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THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

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# Collections Care

AN ACT OF CUSTODIANSHIP &  
AN ACT OF OPTIMISM

ICON.ORG.UK

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# CALLING ALL TRUSTEES

Icon urges those who have been charged with the stewardship of collections to

- fully embrace their commitment to being responsible custodians and to invest in the care of our shared cultural heritage collections
- recognise their role as actors in sustainable development and to unlock the public benefits of collections

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An act of custodianship

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## The four pillars of collections care

The care of collections is a core element of the work of cultural and heritage institutions and is comprised by four pillars of activity: conservation, collections management, heritage science and curatorial services.

Each pillar offers distinct skills and brings a wealth of professional knowledge, expertise and judgement to the challenges faced by institutions.

The combined expertise of these four disciplines is essential to ensure that collections are safeguarded for future generations and public benefit.

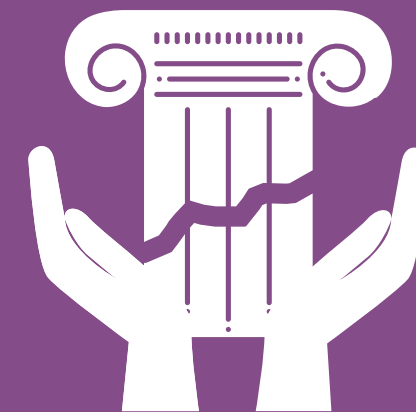


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# COLLECTIONS CARE: AN ACT OF CUSTODIANSHIP

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Trustees of cultural heritage organisations are responsible for ensuring the collections entrusted to their care are kept safe for future generations





## **“We are only trustees for those that come after us.”**

William Morris ~ 1889

As everyone is thinking hard about financial sustainability and re-engaging with audiences, it is more important than ever that the small proportion of museum budgets spent on conservation is protected. Icon is making a strong plea for those charged with the stewardship of collections to fully embrace their commitment to being responsible custodians and to invest in the care of our shared cultural heritage collections.

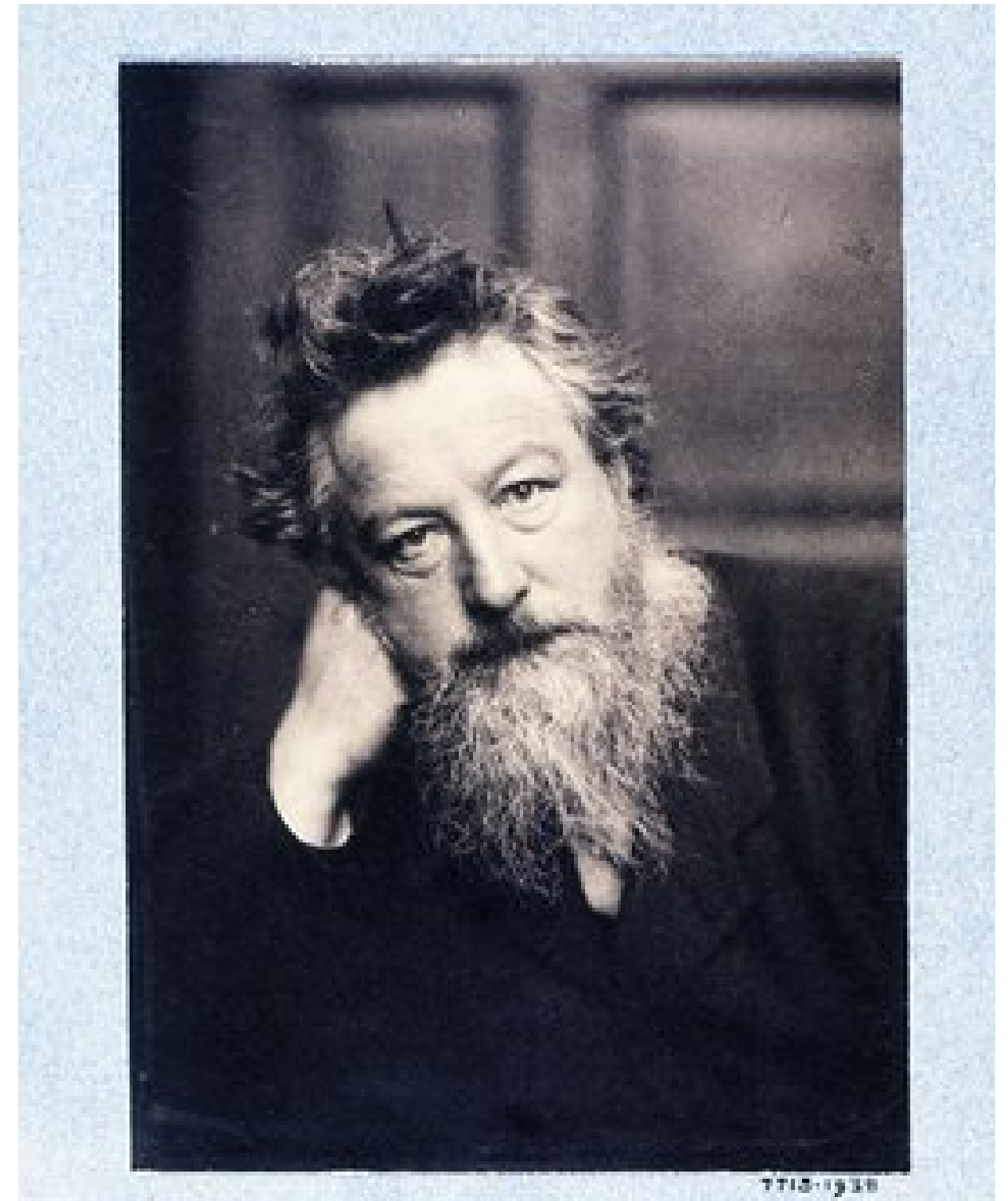


Image: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

# PRESENT DUTY, FUTURE CHALLENGE

"Our nation's collections, held in organisations of many types and sizes across the country, are an unmatched cultural asset. It is essential that they are developed and cared for, celebrated and protected, so they can be enjoyed by as many people as possible. This is both a privilege and a challenge."

