

**Icon Care of Collections Group
Touchy Feely AGM and Conference**

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Abstracts

Object lessons: Handling core collections on a daily basis at Manchester Metropolitan University Museum

Alison Draper and Stephanie Boydell

MMU Special Collections is a university museum with a number of distinct collections and archives. The collections encompass a huge variety of material types from books, and paper based materials, decorative art and crafts, to organics and plastics.

Our primary aim is to engage with our staff and students by bringing collections to the heart of teaching and research. By this we mean that we actively encourage teaching and individual study through direct access to objects and artworks, with handling as a central plank in that approach. In fact one of our mission statements is: "We encourage supervised, hands-on access to all but the most fragile of items in the collections"

Learning with objects has recently seen a resurgence of interest, led by the university museums sector, with some excellent research coming out of UCL. However much of the work done and carried out in museums and galleries focuses on designated handling collections (traditionally second tier and un-accessioned collections).

Here at MMU we believe that the entire collection is a handling collection, and we have had this approach, encouraging active handling of all collections since 2002. This extends to members of the public as well as our staff and students. For us the only limits on physical handling are when conservation deems an item too at risk, however that would not preclude the user from viewing the object directly.

In this session we hope to offer a snapshot of our current practice and experiences in delivering this service. We will outline the curatorial and educational reasons for advocating handling at this level and describe how our users actually work with collections, and how we as curatorial and conservation staff manage this. We will then look at the notion of damage, and how can we monitor it, if it has been as bad as expected, and how it has occurred.

Then we will discuss the main problems that we have encountered, from both a conservation and curatorial point of view, and why we think these have arisen.

We will conclude by looking to the future of the collections, particularly in regard to an upcoming relocation of the collections to new facilities, built to accommodate our unique handling requirements.

Conservation of the Monuments at Southwark Cathedral

Sophie Barton

Southwark Cathedral is currently in the process of reviewing the condition and display of its principal monuments. The condition reporting of the monuments, both within the Cathedral and in adjoining buildings, has highlighted numerous examples of deterioration to the surface and substrates of important works.

Examples of the most important objects which have suffered as a result of veneration and interest from the public are:

- A twentieth century monument to William Shakespeare, where the alabaster effigy has severely altered as a result of being easily accessible to the passing public.
- A selection of fifteenth century roof bosses which are displayed in the Nave of the Cathedral and in the Undercroft.
- Painted monuments, of stone, wood and metal substrates which suffer from being 'polished' and the flaking of polychrome surfaces resulting from their allure to be touched.
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The Cathedral is currently implementing plans to improve the long-term maintenance of the monuments and a variety of approaches are being discussed. One of the options for importance slab ledgers is using a temporary cover, such as an Eyemat™ to protect the floor when there is a service taking place, large groups of visitors or if chairs being used in the area.

There are ethical questions raised as to whether it is correct to create a barrier which prevents members of the public interacting with the objects, it is above all a place of worship not just an historic building. The use of barriers from the Cathedral's point of view also raises questions of health and safety. Is it appropriate to reduce the width of a walkway in a busy aisle with ankle height ropes or would it cause a hazard to the public? It is hoped that some discreet methods of creating barriers, without changing the current accessible display, will be tested out in the New Year. By looking at successful examples in similar environments, we aim to reduce the deterioration to some of the principal monuments and objects in the Cathedral. At present, it would appear to be the most historically important items which are the most accessible and thus suffer the highest risk of damage.

This is a vital step to ensure the preservation of the Church fabric and it would be an opportune moment to discuss the display options with conservators who have encountered similar situations whether in an historic house, museum or a religious building.

Project participants:

Cathedral Architect, Kelley Christ

Conservator, Sophie Barton

Conservation students from the City & Guilds of London Art School

Mixed Messages

Helen Ganiaris, Sandra Hedblad and Jackie Kelly

The Museum of London presents the story of London from 400,000 years ago up to today in a series of chronologically arranged galleries. Each of these galleries has been re-designed a number of times since the Museum opened in 1976. The oldest current gallery in terms of design dates to 1996 (the Roman Gallery) and the most recent to 2010 (the Galleries of Modern London). As exhibition designs and interpretation theories move on the consequences have been that each gallery has a different approach to touchable objects.

In all the galleries there are objects which are on open display and which are easy to touch. However, many of these were not planned to be touch objects. Some are labelled 'Do not touch' but many have no labelling at all. In addition, there are also objects which are designed to be touched and which have signs inviting the visitor to do so. Apart from the signs there is sometimes very little difference in how they are mounted or positioned. Whilst most objects are real, a small number are replicas.

In 2014, the possible redevelopment of a number of our older galleries led us to question how the public were interacting with objects that were on open display. We decided to undertake a study to record all the objects that it was possible to touch in the galleries - including both those that the public were meant to touch and those that they were not meant to touch. Once we started looking we were surprised to find that there were far more objects open to being touched than we had at first anticipated. When we had a full list of these objects we began monitoring how the public reacted to these objects. We wanted to find out if objects that we felt were at risk really were; were there objects that were more at risk of damage than others; were the messages clear? We also hoped that our study would help us understand visitors' reactions and assumptions about objects on open display.

