

## **Cleaning Practices**

### **Introduction**

Good housekeeping may not seem important when compared to other pressing needs, but it is. The items you want to preserve should be kept clean. This will extend their useful life significantly. Keeping storage and display areas clean will contribute to this. Dust, dirt, and grime disfigure and abrade the surfaces of items, support mold growth, and contribute to the deterioration caused by pollutants. Clutter and trash encourage insects and rodents. Because cleaning is such a basic and time-consuming task, it is often overlooked or postponed. But by eliminating dust and dirt, you are slowing the deterioration of items so they can continue to be used. Although good housekeeping is a basic task, it is one of the most important for preservation of your cultural items.

Cleaning should be done on a regular basis, with the frequency of cleaning determined by how rapidly dust and dirt accumulate. When deciding how often to clean, observe how quickly dirt gathers on items and surfaces, and record this information. Make note of any periods when dirt seems to accumulate more quickly, such as times when more visitors than usual come through, or during dry, windy seasons. This information will enable you to prepare a written schedule to follow for regular cleaning. Once cleaning is complete, record what you did and the date in a notebook so you know when to do it again. Ideally this “housekeeping notebook” should also contain a list of the procedures that are followed for cleaning various storage and display areas, the cleaning schedule, and a list of cleaning supplies, with brand names, and the equipment that is suitable to use. The Minnesota Historical Society has produced the *Historic Housekeeping Manual*, which covers housekeeping guidelines, practices, and resources. Although it is intended for use in the Society’s historic sites, you may find much of the information applicable to your situation. It is available online at <http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/conservation/reports/manual-0102.pdf>.

### **Storage and Display Areas**

The best way to keep items clean is to keep storage and display areas clean. Trash

should be emptied daily, especially that which contains food. If possible, keep windows closed, and put filters on air registers and ventilation ducts to help reduce infiltration of dust and dirt. Air registers and ducts can be especially problematic since great amounts of dust and dirt can enter collections and display areas through them. In geographic areas that are especially windy and dusty, having two doors through which to enter a building, an outer and an inner one, with a vestibule between them is advisable. The use of doormats at each door will also help reduce the amount of dirt that enters. Keeping collections in closed containers and using dustcovers on shelves are also important. Floors, shelves, and other surfaces should be cleaned as needed so that dust does not accumulate. In general, clean from the top to the bottom. The most important thing to remember is to take your time and move carefully.

## **Floors**

One of the most important pieces of equipment to have is a vacuum cleaner. To reduce the amount of dust and dirt that accumulates, floors should be kept as clean as possible. This is best done by vacuuming. Sweeping is discouraged because it tends to stir up and scatter dust.

Many different types of vacuum cleaners are available. When selecting one, consider how you will use it. Because you will be moving the vacuum from one location to another, be sure to consider its portability. Often one vacuum must serve the dual purpose of general building housekeeping as well as cleaning the items in the collections. A vacuum with a HEPA (high-efficiency particulate air) filtration system is best because it prevents dust from blowing through the exhaust back into the air. Keep disposable bags on hand, and replace full bags with empty ones promptly, making sure that they never become overfilled. If the vacuum will be used for cleaning items as well as floors, it is important to be able to vary the suction strength with a variable speed motor, an attached rheostat, or, at the very least, a hole in the hose or wand. Rheostats can be purchased in most hardware stores.

Many different kinds of hoses and attachments are available. Hoses need to be long and flexible enough to reach out-of-the-way places. Be sure to get a variety of nozzles, including ones that go down to a small size, and micro-suction

attachments for cleaning items. Such attachments are available from fabric and computer stores. Vacuums are available from local vacuum cleaner specialty stores, department stores, hardware stores, and directly from some of the manufacturers.

Floors should be washed when needed. Careful consideration, however, should be given to bringing water into storage areas because of the risk of spillage and of raising the relative humidity in a confined area, especially if large areas are cleaned at once. Damp mopping is preferred, using no more water than is necessary. As a rule, avoid the use of commercial products, and use only water. If floors are badly soiled, add one-quarter to one cup of ammonia or white distilled vinegar to a pail of water, or use a mild soap such as Murphy Oil Liquid Soap and follow the manufacturer's directions. These supplies are readily available at local grocery or hardware stores. Note that vinegar can react with metals with which it comes in contact.

