

Collections Care and Conservation Policy Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

Date approved by Pitt Rivers Museum Executive Board: 21 May 2024

Date approved by Pitt Rivers Museum Board of Visitors: 25 February 2025

Date at which policy is due for review: February 2030

The Museum's statement of purpose is:

As given in the University of Oxford's regulations, the Museum's purpose is 'to assemble, preserve and exhibit the Pitt Rivers Collection and to promote the public understanding of anthropology and world archaeology, and their teaching and research, based on the museum's collections.' see

Council Regulation 4 of 2019 <https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/council-regulations-4-of-2019#collapse1421161>

The Museum's mission statement:

The Pitt Rivers Museum wants to become a welcoming space to all where stories are shared by many voices. Working collaboratively and creatively with staff, volunteers, and communities we will transform how our iconic collections are engaged with, both online and in the museum. In an increasingly disconnected world, we want to inspire empathy and deepen cross-cultural understanding.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Pitt Rivers Museum's collections underpin everything that it does. The Museum strives to preserve its collections in the best possible condition for its audiences today and for future generations. It does this through a combination of preventive and remedial conservation, and through high standards of collections management and security.

1.2 Experienced and qualified curatorial and conservation staff in the collections and conservation departments manage collections care and conservation.

1.3 Preventive conservation is the most effective means of preserving the diverse range of materials in the collections. The aim of preventive conservation is to minimise deterioration and damage by managing risks to the collection. Work on the collections by visiting researchers, members of Indigenous communities and by other stakeholders, is facilitated by collections, conservation and research staff.

1.4 The monitoring of the Museum's environment (temperature, relative humidity, visible and ultra violet light), the Integrated Pest Management program and object handling guidance are carried out by conservators under the supervision of the Head of Conservation.

1.5 The implementation of packing and storage improvements for the museum's collections in storage is carried out by Conservation and Collections staff under the supervision of the Head of Conservation and Head of Collections. Where collections are being moved by the GLAM Move team this is done in regular consultation with the Heads of Collections and Conservation.

1.6 Remedial conservation treatments are required for some objects to stabilize them and improve their long-term preservation. This is carried out solely by members of the conservation department under the supervision of the Head of Conservation. Where specialist conservators are required for a particular treatment or object they too will be responsible to the Head of Conservation.

1.7 Housekeeping, building maintenance and security are conducted by both contracted external and Museum staff under the supervision of the Museum's Head of Operations. Maintenance of the Museum building and its services is the responsibility of the University's Estates Services.

1.8 General use of the collections is guided by the Museum's Procedural Manual, Access Policy, Collections Development Policy and Documentation Policy and will take into account the conservation requirements of the material concerned. Emergency Planning, and the training of staff in disaster recovery procedures, are also vital to the care of the collections.

2. Long-term objectives

2.1 The Museum aspires to apply the most up-to-date international standards of best practice to the care, collections management and conservation of its collections.

2.2 The Museum will:

- a) Continue to raise standards in the conservation, storage and display of collections, using the Collections Trust's Benchmarks in Collections Care for Museums, Libraries and Archives to periodically review progress.
- b) Collaborate with other museums in GLAM (Gardens, Libraries and Museums of the University of Oxford) in the planning and use of the new Collections Teaching and Research Centre.
- c) Develop fundraising opportunities in line with the collection's stewardship needs, with a view to increasing staff levels, upgrading documentation standards and accessibility, and caring for specific collections.
- d) Address backlogs in the documentation of collections according to the Museum's Documentation Plan.
- e) Transfer historical conservation treatment records to collections databases and upgrade online access to collections images and data.
- f) Develop the collections through acquisition and disposal according to the Museum's Collections Development Policy, in order to maximise their value for research, life-long education and wider public enjoyment.
- g) Build staff knowledge, and share staff expertise with the wider museum community;
- h) Build on collaborative relationships with various stakeholders, particularly those with communities of origin.

3. Legal framework and standards for care

3.1 All care, conservation and use of human remains will conform to the Policy on Human Remains held by the University of Oxford's Museums, 2006 and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums (2005).

3.2 All radiation sources used for analysis of the collection will comply with the University's policy Management of Work with Ionising Radiation at the University of Oxford ¹ and the Museum's Local Rules. All such work will be supervised by the Museum's Senior Radiation Protection Supervisor (SRPS) or Radiation Protection Supervisor (RPS) who will be advised by the University's Radiation Protection Officer (URPO).

3.3 The Museum will comply with all other relevant Health and Safety legislation as advised and updated by the University Safety Office.

4. Staffing, personal development, and knowledge sharing

4.1 The Museum will recruit trained conservation and curatorial staff to manage the Museum's collections.

4.2 New staff will receive appropriate induction training and supervision and must comply with this Policy. The skills of all staff that work with collections will be assessed through annual personal development reviews (PDR), and encouragement will be given to attend and present and relevant conferences and seminars.

