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Postgraduate Certificate in Conservation of Vintage Paper Items

# Handling and Storage of Vintage Paper Items

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Vintage paper items are unique and irreplaceable objects that require special care and handling to ensure their longevity and preservation. In the course Postgraduate Certificate in Conservation of Vintage Paper Items, students will learn about the key terms and vocabulary related to the handling and storage of these items. This explanation will provide a comprehensive overview of the essential concepts and techniques for the proper conservation of vintage paper items.

## 1. pH and Acidity

pH is a measure of the acidity or alkalinity of a substance, with a scale ranging from 0 to 14. A pH of 7 is neutral, while a pH below 7 is acidic, and a pH above 7 is alkaline. Vintage paper items are often acidic due to the presence of lignin in wood-based paper or the use of acidic inks. Over time, acidity can cause paper to become brittle, discolored, and damaged. To prevent this, conservators use buffered storage materials with a pH of around 8.5 to neutralize the acidity and slow down the degradation process.

## 2. Relative Humidity (RH) and Temperature

Relative humidity (RH) is the amount of moisture in the air relative to the maximum amount of moisture the air can hold at a given temperature. Paper is hygroscopic, meaning it absorbs and releases moisture in response to changes in RH. Fluctuations in RH can cause paper to expand and contract, leading to cockling, warping, and other forms of damage. To prevent this, conservators store vintage paper items in environments with stable RH levels between 40% and 60%. Temperature is also an essential factor in the storage of vintage paper items. Ideally, storage areas should have a stable temperature between 60 and 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

## 3. Light Exposure

Light exposure can cause fading, yellowing, and other forms of damage to vintage paper items. To prevent this, conservators limit the amount of light that vintage paper items are exposed to by using low-level, indirect lighting and by storing items in dark, opaque enclosures. Ultraviolet (UV) light is particularly harmful to paper, so conservators use UV-filtering materials, such as acetate or polyester sleeves, to protect items from UV damage.

## 4. Handling and Transport

Proper handling and transport are essential to prevent damage to vintage paper items. Conservators use gloves, either cotton or nitrile, to prevent the oils and acids from their skin from transferring to the item. Items should be supported with both hands, with the dominant hand cradling the item from below and the non-dominant hand supporting the item from above. Items should never be touched by their corners or edges, as this can cause tears and creases. When transporting items, they should be placed in rigid, acid-free boxes or folders.

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## 5. Storage Materials

Storage materials for vintage paper items must be acid-free, lignin-free, and buffered to prevent acidic transfer and degradation. Common storage materials include:

- \* Acid-free paper: Used for enclosures, folders, and boxes, acid-free paper is made from cotton or alpha-cellulose and has a pH between 7.5 and 10.
- \* Buffered paper: Buffered paper contains an alkaline reserve, usually in the form of calcium carbonate, which helps to neutralize acidity.
- \* Polyester (Mylar) and polypropylene: These materials are inert, meaning they do not emit any gases or acids that could harm the item. They are often used for sleeves, enclosures, and interleaving.
- \* Archival-quality adhesives: Adhesives used for repairs or attachments must be archival-quality, meaning they are stable, non-reactive, and pH-neutral. Common archival-quality adhesives include wheat starch paste, methyl cellulose, and polyvinyl acetate (PVA).

## 6. Housing and Enclosures

Housing and enclosures for vintage paper items should be designed to protect the item from physical damage, environmental factors, and handling. Common types of housing and enclosures include:

- \* Boxes: Acid-free boxes are used to store flat items, such as maps, photographs, and documents.
- \* Folders: Acid-free folders are used to store flat items, such as letters, certificates, and manuscripts.
- \* Portfolios: Acid-free portfolios are used to store oversized items, such as posters, blueprints, and plans.
- \* Sleeves: Polyester or polypropylene sleeves are used to protect items from dust, dirt, and handling.

## 7. Display and Exhibition

When displaying or exhibiting vintage paper items, conservators must consider the environmental conditions, handling, and security of the items. Display cases should be designed to protect items from light exposure, environmental factors, and handling. Framing materials must be archival-quality, with acid-free mats, mounts, and backings. Glazing materials should be UV-filtering to prevent UV damage. Items should be securely attached to the mat or mount using archival-quality adhesives and hinges.

## 8. Insects and Pests

Insects and pests can cause significant damage to vintage paper items. Common pests include booklice, silverfish, and termites. To prevent pest infestations, storage areas should be kept clean and free of food debris. Items should be inspected regularly for signs of pest activity. If an infestation is detected, a professional pest management service should be consulted.

## 9. Disaster Preparedness and Response

Disasters, such as floods, fires, and earthquakes, can cause significant damage to vintage paper items. To prevent or minimize damage, conservators should have a disaster preparedness and response plan in place. This plan should include procedures for evacuation, salvage, and recovery of items. Staff should be trained in disaster response techniques, and emergency supplies should be kept on hand.

## 10. Cleaning and Maintenance

Regular cleaning and maintenance are essential to prevent dust, dirt, and other contaminants from accumulating on vintage paper items. Items should be dusted using a soft brush or vacuum with a HEPA filter. Surfaces should be cleaned using mild, pH-neutral cleaning agents. Items should be inspected regularly for signs of damage, such as tears, creases, or discoloration. Any damage should be repaired using archival-quality materials and techniques.

In conclusion, the handling and storage of vintage paper items require a thorough understanding of key terms and vocabulary, as well as specialized techniques and materials. By following the guidelines outlined in this explanation, conservators can ensure the longevity and preservation of these unique and irreplaceable objects. Regular cleaning, maintenance, and inspection are essential to prevent damage and ensure the continued preservation of vintage paper items. With proper care and handling, these items can be enjoyed for generations to come.