



250 Ways to Care for Your Community by Caring for Your Cultural Heritage

*A practical, friendly guide for staff and volunteers at museums,
libraries, archives, historic houses, historical societies,
and performing arts organizations*

January 2026

Introduction

In 2026, the United States marks 250 years since its founding. Anniversaries invite both reflection and responsibility.

Cultural heritage is not just what we celebrate on special occasions. It is what we care for quietly, every day. It lives in documents, objects, buildings, performances, and collections—many of them fragile, many of them irreplaceable, all of them carrying memory forward.

This guide offers 250 simple, practical ways to care for cultural heritage by reducing everyday risk. Most require no special equipment. None require a conservation degree. All rely on something far more important: attention.

Preventive care is not glamorous. When it works, nothing happens. But over time, small, thoughtful actions accumulate into something powerful—stability, longevity, and the ability for future generations to encounter their history intact.

Written for staff and volunteers working in museums, libraries, archives, historical societies, historic houses, and performing arts organizations, this guide is organized around the realities of daily work. It begins with the five factors that cause the most damage—light; temperature and humidity; dust and pollutants; handling; and pests—before moving into material-specific guidance and concluding with the most important factor of all: people.

Throughout, short moments of Ohio history remind us that care is local. Every collection in Ohio sits within layers of human, industrial, and cultural history. The choices made today become part of that story.

250 Ways to Care for Your Community by Caring for Your Cultural Heritage is ICA's semiquincentennial gift: a practical, generous invitation to notice more, worry less, and remember that care—quiet, cumulative, and shared—is itself a civic act.

Sincerely,

The Team at ICA-Art Conservation

January 2026

America's First Nonprofit Art Conservation Lab

75 years young, in December 2026

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THE FIVE BIG CONCERNS (Ways 1–125)

(Light · Temperature & Humidity · Dust · Access & Handling · Pests)

LIGHT

1. Turn lights off when no one is in the room.
2. Keep objects out of direct sunlight.
3. Use curtains, shades, or blinds whenever possible.
4. Rotate light-sensitive objects off display.
5. Store sensitive materials in the dark.
6. Use the lowest light level that allows comfortable viewing.
7. Avoid spotlighting fragile objects.
8. Remember: light damage is cumulative.
9. Remember: light damage is irreversible.
10. Turn off case lights overnight.
11. Avoid placing objects near windows.
12. Use UV-filtering film where feasible.
13. Reduce display time rather than increasing light.
14. Keep works on paper out of long-term display.
15. Limit exhibition durations.
16. Document when objects go on and off display.
17. Treat storage lighting as task lighting only.
18. Avoid decorative lighting in storage areas.
19. Keep holiday lighting away from collections.
20. Close doors to block stray light.
21. Remember that LEDs still cause fading.
22. Avoid heat-producing bulbs near objects.
23. Check for sun shifts seasonally.
24. Shield objects during events.
25. Dim lights during cleaning.
26. Use facsimiles for long-term display.
27. Train volunteers to turn off lights.
28. Build “lights off” into closing routines.
29. When in doubt, choose darker.
30. Darkness is not neglect—it’s protection.

Did You Know?

Many 19th-century Ohio museums relied entirely on daylight. Light damage often predates electricity.

TEMPERATURE & HUMIDITY

31. Aim for stability, not perfection.
32. Avoid rapid temperature changes.
33. Avoid rapid humidity changes.
34. Keep objects away from vents.
35. Keep objects away from radiators.
36. Avoid space heaters near collections.
37. Avoid fans blowing directly on objects.
38. Elevate collections off basement floors.
39. Keep collections out of attics.
40. Allow objects to acclimate slowly.

41. Monitor conditions if possible.
42. Even simple devices help.
43. Notice seasonal patterns.
44. Document problem areas.
45. Address leaks immediately.
46. Respond quickly to condensation.
47. Keep storage doors closed.
48. Avoid opening windows near collections.
49. Watch humidity during spring rains.
50. Watch dryness during winter heating.

