Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material

AICCM COLLECTION CARE FIRST AID WORKSHEET

Objects and mixed materials

Four Questions to Ask

- What do you see?
- What is the risk?
- What is the safest first step?
- When would you call a conservator?

Safe First Steps

- Reduce unnecessary handling and movement; support before moving.
- Keep detached parts associated, supported and labelled; photograph and record condition.
- Control obvious external risks only when that can be done without treating or destabilising the object.

Common Mistakes

- Cleaning corrosion, tarnish or accretions because they “look dirty”.
- Using household glues, tapes, oils, polishes or chemicals
- Forcing moving parts or reassembling an unstable object.

Escalation Triggers

- Active or accelerating corrosion; powdering / flaking; structural instability.
- Unknown sticky / weeping plastics, residues or hazardous materials.
- Complex mixed materials, significant or culturally sensitive material, or treatment needed before movement, display or transport.

Resources

AICCM Visual Glossary - Corrosion, crack, detached, friable and off-gassing. Open

AICCM Objects Special Interest Group - Professional network covering diverse three-dimensional collections. Open

Canadian Conservation Institute - Care of Objects - Material-specific preventive care for metals, plastics, ceramics, furniture and other objects. Open

Canadian Conservation Institute - Metal Objects - Water and high relative humidity are primary corrosion risks for many metals. Open

Artcare: The Care of Art and Artefacts in New Zealand. Open

Te Papa Conservation Guidelines: Open

Visible sign / scenario	Ask	Safe first move	Tempting mistake	Escalate when…
Loose component / crack	What changes if we pick it up?	Stop unnecessary handling; support the whole object and detached part; document association.	Don't glue it back; lift by the projecting part.	movement could extend the crack; part is lost; object must travel/be displayed.
Powdery or flaking surface	Is material being lost through touch or vibration?	Do not touch the surface; isolate from vibration; photograph; seek advice.	Don't brush, wipe or vacuum loose material.	material is actively shedding or needs to be movement.
Corrosion on metal	What is active change versus stable patina?	Keep dry; minimise handling; document appearance; assess environment.	Don't polish, scrape, oil or chemically "neutralise" corrosion.	corrosion is powdery, expanding, wet, rapidly changing or salts are suspected.
Sticky / weeping plastic	What do stickiness, droplets, distortion or odour tell us?	Reduce handling; separate from adjacent materials; improve local ventilation if safe; protect from dust; seek material-specific advice.	Don't wash, solvent-clean, wrap tightly or add absorbent powders.	material is actively exuding, deforming, causing residue or affecting neighbours.
Failing adhesive / old repair	Is the repair now part of the risk?	Support the item so the joint is not carrying load; document repair.	Don't add more glue or tape.	joint is structural, original material is lifting, or removal is contemplated.
Dust / surface dirt	Is it loose dust or something hazardous / friable?	Improve housekeeping around the object; only clean if an established safe method exists.	Don't assume every dusty surface can be brushed or vacuumed.	surface is friable, coated, composite, contaminated or significance is uncertain.
Poor mount or support	Where is the weight carried? Is storage causing distortion?	Add non-invasive support; reduce point loads; avoid stacking objects; plan movement.	Don't force object to fit a mount; use pressure or adhesive to secure.	mounting requires attachment or reshaping.
Unknown residue	Can we safely identify what it is?	Do not touch; isolate area; seek safety and conservation advice.	Don't smell, taste, scrape or solvent-test residue.	hazard or contamination is possible.
Broken object	How do we prevent further damage and loss?	Document, wrap components separately but keep together	Don't glue it together, testing fit of components, discarding small pieces.	Object needs to be displayed
Leather dry or stiff	Is the object stable?	Document, support item to help maintain its shape	Don't apply oils, coatings or polishes.	Object needs to be displayed, active shedding
Squashed or distorted object	Can we safely improve storage or display?	Avoid stacking objects in storage, provide appropriate support to maintain shape.	Don't force it back into original shape.	Object needs to be displayed, risk of tearing

Resources (continued)

Powerhouse Museum Conservation.
Open

National Museum of Scotland: handling and packing objects.
Open

WA Museum Collection Care Manual.
Open

Museums and Galleries NSW Collection Care.
Open

National Parks Service Conserve O Grams.
Open