4.3 All new staff, volunteers, interns, students, visiting researchers, and others working with collections will be trained in health and safety matters, object handling, and be made aware of any risks associated with the collections, as well as receiving on-going supervision from conservation and collections staff.

4.4 All new curatorial staff will be trained in the use of the Museum's Procedural Manual for documentation and collections management and will be expected to work within the guidelines set out.

4.5 The Museum will encourage the sharing of its staff expertise through GLAM networks, subject specialist group networks and other formal and informal means.

5. Preventive conservation

5.1 The Museum will work with the University's Estates Services to ensure that all its buildings are well maintained, and any defects are remedied promptly. Any faults that threaten unacceptable environmental conditions, for example water leaks, will be remedied as a priority.

5.2 Monitoring of environmental conditions (temperature, relative humidity (RH), lux and ultraviolet radiation levels) in the Museum's buildings, will be undertaken by conservation staff, using regularly calibrated telemetric systems. Ongoing monitoring will take place, with results evaluated and acted upon where possible.

¹ Available at: www1.admin.ox.ac.uk/safety/oxonly/upss0112/

5.3 Temperature and RH conditions will be managed using air handling and air conditioning equipment maintained by Estates Services, and buffered storage and microclimates as appropriate within the constraints of the Museum building and off-site facilities. Light levels will be managed through controllable lighting and the elimination of natural light. The environmental needs of an object will be part of the evaluation for its suitability for loan.

5.4 The threat from pests is managed and minimised according to the Museum's Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program (see Conservation Lab Manual). Insect pests will be monitored using traps, spot-checks of high-risk zones, and the vigilance of all staff. Insect pest prevention will be maintained through good housekeeping, restriction of eating areas (see the Museum's Food Policy), removal of potential pest breeding spaces, and quarantine of incoming material. Infestations will be treated promptly by isolation, deep-freezing or manual cleaning as appropriate for the material, to be followed by regular checking. External contractors, under the direction of the Head of Conservation, will undertake the monitoring and control of rodent pests.

5.5 Handling of objects will be kept to a minimum, and staff and volunteers will be guided by the collections and conservation teams, Guidelines for Handling Objects in the Museum's Procedural Manual and given specialist training as necessary. Manual handling training will be provided by the University Safety Office via the Departmental Safety Officer for all staff involved in moving large or heavy items.

5.6 Damage to collections while in transit, whether within the Museum or from off-site facilities, will be mitigated by the packing methods employed by well-trained and equipped staff (see Guidelines for Handling Objects).

5.7 Good housekeeping, and the use of display cases or storage enclosures, will be used as methods to control dust levels. Cleaning routines in the Museum and off-site facilities will follow a strict rota and be carried out by contract cleaners under the supervision of the Head of Operations. Collections on display will only be cleaned by, or under the supervision of, conservation staff.

5.8 Pollutants will be managed by the choice of materials used for packing objects in the reserve collection, new display cases, storage furniture, mounting methods and construction or finishing of areas containing museum collections.

5.9 Physical and chemical damage to collections will also be mitigated wherever possible by accurate identification of materials.

5.10 All display and storage of archival material will be guided by BS 4971:2017 Conservation and Care of Archive and Library Collections (formerly BS 5454). The display and storage of object collections will be guided by BS EN 16893:2018 Conservation of Cultural Heritage.

6. Remedial conservation

6.1 Remedial conservation will be carried out by qualified conservators, guided by the Institute of Conservation's (ICON) Code of Conduct and Professional Standards (2020) (see Conservation Lab Manual), and where practicable decisions will be made in consultation with relevant originating communities and curators.

6.2 Prior to any remedial conservation the object will be fully examined and a condition assessment made. Past treatment record cards, currently not available digitally, will also be consulted.

6.3 Remedial conservation treatments will in general involve the appropriate stabilisation of objects rather than restoration. The principal of minimum intervention will be adhered to unless a community asks that we carry out more extensive treatment.

6.4 No object will be altered, nor material removed from it, without justification. When such removal or alteration is required, the object will first be documented in its original state and any removed material will be kept, labelled, and filed. Where destructive sampling is requested, this will be assessed using the Destructive Sampling Policy.

6.5 All remedial treatments will be fully documented with a written and photographic record on the applicable collections management databases.

7. Auditing and monitoring of collections

7.1 Accessioning of collections, locations indexing, and movement recording is carried out according to SPECTRUM standards as outlined in the Museum's Documentation Policy and Procedural Manual for documentation and collections management. Future work on the Museum's documentation backlog is addressed in the Museum's Documentation Plan. Auditing of collections is carried out as required for access purposes and to answer external enquiries. Checks may also be requested by the University's auditors. Checks may also be requested as agreed with GLAM partners to assess security of the Museum's collections.

