

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

Issue 147 | January 2024

Exhibition Materials and Collections Stewardship

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Collecting institutions hold their collections in the public trust. This means that while we are the legal custodians of the objects, we hold them to benefit the communities we serve. Thoughtful and intentional use of the objects in exhibitions is one of the most powerful ways we have to share them and the history they represent with the public.



Smith Alsop Paint Display (Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

It's important to recognize that exhibiting objects means that they are moved from stable storage environments to less stable exhibit spaces. Beyond planning for changes in temperature and humidity, monitoring light levels, and checking for pests, it's vital to mitigate harm by choosing the appropriate materials to use while the objects are on exhibit.

The following materials are acceptable to use when constructing exhibit cases and exhibiting objects:

- Acid-free paper, board, or tissue
- Acrylic adhesive and paints
- Cotton (washed and undyed)
- Glass
- Linen (washed and undyed)
- Melinex (Type 456 or 516)
- Metals
- Muslin (washed and undyed)
- Plexiglas
- Polyester fabrics
- Polyester sheeting (Mylar Type D)
- Polyethylene foam (Ethafoam)
- Tyvek

Wood for Exhibit Cases

If you are using wood in the construction of a display case, be sure to use wood that is sealed, and remember that not all wood types are safe to use. Some acceptable woods are balsa, birch, exterior plywood, maple, and marine plywood. Avoid using highly acidic woods and wood products such as particleboard, chipboards and pressed-fiber board.

To seal the wood, don't use polyvinyl acetate latex paints, alky-, oil-, or lead-based paints. Instead, some options you could use include acrylic paints (2-3 coats), latex urethane acrylic, Marvelseal, moisture-cure, non-oil modified urethanes, shellac (2-3 coats), or two-part epoxy paints.

Using the right exhibit materials allows us to share our collections and the history they represent and still provide good collections stewardship.

Material lists are based on recommendations from Catherine Sease, Fellow of the American Institute of Conservation, and compiled by Janice Klein for a session at the 2017 AASLH Annual Meeting.

For more information about acceptable and unacceptable exhibit materials, contact localhistoryservices@indianahistory.org.

Further Resources

- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Choosing Materials for Storage, Exhibition & Transport](#) (American Institute for Conservation Wiki)
- [Protecting Collections During Exhibition](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Timely Tips](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

Collection Trainings

[Photo Preservation and Housing with the Henry Ransom Center](#)

January 22 to February 2 (Conservation Center for Art and Historical Artifacts)

[Rock On! Storing Your Geological Materials](#)

January 24 (Connecting to Collections Care Online Community)

[Webinars](#)

Recorded – (Indiana Historical Society)

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