



# Actions for drying flood-damaged artworks (paintings) in an Australian context

These instructions provide a guide to the initial drying of paintings in your personal collection; however, paintings will most likely require subsequent attention from a conservator.

## Before you begin

- Start drying procedures as quickly as possible. Do not assume that any painting is ruined; prioritise works in terms of significance, and seek guidance from experts. Experts include art and material culture conservators who can be reached through:
  - Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material: [secretariat@aiccm.org.au](mailto:secretariat@aiccm.org.au) or <https://aiccm.org.au>
  - State-based museums and galleries organisations
  - State-based art galleries and libraries
  - Your local council member
- When working in flood-affected areas or with flood-affected materials, always wear personal protective equipment, including disposable waterproof gloves, properly fitted disposable P2 mask / respirator and safety glasses, waterproof boots, long pants and shirt with long sleeves. Floodwaters may contain harmful substances, chemicals and sewerage, which can transfer to the paintings and yourself during handling. Mould may also be present, which can affect your health and may grow very quickly in humid conditions.
- Follow emergency safety procedures to ensure that the area is safe to enter and no harm comes to individuals.
- Ensure you have permission from the owner of the artworks before handling them.
- Do not undertake any action that you feel unskilled to perform.
- Document the paintings with photographs and written notes.

## Painting materials are diverse

- Supports include canvas, compressed fibreboard (chipboard and Masonite), solid wood panels, canvas boards and cardboard or paper.
- Paint types include oil, watercolour, acrylic and other synthetic paints. Paintings can contain colours and varnishes that are soluble or affected by water.
- Typically, paintings on canvas are stapled taut over a wooden **stretcher or strainer**, then sometimes fitted into a **frame**.
- The frame may include glass and mounts at the front, and wood, paper or cardboard backings and wire and hanging systems on the reverse. The **frame** may be large and ornate or it may be a simple strip moulding around the perimeter of the artwork.

## Drying procedures

- **Do not attempt cleaning or mud removal while the paintings are wet** as paint layers can be soft, unstable and easily damaged.
- As paintings dry, they may exhibit flaking, lifting or curling paint layers, or show softened or dissolved paint or ground layers. Wooden and paper elements will expand when wet and may show distortion and warping, sometimes permanently.

## ACTIONS

### 1. Prepare a space for drying paintings

- Ideally, this space will contain both a 'dirty' area to handle, unwrap and possibly unframe wet paintings, and a 'clean' area for drying.
- The dirty area should have a soft surface to lay paintings on (a tarp, drop sheet or layers of clean cardboard) and have access to rubbish bins and unframing tools such as pliers and screwdrivers.
- The drying area should be a clean space with good air circulation and access to electricity. It needs to be protected from rain or future flooding. It is best if the drying area is sheltered, not in direct sunlight and large enough to lay out your paintings for a few days. Security may also be a consideration for both these spaces.

### 2. Collect materials to assist drying

- Pedestal fans, power leads, foam or wooden blocks (cardboard boxes are useful), a table, absorbent materials (such as blotting paper, paper towels, towels, clean cardboard), labels with a string, pencils, garbage bags, rolls of baking paper, head torch, Glen 20™ spray (or similar ethanol based aerosol), camera or phone, scissors, screwdrivers, pliers and tools for unframing.

### 3. Handle wet paintings carefully

- Hold paintings with both hands and ask for assistance if they are large or heavy. Paintings may need to be transported by car or truck to a drying area, and require careful stacking and packing during transport.
- Do not lay paintings horizontally on top of each other, but instead stack them vertically, with frames alternating face-to-face and back-to-back.
- Once you arrive at your salvage area and unpack your paintings, start in the dirty area to carefully remove any wrapping (such as bubble wrap or tissue) from the paintings and discard in garbage bags. If wrapping is stuck to the surface of the painting, cut off what is not stuck and leave the rest to dry with the painting.

### 4. Do not clean while wet

- While paintings are wet, avoid touching the paint surfaces or frame's decorative mouldings as this could cause damage. Any cleaning of mud or debris should be undertaken by a conservator once the painting is dry.

### 5. If it is safe to do so, separate the painting from its frame to dry

- **NOTE:** Paintings on canvas are typically stapled taut over a wooden stretcher or strainer.
- **Do not remove a canvas painting from its stretcher or strainer while wet** — stretched canvas may become very tight when wet and can warp its stretcher. Do not unstaple a canvas painting from its stretcher.
- Sometimes paintings and works on paper are also fitted into an external frame, which may contain glass or acrylic at the front and a cardboard backing on the reverse.
- **If it is safe to do so and the framing materials are wet, remove the painting from its external frame to allow drying of the artwork.** Lay the framed painting face down on a soft surface and unfasten the fittings securing the painting in the frame using screwdrivers and pliers. Remove any backing boards or mounts and hanging wire. Once fittings are unfastened, lift the painting from its frame and place it face up to dry. If the painting appears to be stuck to the frame or glass, do not force it; instead, leave the painting in place, keeping it face down to dry in its frame.
- If separated, label the frame and any detached parts so they can be reunited later with the painting. Labels and other inscriptions on backing boards may also be important to dry and retain.

### 6. Set up the paintings and frames to dry

- Unframed paintings are best placed face up on raised blocks under each corner to allow air circulation underneath. Allow the paint surface to air dry untouched. If paintings are large, or if space is an issue, they can also be leaned upright against a wall, on blocks. Cardboard or foam can be placed behind the top edge of the painting to protect it from the wall.

### 7. Ensure good air circulation

- Place pedestal fans around the room, without allowing too much force from the air on individual paintings. Do not use hairdryers, direct sunlight or heat to dry paintings, as heat or rapid drying can damage paint layers. As well as assisting drying, circulating air from pedestal fans can reduce mould growth.
- Mould may begin to grow on the paintings as they start to dry — often within 48 hours. Lightly spraying 60–70% ethanol in water (or a commercial alternative such as Glen 20™ spray — active ingredient 60% ethanol) on the unpainted reverse of canvases, wood supports or paper backings can reduce mould growth. Always test surfaces and never spray ethanol or other products on the painted surface of artworks, as ethanol can dissolve paints, varnishes and plastics.
- Once dry, exposure of the reverse of the painting to UV light (sunlight) for half an hour may also reduce mould growth.

### 8. Establish priorities for the drying process

- Focus first on the paintings of highest significance, and then on those that are wet or are actively distorting. Continue to monitor the reverse of the paintings for mould growth.

### 9. Arrange to have a paintings conservator inspect the paintings as soon as possible

- A conservator will assess the extent of damage, deal with possible mould growth and provide advice regarding treatment and next steps.

### 10. Other resources

<https://aiccm.org.au/disaster/flood/>

Find a professional conservator at:

[https://aiccm.org.au/find-a-conservator/?\\_page=9](https://aiccm.org.au/find-a-conservator/?_page=9)

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