearest major museum or private conservator.

Please keep in mind that while things might look irretrievably damaged, there may well be treatments that will salvage these items.

Do not despair, but please seek conservation advice! A list of conservators in private practice can be found on the AICCM website—www.aiccm.org.au.

Image credits: Both by Megan Jordan-Jones, Australian War Memorial. *Front cover:* Medals salvaged from the Canberra bushfires, before treatment. *Back cover:* The same medals, after treatment and with new ribbons.



Conservators work to preserve our cultural heritage. We work in museums, art galleries, libraries, archives and in private practice.

The AICCM is the professional organisation for conservators in Australia.

This brochure was prepared by Kay Söderlund in February 2009.



The Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials

www.aiccm.org.au
secretariat@aiccm.org.au



After a fire

How can you salvage your family's precious belongings?



www.aiccm.org.au

HOW CAN YOU SALVAGE YOUR FAMILY'S PRECIOUS BELONGINGS?

After a fire

Personal safety is always the highest priority when entering buildings damaged by fire.

Never attempt to salvage belongings at the expense of your own safety.

- Wear protective clothing - especially gloves (nitrile or latex are preferred over cotton), face masks and eye protection.
- Avoid breathing in or touching hazardous materials. Risks in fire-damaged areas can include particulates, exposed asbestos, lead-containing building materials (such as glass and lead paint) and chemical residues.
- If water has been used to put out the fire, mould may also be an issue and should not be inhaled.

Checklist: What you will need

For collecting items:

- Nitrile or latex gloves
- Dust mask
- Eye protection, such as goggles
- Protective clothing
- Boxes, containers and plastic sleeves

For cleaning items:

- Vacuum cleaner with HEPA filter
- Soot sponges

General handling advice

When retrieving your items:

- Even though you will be sorely tempted, it is important to reduce the amount you handle or touch damaged items. The very fine particles in soot stick to everything and every touch will grind it further into the item you are trying to save.
- Take photographs of your damaged items and contact your insurance agency as soon as possible to start any claims.
- Soot and ash are very abrasive and will further damage your item through scratching.
- If your items were exposed to both heat and water they will be even more fragile.
- Lift your objects carefully and avoid weakened areas - e.g. support ceramics from the base, rather than lifting by handles.
- Wear nitrile or latex gloves when handling objects as the greasy residue in soot can be permanently fixed to absorbent surfaces by skin oils.
- Avoid placing pressure on blistered or lifting surfaces - e.g. on paintings and photographs.
- Place items in supportive boxes or plastic containers until you can obtain further advice or are ready to begin cleaning.
- Keep in mind that the longer that the soot remains on the item, the harder it is to remove.

Some simple cleaning tips

- Do not use water—or any other cleaning solution! Water will drive soot and ash further into the surface of your item and it will become impossible to remove.
- As soon as possible, vacuum the soot and ash off your item.
- Do not vacuum wet or damp items – wait until it is dry.
- It is preferable to use a HEPA filter in your vacuum cleaner (this is a high efficiency particulate filter – they can be bought in good vacuum cleaner shops).
- Use the vacuum on the lowest setting, or have smaller plastic tubes inserted into the main tube to reduce suction.
- Do not use a brush and do not allow the nozzle to touch the surface.
- Vacuum all exposed surfaces **before** opening out folded items such as textiles or books.
- If you want to remove further residue, 'soot sponges' can be carefully used if the item is robust enough. Cut small pieces of the sponge for more accurate application and economic use. The dirty surface of the sponge can be cut off to expose a new cleaning surface. These sponges are available through specialist conservation suppliers – contact the conservation department at any of the major museums, libraries, archives or galleries for advice.