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conservation

Preserving Cultural
Heritage

How Do I...

Care for Glass & Ceramics

Introduction

While ceramics and glass come in a variety of forms with unique properties and requirements for preservation, these basic guidelines cover most cases. Ceramic and glass objects are primarily at risk for accidental cracking and breaking, often a result of improper handling or display. Some objects have increased vulnerability due to poor manufacturing methods or materials and their prior history. Proper handling, storage, and display can extend the life of these materials.

Handling

- › First, visually examine the object for loose components and damage such as cracks and former repairs.
- › Before handling, remove rings and jewelry to prevent damage.
- › Most ceramic and glass objects can be safely handled with clean, dry hands. Exceptions include delicate surfaces like gilding and lusterware; use nitrile gloves.
- › Clear a safe path before moving the object and carry it in a padded basket or box, only moving one piece/component at a time.
- › To lift, place your hands around the body of the object and avoid vulnerable areas like a handle, rim, or spout.

Storage Conditions and Environment

- › Store objects in areas that aren't prone to extreme or rapid fluctuations in temperature and humidity; interior closets are typically more stable than other household areas.
- › Ceramics and glass should be stored on sturdy, level surfaces. For objects that cannot safely stand on their own, use padding or supports made of acid-free materials.

Display

- › Ceramics and glass should be displayed on sturdy, level surfaces.
- › If possible, limit colored glass objects' exposure to direct sunlight, since some colored glass is sensitive to ultraviolet light.
- › Limit exposure to dust, debris, and oily residues by displaying objects in boxes, cases, or closed cabinets. If possible, avoid open display in the kitchen.
- › When displaying ceramics like plates, use vertical plate racks or two-prong mounts with felt padding to avoid scratching the surface. Spring-loaded mounting brackets for displaying ceramics vertically can exert too much pressure and cause damage. Adhesive mounts can stain the ceramic.
- › If you are in an earthquake prone region, or otherwise subjected to high levels of vibration, contact a local objects conservator for more information about safe display.



Have clean, dry hands when handling ceramic or glass objects.



Handles, rims, and spouts can be weak points.



Ceramic plate on display, supported by an acrylic base.

Images courtesy Miriam-Helene Rudd Ingrid Neuman

Safe Use

- › Before using any ceramic or glass objects for dining, look for any damage, including chipped glaze or cracks, which can also present risks for safe food practices. Some historic glazes and finishes might contain lead, uranium or other heavy metals.
- › Avoid pouring hot liquids into or onto cold objects, which can result in cracks.
- › After using ceramics or glass to serve or consume food, hand wash with soapy water to remove all food residue and thoroughly dry with a clean cotton towel. Avoid using dishwashers to clean historic or valuable ceramics and glass.
- › After use, observe for signs of change or deterioration and use discretion regarding continued use.

Cleaning and Maintenance

- › Dust, debris, and oily residues can accelerate damage. Regularly dust with a soft, clean paint or makeup brush. Be careful not to scratch surfaces with any metal parts of the brush. Avoid using microfiber and commercial dusting cloths, which can snag on surfaces and leave fibers.
- › For decorative items or more vulnerable items, minimize washing, as handling can increase risk of breakage. Do not immerse porous ceramics like earthenware in water; this can drive stains further into the body.

Emergency Response and Disasters

- › The most serious threats for ceramic and glass objects are scratching and breaking.
- › If an object breaks, keep all the fragments until it can be repaired. Take care with the sharp edges and when storing pieces, try to prevent further damage.
- › For objects that have become wet, rinse with clean, distilled, or deionized water and dry with clean cotton or paper towels. Avoid scratching objects with dirty towels or by wiping off grit or soil.
- › If a low-fired or porous ceramic object is waterlogged, contact a conservator as soon as possible.

When and How to Contact a Conservator

- › If you notice any changes in the appearance of your object, deterioration such as crizzling (a network of fine fissures), weeping (liquid droplets on the surface), flaking, soluble salts (typically seen as a fine, white crystals on the surface), failure of prior repairs, or if the object breaks, contact a conservator who specializes in ceramics and/or glass objects.
- › Use AIC's "Find a Professional" tool to locate a conservator in your area. Use the specialty "Objects" to identify the right conservator for the job. Read our Guide to Hiring a Conservator to learn more.

Useful Links and Resources

- › Places to buy archival storage: https://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Conservation_Supply_Sources
- › CCI's Preventive conservation guidelines for collections: <https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/preventive-conservation/guidelines-collections/ceramics-glass-preventive-conservation.html>

Remember

- › Wash your hands with soap and water before and after handling.
- › Remove rings and other jewelry prior to handling.
- › Regularly inspect objects to ensure that they are in stable condition. Catching problems early can prevent major damage.



Glass mug with aged, yellowed prior tape repair.



Ceramic tile flaking, likely due to the movement of water and soluble salts.

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