It is essential that precautions be taken to prevent items stored close to the floor from being splashed with any cleaning agent, even plain water. If unsealed cement floors need to be washed, make sure that they are thoroughly dry before storing items near them or before closing the area. If these unsealed floors generate a lot of dust, consider having them sealed. This will make maintenance easier. They should be sealed with an acrylic-based low-odor sealant. Contact a local contractor who specializes in sealing floors, and ask what products are available. Then contact a preservation professional for advice on these specific products.

## **Shelves and Other Surfaces**

Shelves and other surfaces are best cleaned with a magnetic wiping cloth, which attracts and holds dust with an electrostatic charge. These are marketed as dust-allers or dust-swipes and go by such brand names as the Dust Bunny, the Dust Magnet, and Preserve-It. They are available in local grocery stores and hardware stores or from conservation suppliers. Take care to avoid cloths that have been treated with chemical cleaners as the chemicals could harm some items.

Dry cleaning sponges made of vulcanized rubber are useful for the removal of sooty dirt. They degrade upon exposure to light and with age, so they need to be

stored in an airtight container in the dark. As the surface of the sponge becomes dirty with use, it can be sliced off and discarded. Also, these sponges can be cut or sculpted to any shape to fit into places that are hard to clean. They are available in some hardware stores and from conservation suppliers.

Plain, clean, soft rags or cotton diapers also work for dusting. Local diaper services may have inexpensive diapers available. Avoid cloths with raw edges and dangling threads. Do not apply chemical sprays that are intended to attract dust to these cloths. The chemicals may be harmful. Remember to wash the cloths regularly. Feather dusters should never be used because they redistribute the dust rather than collect it.

Heavy dust should be removed with a vacuum. Thick accumulations of dust and dirt may require that surfaces be wiped with a damp cloth. As mentioned earlier, careful consideration should be given to bringing water into storage areas because of the risk of spillage and of raising the relative humidity in a confined area, especially if large areas are cleaned at once. Shelves and other surfaces must be completely dry before items are placed back on them.

## **Collections' Items**

The handling required for cleaning may damage fragile items, or parts of them. Judgment needs to be used when deciding when and how often to clean. When cleaning items, remember to proceed slowly and gently. Remove jewelry and any clothing that could catch on items. Remove street shoes if you need to walk on diorama platforms or other display areas. Make sure your hands are washed and dry, and wear gloves if appropriate. For your own welfare, wear hearing protection when vacuuming.

The supplies you will need most often for cleaning items include gloves, cloths, brushes, and screens. If you are going to clean the items where they are stored or displayed, you will need a cart or some type of carrying basket to transport your supplies. If you are going to transport items to a cleaning area, follow the handling guidelines for moving items that are provided in *Handling Practices*.

In general, dust can be removed from items with a cloth, a soft-bristled brush, or a vacuum. As discussed above, clean, soft, cotton cloths, such as diapers

or magnetic wiping cloths, work well. If a cloth is inappropriate for the item you are cleaning, a brush may work. Keep on hand several soft-bristled brushes in a variety of sizes and shapes. Natural bristles work best. These are available from grocery, hardware, artist supply, and craft supply stores. Brushes must be used only for cleaning and should be labeled to indicate this. Never allow a dusting brush to be used for painting, cleaning metals, or any other activity no matter how clean it appears to be afterward. If a lot of dust needs to be removed by brushing, brush it into the nozzle of a vacuum to prevent it from scattering.

Sometimes items can be vacuumed directly. Be sure to adjust the suction strength so that it is not too great for the item being cleaned. If you are concerned about lifting a loose fragment from an item, such as a flat textile, tape flexible fiberglass screening, like the kind used on windows, over the nozzle of the vacuum. Alternatively, the screen can be placed over delicate items, and the vacuuming can take place through it. Wrapping the edges of a piece of screen with masking or cotton twill tape prevents the cut edges from snagging items. Screening is available by the roll from hardware stores.

Feather dusters should never be used to clean items. They may get caught on items and damage them, they may contaminate items by spreading dirt and other contaminants from one item to another, and they scatter the dust. Sooty dirt can be removed from certain types of items with the vulcanized rubber sponges mentioned above. Heavily soiled but sturdy paper is one example.