

Conclusion

Preservation is a continuum. One doesn't finish a storage project and then ignore the storage area for the next 20 years. In some large museums, storage improvements are an annual part of the budget. As one area is up-graded, all of the other areas are shifted up. For example, one storage area gets powder coated cabinets on compactor rails. The stationary powder coated metal shelving from that area is installed in another area with rickety metal shelves with baked enamel coating. That metal shelving replaces the wood shelves in yet a third storage area. Each storage area is slightly better than it was the year before. As each area is improved, staff will eventually cycle back and start working on what was the "best" space only a few years earlier. Now this space needs individual storage mounts for the collection. Or crack and crevice caulking to reduce pest incursions, or dust covers... the list is limitless.

Staff monitoring is critical to catching potential problems before they damage large amounts of the collection. Thus, storage must be visited regularly, preferably more than once a day, to monitor for pests, leaks, dust, corrosion, and strange, unforeseen events. What is an unforeseen event?

- Autumn leaves blocking an outside drain resulting in a foot of rain water flooding storage during the weekend – only the evidence remained by the time staff entered the area on Monday.
- Mechanical room vibrations cracking a bottle containing old medicine, contents unknown, but strong enough to make a curator dizzy when the cabinet is opened. Up until then the museum didn't know it had any medical items in that area of storage.
- Corrosion of the metal drawer glides, depositing white powder on collection items whenever drawers are opened and closed.
- Condensation on a wall or pipe, dripping onto a collection item.
- White powder growths on a limestone sculpture. This probably indicates the presence of damaging fumes.

The casual approach some museums have towards their storage area is difficult to explain when the collection is the largest asset held by the museum. Museum policy and procedures must be written and enforced to maintain the highest level of security for storage areas. Contractors, researchers, friends and family should never be unattended in storage. No one person should have access to all areas of the museum. For example, if the Director has building keys, then he/she should not have storage room keys. The Curator with storage keys should not have front door keys. This ensures that two people must be present in the museum for storage to be accessible. It creates checks and balances within the museum in order to guard the collection. The majority of museum theft is internal. Often good procedures would have preserved the collection. Good procedures that don't cost a dime.

This course only covers broad storage issues. It didn't go into detail on types of materials that should be used next to artifacts, designs for support or stabilizing mounts, how to test materials, how to maximize drawers and cabinets, or how to raise money to pay for improvements. Some of these topics were touched on in chats throughout the course. We have other courses at www.museumclasses.org that cover these topics in detail.

Throughout this course we emphasized how interwoven staff is in the creation of high quality museum storage. The level of staff understanding and training of preservation principles greatly impacts the quality of a museum's storage. If the board, director, exhibit designer, volunteers and janitor don't understand what causes damage to the collection, then they can't be part of the preservation team. Thus, staff training is, in the end, one of the most important parts of creating and maintaining a preservation quality storage facility. Training includes board packets and presentations, posted announcements throughout the museum, staff meeting presentations, staff training with outside consultants, regular tidbits in a newsletter, and creating a library of resources for staff to peruse. Little by little it makes a difference. Remember, preservation is a continuum.