

Caring For Your Belongings



(Image: Migration Heritage Centre Belongings Project archived website banner)

The Migration Heritage Centre (MHC) was established in 1998 and then located at the Powerhouse Museum (PHM) from 2003. The MHC has since closed. The MHC website has been archived and the featured content is no longer current or updated but it remains available to the general public for research and historical information purposes only.

The following information about caring for your belongings has been extracted from the MHC website and provided in this format for ease of reference. The archived MHC website may be accessed from this link: <https://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/belongings-home/index.html>

Caring for Your Migration Heritage Items & Family Memorabilia

Keeping your history

Writing the story down is one of the most important ways that families pass valuable history to the next generation. It is difficult for the next generation to recover the history and associations of family items or know who is in family photos if this information is not written down. Family stories and memories give meaning to migration heritage items and family memorabilia. Steps to keep your family history and pass it to the next generation include:

- adding captions to your family albums to identify who is in the photos and where and when they were taken;
- recording the history of your family's journey to Australia, why they decided to come here and their experiences, successes and difficulties as they built a new life; and
- writing down the stories and associations of your family items and keeping these notes with the item. When writing the history of family items, record who owned them, how they came to Australia, where they were used and why they were kept. If writing a note about 'grandmother's lace collar', remember to record her name and other important information about her. Don't forget to sign your name and date the end of the note.

Conserving your history

Below is a *basic* guide in how to handle, store, display and clean your memorabilia items. The resource references listed at the end offer conservation advice and products and will be able to provide you with more *specific* information.

Handling your memorabilia items

- Handle valued family photos, papers and textiles as little as possible.
- Always wash hands before touching photos, papers, textiles and costume, or wear white cotton gloves.
- Keep away from food and drink, and ensure the environment is clean and dry.
- When handling, unwrapping or packing papers and textiles, work on a large table with a clean cotton cover.
- Remove rings, watches and other jewellery that can catch fibres and threads.
- Always support the weight of the item when moving and handling.
- Don't pick items up by a corner or edge.
- Where required, support the item on acid free board, or a board covered with a soft undyed cotton fabric so that you handle and lift the support not the paper or textile.
- Keep pens and ink well away from papers and textiles.

Storing your photos and books

- Keep photos, books and family papers in a cool, dry place that offers the most stable temperature and humidity. The inside walls of a house, such as hall cupboards, provide a better environment than an external wall.
- Where possible store books, papers and photos in a dark place, or an area that has low light levels. Bright lights and sun will irreversibly fade and damage items made of organic materials such as paper, textiles, leather and bone.
- Keep items away from sunlight.
- Protect important photos and books from dust and contact with wooden shelves by wrapping in acid free tissue or similar material.
- Use acid free storage materials such as acid free paper.
- Avoid storing items in newspaper.
- Keep heavy books and papers flat.
- Wrap acidic papers such as newspapers in a buffering material.
- Photocopy the contents of newspaper articles and other papers that are on highly acidic paper onto acid free paper.
- Do not laminate photos or family papers or repair with sticky tape.
- Regularly check for pests and occasionally air item in a cool dark place.

Storing your textiles and costumes

- Store textiles and costumes in a place with the most stable temperature and humidity. Look for a clean, cool, dry, dark place, in a cupboard or chest on an internal rather than an external wall.
- Storage containers provide stability for the item, guarding against stress, strain and unnecessary movement. If possible, store precious textiles and costume in acid free boxes, interleaved with acid free tissue.

- Where possible store items flat, or fold as little as possible, padding out folds with acid free tissue. This stops the textile from splitting along creases. Repack from time to time and change the folds. For larger textiles, roll on acid free cardboard rolls, interleaved with tissue. Heavy textiles can be rolled on polythene pipe, interleaved with tissue. Roll with the right side of the textile facing down and out. Historic costume is best stored flat in acid free boxes, rather than on hangers.
- If you can't purchase acid free boxes and tissue, textiles can be wrapped in clean, soft, undyed cotton.
- Protect textiles from pollutants, such as smoke, and from light and dust.
- Make sure textiles are clean when they are packed away, otherwise they may attract insects.
- Regularly inspect items for signs of mould or pests, and air in a cool, dark place from time to time. Remove any pins or staples.

Displaying your memorabilia items

- Dyes fade and fibres are damaged by sunlight and strong light. This damage is irreversible. Choose the darkest place in the home for hanging and displaying valued photos, paintings and textiles.
- Keep photos, paintings and textiles in areas that are clean, dry, dust and smoke free and away from sunlight and bright lights.
- Consider displaying your family items for special occasions or change them regularly rather than keeping them on permanent display. Alternatively, keep a cotton protective cloth over the item.
- Copy original photos if you want to display them permanently or in a brightly lit room.
- Always ask for acid free mounts. If framing with glass or Perspex use a deep mat or spacers to keep the glass off the fabric.
- Do not use pins, staples, sticky tape or glue to mount and frame papers and textiles.
- If reframing a picture, keep the original labels, frame and backing board.
- Smaller textiles such as embroideries, samplers and lace can be mounted and framed.
- If necessary, carefully hand sew the textile onto a backing cloth (preferably a clean, washed fabric of the same fibre as the textile), which has previously been stitched to a further soft cotton fabric fixed to an acid free mount. Do not stretch or strain the textile.
- Heavy textiles that are in good condition can be hung on padded acid free rolls or covered polythene pipe, with the hanging rod passing through the roll or pipe.
- Large flat textiles that are in good condition can be hung on Velcro battens, but do not sew Velcro directly onto valued textiles, instead sew the Velcro onto tape then hand sew the tape to your textile. Alternatively, a cloth sleeve can be sewn to the back of the textile to take a rod or batten.

Cleaning your memorabilia items

- Always seek expert advice before cleaning or repairing important family items or in doubt.
- It's OK for family treasures to look old and worn. Signs of age, wear and tear are part of the story of the item.
- Use a gentle brush to clean papers, books and textiles.

- If the textile is robust, a gentle vacuum will remove dust and grime. Cover the end of the vacuum hose with net, keeping it just off the item or fabric.
- Old and valued textiles should only be washed by a trained conservator. Washing may cause irreversible damage, so seek expert advice.
- Do not oil or dress the bindings of old books.
- Keep the original finish of antique furniture. Do not repaint or repolish. Keep original upholstery.
- Polishing can destroy the surface and patina of many metal objects. Clean silver and metal items as little as possible.
- Wash silver with warm water and mild soap and dry with a soft cloth. Avoid commercial polishes, abrasive cleaners and dips.
- Do not put old ceramics and glass in the dishwasher. Wash by hand in a mild detergent and dry carefully with a soft cotton cloth.

Resources to help you care for your memorabilia items

Advice

- Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials Inc.
Web: <https://aiccm.org.au/>
- Canadian Conservation Unit
'How to care for' guide
Web: <https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/care-objects.html>
- International Conservation Services
Web: <https://icsconservation.com.au/>
- Museums and Galleries NSW
see 'Resources'
Web: <https://mgnsw.org.au/>

Suppliers

- Albox Australia Pty Ltd (South Australia)
Web: <https://www.albox.com.au/>
- Zetta Florence (Victoria)
Web: <https://zettaflorence.com.au/archive/>