7.2 Monitoring of collections for problems relating to conservation and care is carried out systematically as part of IPM, via regular surveys of vulnerable material (such as collections containing cellulose nitrate), storage upgrade projects, and during the process of accessing the collections for research and answering enquiries. Any condition assessments made when an object is seen are documented on the Museum's collections management system and form part of the permanent record for that object.

7.3 Any decision to discard specimens which have lost all educational, scientific, historical, and cultural value because of decomposition or other chemical instability, or which are deemed a health and safety hazard (see Collections Development Policy) will be made in accordance with the disposal procedures specified in the Museum's Collections Development Policy.

8. Use of Museum collections for research and loan

8.1 All acquisitions, sampling, exchange, transfer, and disposals (including disposals due to irreparable decay or damage), will follow the Museum's Collections Development Policy, Destructive Sampling Policy and Documentation Policy.

8.2 All proposed use of the collections in relation to research and loans will be balanced against their scientific, historical, cultural as well as insurance value, and decisions will be made by senior collections and conservation staff, taking advice from other subject specialists where necessary.

8.3 The Museum makes objects accessible for more than 400 research visits each year, largely managed by the Museum's Collections section. Researchers viewing artefacts are briefed by collections staff regarding appropriate handling and are asked to wear gloves to minimise risk to

artefacts as well as to protect them from possible contact with toxins or pesticide residues. Such visits are supervised by collections staff who assist with handling. Where deemed necessary, conservation staff may be asked to advise on or to assist with handling, either in preparation for a visit or during it. Consideration may be given to originating community visitors handling objects without gloves if that enables a more meaningful reconnection with their cultural heritage. In this situation visitors will be made aware of potential risks.

8.4 Outgoing loans will conform to the Museum's Conditions for Loans as signed by the borrower. In addition, a customised Loan Agreement is developed for each loan, specifying environmental conditions for individual artefacts, particular security needs, display requirements and insurance valuations. The Loan Agreement is signed by both parties. The costs involved in lending to other institutions are under review (May 2024) but currently the Museum operates a cost recovery scheme for loans costs.

8.5 All incoming loans must be accompanied by a formal loan agreement between the Museum and loaning individual or institution and will be treated according to that agreement. Condition assessments will be carried out by the Museum if not supplied by the loaning institution and will be repeated when the loan is returned.

8.6 All objects agreed for outgoing loan (subject to meeting the Museum's loan conditions) will receive any necessary conservation treatment before they leave the Museum. Condition assessments, packing, packing instructions and the briefing of couriers on the packing and handling of the objects will be carried out by conservators, who will also advise on the suitability of mounting and display methods. The Deputy Head of Collections will normally carry out the administration of the loan in consultation with the Head of Collections.

8.7 Objects will be made available for access by visiting researchers and other stakeholders by prior arrangement and depending on the resources available. This will normally be facilitated by the Assistant Curator (Visiting Researchers). Where necessary objects will be assessed by the conservation team prior to any visit. Information and guidelines for people planning a visit can be found at

https://prm.web.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/prm/documents/media/info_for_visitors_to_prm_collections.pdf

9. Museum security and emergency response

9.1 Security of the Museum is supported by the University's Security Services and managed by the Head of Facilities Management. High standards will be maintained through management of access, keys, CCTV, and the Museum's intruder alarm system. All security systems are maintained by companies with the appropriate accreditation. Security reviews are carried out at least every two years.

9.2 Security of collections is paramount. Display cases will be kept securely locked, and objects on open display monitored by trained front of house or security staff. Collections not on display are kept in locked and alarmed storage areas with no unsupervised public access. Visitors to collections areas are supervised at all times. Any theft or unaccounted loss will be reported to the police.

9.3 The Museum monitors and responds to security alerts circulated by Arts Council England's National Security Advisor, Police Forces and Constabularies, and the University Security Service. The Museum's Disaster Response Plan and the Museum's Emergency Call-out Cascade will be reviewed annually, and revised where necessary to ensure documents remain relevant. A professional salvage company is contracted to provide additional emergency support.

9.4 Emergency training exercises/scenario planning events are carried out at least annually, coordinated by the Museum's Emergency Planning Working Group.

9.5 Emergency response equipment in the Museum building and off-site facilities are maintained and checked by the conservation department on an annual basis.

10. Policy publication and review procedure

10.1 This Policy will be published on the Museum's website and will be made available for visitors to the Museum to view on request.

10.2 This policy will be reviewed from time to time, and at least every five years.

10.3 Relevant Museum staff will be made aware of this policy during induction or specific meetings. This policy should be read by all staff but curatorial, collections and conservation staff in particular should be familiar with this policy.