

Breaking the rules: managing fading without (so much) guess work

Bruce Ford

ABSTRACT

Cultural institutions often deal with the risk of light-fading by adopting lighting guidelines such as the CIE's *CIE 157, Control of Damage to Museum Objects by Optical Radiation* that limit display and maximum light levels according to colourants' assumed lightfastness. Like other heuristic and rules-based approaches to preventive conservation, especially those based on inadequate or highly generalised data, implementation is likely to be very expensive and focused on compliance rather than the qualities of the objects themselves and physical processes involved. This endangers the most vulnerable objects and unnecessarily restricts access to many more.

By failing to address common-sense aspects of the long term risk of fading, 'best practice' (but practically unworkable) blanket restrictions on display - often of whole classes of objects like 'works on paper', 'non-carbon inks' or 'textiles' - may become a major driver of exhibition programs, seriously limiting curatorial options and reducing the conservator's professional role to that of the lighting police. The impasse may be broken by basing cumulative exposure limits on simple structured fading risk assessments based on the Collection Council of Australia's *Significance* guidelines and object-specific fading rate data derived from the non-destructive accelerated "microfading" technique. This approach allows the most vulnerable material to be identified and selectively protected at much lower cost and inconvenience to the exhibiting or lending institution.

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