51. Keep HVAC settings consistent.
52. Avoid shutting systems off completely.
53. Plan for power outages.
54. Protect collections during building work.
55. Remember that humans feel changes too.
56. If you're uncomfortable, objects are too.
57. Mold needs moisture and time.
58. Prevent moisture before treating mold.
59. Stability slows deterioration.
60. Boring environments are good environments.

Did You Know?

Basement flooding during Northeast Ohio spring rains is one of the leading causes of collection damage statewide.

DUST & AIRBORNE POLLUTANTS

61. Dust is abrasive.
62. Dust holds moisture.
63. Dust attracts pests.
64. Clean regularly, not aggressively.
65. Clean shelves before objects.
66. Use dry cleaning methods first.
67. Avoid sprays near collections.
68. Avoid feather dusters.
69. Use soft brushes.
70. Use microfiber cloths.

71. Clean floors before objects.
72. Vacuum with HEPA filters if possible.
73. Keep doors and windows closed.
74. Reduce clutter.
75. Dust is not harmless dirt.
76. Document cleaning schedules.
77. Train volunteers in safe cleaning.
78. Protect objects during building work.
79. Cover shelves during renovations.
80. Remove trash daily.

81. Avoid scented cleaning products.
82. Watch for soot or residue.
83. Industrial dust may linger for decades.
84. If you can write in it, it's overdue.
85. Gentle consistency beats deep cleaning.

Did You Know?

Industrial residues from steel, coal, and manufacturing still appear in dust samples from historic Ohio buildings.

ACCESS & HANDLING

86. Fewer hands reduce risk.
87. Clean hands are often better than gloves.
88. Support objects fully when lifting.
89. Never lift by handles or rims.
90. Never lift by frame alone.

91. Plan moves before lifting.
92. Clear pathways first.
93. Use carts whenever possible.
94. Do not stack objects casually.
95. Avoid multitasking while handling.
96. Ask for help early.
97. Use two people for large objects.
98. Remove jewelry before handling.
99. Avoid food and drink nearby.
100. Slow is safer.

101. Do not rush for visitors.
102. Restrict unnecessary access.
103. Supervise handling closely.
104. Train new volunteers thoroughly.
105. Assume objects are fragile.
106. Avoid leaning objects against walls.
107. Return objects promptly after use.
108. Document movement.
109. When unsure, stop.
110. Good intentions still cause damage.

PESTS

- 111. Pests like food, shelter, and quiet.
- 112. Keep food out of collection spaces.
- 113. No plants in storage areas.
- 114. Monitor regularly.
- 115. Sticky traps are early warnings.
- 116. One bug matters.
- 117. Identify pests before reacting.
- 118. Seal cracks when possible.
- 119. Clean regularly to deter pests.
- 120. Quarantine new items.

- 121. Watch seasonal patterns.
- 122. Store textiles carefully.
- 123. Report sightings early.
- 124. Pests are not a moral failing.
- 125. Prevention is easier than eviction.

Did You Know?

Ohio's four seasons create ideal conditions for insects to thrive indoors year-round.

MATERIAL-SPECIFIC CARE

WORKS ON PAPER & ARCHIVES

126. Store flat whenever possible.
127. Use folders, not rubber bands.
128. Remove paper clips.
129. Remove sticky notes.
130. Support documents fully.

131. Avoid folding.
132. Keep paper away from light.
133. Use boxes for protection.
134. Label enclosures clearly.
135. Handle one item at a time.
136. Avoid lamination.
137. Keep paper dry.
138. Watch for brittleness.
139. Isolate moldy items.
140. Avoid fast repairs.

141. Document condition changes.
142. Store photographs carefully.
143. Avoid pressure on edges.
144. Train researchers.
145. Paper remembers stress.

BOOKS

- 146. Shelve books upright.
- 147. Support them with bookends.
- 148. Store large books flat.
- 149. Don't pull by the spine top.
- 150. Keep shelves clean.