- Arts Council for England

"Above all, museums are responsible for collections – not just for the present, but for future generations. Although this is an obvious point, it is one that imposes particular challenges."

- The Mendoza Review: an Independent Review of Museums in England

"Archivists should protect the integrity of archival material and thus guarantee that it continues to be reliable evidence of the past."

-International Council on Archives Code of Ethics

"The core mission of library and information professionals is to ensure access to information for all, therefore due regard should also be given to ensuring continuity of access to preserved materials."

-CILIP Ethical Framework

"Museums and those who work in and with them should maintain and develop collections for current and future generations."

- Museums Association - Code of Ethics for Museums

"Trustee ownership confers duties rather than rights. Trustees...hold the collection exclusively for the advantage of the beneficiaries."

- Neil MacGregor

## Why does custodianship matter?

Collections simply don't look after themselves. Our precious cultural heritage is at risk from a variety of threats. Agents of decay include water, humidity, insect pests, light and pollution; all of these factors threaten the integrity of cultural heritage objects. Conservators keep collections safe by maintaining a safe and appropriate environment for collections, monitoring their condition regularly, and undertaking appropriate conservation treatments when needed.

Investing in a high standard of collections care and conservation is therefore an essential element of responsible custodianship. Caring for collections also provides the intimate understanding of objects that supports truly compelling story-telling.

## What are the benefits?

Good custodianship is founded in strategic planning for ongoing collections care, the implementation of monitoring processes and a commitment to addressing problems before they escalate. Time and effort spent on routine care and housekeeping, and on fixing issues as they arise is inevitably cheaper and more cost effective than having to put right much more extensive damage later.

Investing in preventive conservation that focuses on long-term preservation and minimising deterioration is one of the most cost-effective ways that trustees can fulfil their duties as guardians of cultural heritage.

**"Stave off decay by daily care."**

William Morris ~ 1877

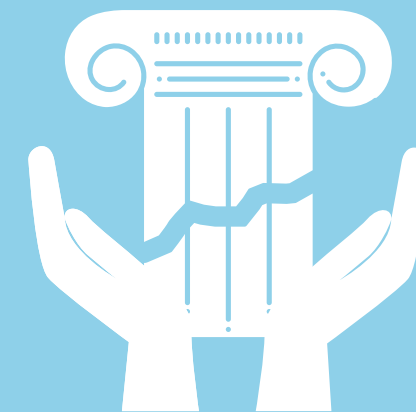


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# COLLECTIONS CARE: AN ACT OF OPTIMISIM

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Trustees of cultural heritage organisations have the unique opportunity to deliver widespread public benefit and advance sustainable development through collections care





**The role of institutions is to enable access to the cultural heritage entrusted in their care, to allow people to interact with objects and to unlock the stories within them. This is only possible when objects are in a safe and stable condition and collections are sustainably maintained.**

Sustainable and accessible collections enable a range of activities from learning, education and research, to providing inspiration for the creative industries and support for responsible tourism. Collections care can therefore advance the pillars of sustainable development through its far reaching benefits to society.

Icon urges those who have been charged with the stewardship of collections to recognise their role as actors in sustainable development and to unlock the public benefits of collections through investment in collections care.





## How does collections care generate public benefit?

Conservation and engagement have the same shared goal of providing benefits to people and society through enabling interaction with heritage.

By keeping objects and collections in a safe and stable condition, collections care professionals ensure the sustainability of heritage.

From identifying objects for handling, digitising collections for online audiences, to preparing treasures for exhibitions, collections care supports diverse connections and experiences with heritage in a way that not only provides an intimate understanding of objects for current audiences but ensures future generations can make their own connections.

This fulfils the definition of sustainable development of meeting "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

## What are these benefits?

The societal benefits of cultural heritage have been widely researched and are often categorised under the following themes: health and wellbeing, economy, social cohesion, education and skills, inclusive growth and sustainability. By enabling access to and engagement with cultural heritage, collections care supports the ongoing delivery of these benefits to society.

However, the value of caring for collections goes beyond the benefit it creates through providing access to heritage. As a participatory and highly skilled practice, conservation gives opportunities for building social capital, the development of knowledge and innovation. Rooted in principles of long term care, it champions sustainability and counters throwaway culture.

Investing in preventive conservation is a cost-effective way to unlock the public benefits of collections and for Trustees to support the communities that they seek to serve.



Where can I find out more?

<https://www.icon.org.uk/resources/caring-for-your-collection.html>

<https://www.aim-museums.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Successful-Collection-Care-2017.pdf>

<https://collectionstrust.org.uk/spectrum-resources/conservation-and-collections-care/>

[https://www.swfed.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/signposts\\_factsheet\\_4\\_Preventive\\_conservation\\_2006.pdf](https://www.swfed.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/signposts_factsheet_4_Preventive_conservation_2006.pdf)

<https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/advice/collections/introduction-to-collections-care/>







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Icon is a charity and professional body seeking to create positive change for cultural heritage by championing conservation

**The Conservation Register is our free tool helping you find a professional conservator you can trust. It provides a reliable way to identify and contact an accredited professional who will ensure collections and objects are conserved to appropriate standards and can be enjoyed by future generations.**

**[www.icon.org.uk](http://www.icon.org.uk)**

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The Institute of Conservation  
06-109 Saffron Hill  
London  
EC1N 8QS  
UK  
T: 020 3142 6799