

Handling Museum Objects

Handling museum objects is one of the key features of working in a heritage institution. However, handling is one of the leading causes of damage to objects!

Safely handling museum objects is one of the simplest but most effective ways of caring for your collection.



Object handling

Your environment

Be aware of **your environment** when handling an object.

Always handle objects over a table or other sturdy surface.

When not being handled, the object should sit on a Plastazote® layer or tray, or other suitable surface.

The image opposite shows a table covered with acid-free tissue, creating a safe surface for the object to sit on.

Keep the object close to the table. If you need to see the base, place the object on a support, or ask someone to help you lift it.

Keep your handling surface clear. No piles of books or papers nearby. Give yourself plenty of space to handle the object.



Object handling Gloves

When you are handling museum objects, it is best practice to wear gloves.

Disposable nitrile gloves are better than cotton gloves because they allow greater accuracy of movement, there are no fibres to get caught on objects, and they are not kept to transfer dirt between objects. Also, some people are allergic to latex, so that material is not suitable.

Nitrile gloves are for your protection as well as the object's. Wearing gloves protects you from the harmful features of objects; for example, objects made of **lead**, or objects coated with **poison** (arrow heads are a particular example of this).

There are some cases where gloves are optional. For example, when handling paper objects or hanging scrolls. In these cases, consult with a conservator to ensure that you are handling the object in the appropriate manner.



A metal object that has been handled without gloves.
Even touching it once is enough to leave a greasy residue!

An often overlooked preparation for handling objects is to consider what you are wearing.

Particularly think about:

Jewellery- rings and watches should be removed before handling objects. They can scratch surfaces even through gloves.

Necklaces should be tucked securely inside clothing so that they do not fall onto objects.

Hair- make sure that your hair is tied back to prevent it falling forward on to an object, or obscuring your vision while you are holding an object.

Clothing- Any loose items of clothing should be secured or removed before handling objects. Sleeves should be tight to the wrist, or rolled up. Ties should be tucked into your shirt. Also remember your staff passes. They should be tucked safely away.

Disposable aprons are a good solution if you are concerned about your clothing while you are handling objects. See picture opposite.



Object handling

Assessing an object

Now that you have prepared yourself and your environment, you can consider the object. However, before interacting with an object, you should first assess it.

Think about the following:

Vulnerable components- are there handles that move? Is the lid a separate piece? Is there fragile decoration? Are there delicate components?

The weight of the object- can you pick this object up by yourself?

The balance of the object- is this object heavier at one end/ unevenly weighted?

The size of the object- can you safely pick this object up in your environment?

The shape of the object- are there components that stick out (e.g. a spout, or tail)

Most importantly- Do you need to handle this object?



Object handling

Picking up the object

Now that you have ensured that your environment is suitable, you have the PPE that you need, and have decided that you do in fact need to handle the object, you can go ahead and pick it up.

Ensure that you lift the object with **two hands**, and support the weight of the object from underneath as much as possible.

If you are lifting the object with another person, make sure to communicate clearly about lifting and handling.

While handling the object, think about the pressure you are applying. Holding an object more tightly does not mean that it is more secure!

Remember: if you are ever unsure, ask! Perhaps a colleague has handled this object before, and knows more about it.