- 151. Avoid overcrowding.
- 152. Use bookmarks, not scraps.
- 153. Keep food away.
- 154. Watch for loose boards.
- 155. Avoid pressure on spines.
- 156. Keep books out of sunlight.
- 157. Handle gently when open.
- 158. Support open books.
- 159. Avoid photocopying fragile books.
- 160. Isolate moldy books.

- 161. Document damage early.
- 162. Keep shelving stable.
- 163. Avoid leaning stacks.
- 164. Clean shelves first.
- 165. Books like calm lives.

PAINTINGS & FRAMES

- 166. Lift paintings with two hands.
- 167. Support from underneath.
- 168. Never touch paint surfaces.
- 169. Keep backing boards intact.
- 170. Check for flaking paint.

- 171. Avoid vibration.
- 172. Secure hanging hardware.
- 173. Keep away from heat sources.
- 174. Avoid damp walls.
- 175. Frames are part of the object.
- 176. Avoid pressure on frames.
- 177. Protect during transport.
- 178. Store upright when possible.
- 179. Avoid stacking.
- 180. Document condition changes.

- 181. Watch corners carefully.
- 182. Keep pests away.
- 183. Avoid cleaning paint yourself.
- 184. Call a conservator when unsure.
- 185. Paintings age gracefully with care.

PLASTICS

- 186. Plastics are not permanent.
- 187. Many plastics off-gas.
- 188. Isolate sticky plastics.
- 189. Isolate smelly plastics.
- 190. Keep plastics cool.

- 191. Avoid airtight enclosures.
- 192. Monitor regularly.
- 193. Document changes.
- 194. Avoid mixing plastics.
- 195. Support fragile shapes.
- 196. Avoid stress on joints.
- 197. Store away from heat.
- 198. Watch for discoloration.
- 199. Plastics may fail suddenly.
- 200. Keep good records.

- 201. Separate from organic materials.
- 202. Train staff about plastics.
- 203. Early action matters.
- 204. Plastics challenge assumptions.
- 205. Change is not your fault.

Did You Know? (Ohio)

Ohio was a major plastics manufacturing center in the 20th century; many collections contain early synthetic materials.

METAL, WOOD & LEATHER

- 206. Metals dislike moisture.
- 207. Wood dislikes rapid change.
- 208. Leather needs airflow.
- 209. Avoid polishing metal.
- 210. Corrosion spreads.

- 211. Keep metals dry.
- 212. Avoid wrapping leather tightly.
- 213. Support wood evenly.
- 214. Watch for cracking.
- 215. Avoid pressure points.
- 216. Store mixed materials carefully.
- 217. Separate reactive materials.
- 218. Document corrosion early.
- 219. Avoid DIY repairs.
- 220. Handle gently.

- 221. Protect from pests.
- 222. Keep away from heat.
- 223. Monitor seasonal change.
- 224. Call experts when needed.
- 225. Slow care wins.

THE HUMAN FACTOR

- 226. Write things down.
- 227. Label clearly.
- 228. Share knowledge.
- 229. Train kindly.
- 230. Ask questions.

- 231. Notice small changes.
- 232. Trust your instincts.
- 233. Slow down.
- 234. Communicate clearly.
- 235. Care for future staff.
- 236. Care for future communities.
- 237. Respect limits.
- 238. Know when to stop.
- 239. Plan before acting.
- 240. Celebrate small wins.

- 241. Preventive care is invisible success.
- 242. Consistency matters.
- 243. Perfection is not required.
- 244. Progress beats perfection.
- 245. Humor helps.
- 246. Care is cumulative.
- 247. You are a steward.
- 248. You are part of the story.
- 249. Today matters.
- 250. Thank you for caring.

Final Ohio Did You Know?

Ohio's cultural heritage survives not because of grand gestures, but because of thousands of quiet acts of care—just like these.