In addition we wanted to clarify the situation for our gallery staff, who are on the front line in terms of interceding with a visitor who is touching something they are not supposed to or can encourage visitors to explore those objects meant to be touched. It is difficult for them to do this if they themselves are not clear on whether an object can be touched or not.

Following on from the monitoring we then re-evaluated the objects and their locations. In some cases the findings supported our assumptions that objects were at increased risk but in other cases we were happily surprised. Overall, however, it became very apparent that work needs to be done to unify our labelling and the information that we are sending out in terms of whether it is ok or not to touch objects that are on open display.

All our collections are handling collections

Isobel Griffin

For museums and galleries, deciding whether or not to allow handling of collections is a challenging dilemma. On the one hand handling offers many benefits to the users of the collections, but these benefits must be balanced against the potential for physical and chemical damage.

For libraries, the situation is somewhat different. Library users expect to be allowed to handle collections, and on the whole they are. There are very few items within the National Library of Scotland that would not be issued to a reader, although as the value or fragility of items increases, so the level of control increases. The library's collections are divided into general collections and special collections, and the special collections must be consulted in a separate reading room, where the level of supervision is more stringent and more emphasis is placed on appropriate handling.

It is clearly important that the reading room staff are competent themselves in assessing the potential for damage and handling collections appropriately, and that they are confident to pass this knowledge onto the readers. All new reading room staff are expected to familiarise themselves with the library's handling guidelines, and to attend a training session delivered by the Collections Care team. The staff who deliver the books from the shelves to the reading rooms are also targeted for training.

The users of the library sign an agreement to abide by certain terms and conditions, which include rules about the ways the collections are handled and used, and they will soon also be asked to watch a short collections care video. There are signs and leaflets in the reading rooms reiterating the handling guidelines, and there are book wedges, weights and cushions provided. The reading room staff patrol the reading rooms, both to reduce the chances of items being stolen and to offer handling advice.

For the conservators working with the library's collections, the consequences of items being frequently handled is that they require treatment more often than they would in a museum, and that the treatments may need to be relatively invasive. The library's Collections Care Policy states that conservation should make collection items 'fit for purpose', and this usually, but not always, means able to be handled safely. Some collection items are in such poor condition that they could receive a time-consuming and heavily invasive treatment and still easily be damaged by further handling, and for these items the policy is try to source an alternative copy, sometimes by nominating the item for digitisation. The Collections Care division also undertakes re-housing work to improve the security and ease of handling of items on single sheets; this can involve mounting works of art on paper, and hinging manuscripts inside fascicles.

Facilitating the handling of collections is undoubtedly challenging, but the library experience shows that it can be done, and that by employing creativity and innovation, conservators can ensure it is done very well.

Using handling collections in a local authority museum service

Simon Brown

I work with Access Artefacts, a handling collection of around 11,000 unaccessioned objects at Nottingham City Museums and Galleries (NCMG), held in an off-site store in the grounds of Wollaton Park. It is a very broad collection, with a mix of social history, world cultures, taxidermy, geological and biological specimens, archaeology and other objects. The collection is unaccessioned but is managed to accreditation standards within an accredited service.

The collection is kept separate from the accessioned collections so that it can be used for handling. We are funded by Arts Council England to manage the collection as a loans service for schools and community groups. To our knowledge we are unique in the country for having a handling collection of this size and depth, with original objects.

From the collection we develop themed resource boxes that contain around 15 to 20 objects. These are packaged alongside a written information pack containing activities and information, specially developed for use in the classroom or with community groups. For example we can cover almost every aspect of the national curriculum for history from key stages 1 to 3.

The collection is used by schools and community groups who come to us directly or through colleagues at NCMG. Objects are also used on our museum sites in handling sessions, activities and public events. As Artefact Loans Officer I am responsible for the management of the collection and the development of the Access Artefacts service. I have worked with the collection for 3 and a half years. I can speak about the issues that have arisen with the use of our collection, such as its juxtaposition with the accessioned collections on display and how this is discussed with the public.

I can also speak about the impact that the collection has achieved, for example in schools and in the use of reminiscence boxes for people living with dementia (there is a growing body of work that illustrates the value of handling historic objects in the treatment of dementia). The collection is used in ongoing community engagement work and specific projects, such as the award winning Universal Roots project (<http://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/museumprojects/index.aspx?articleid=25049>).

The collection is also used at public events, both by colleagues within NCMG and by the public, giving further advocacy for the wider work of the service. None of these impacts would have been possible if the collection could not be handled.

Further to this I could speak about our practical experience of using the collection, and offer advice on how delegates may wish to develop their own service.

Risky Business?

Irit Narkiss

The Manchester Museum has been at the forefront of active use of collections for more than a decade. We use accessioned objects and specimens for school and university sessions, handling tables, outreach and other public programmes; rarely using replicas or surrogate objects.

Five years ago a damage form was instituted to monitor breakages and near misses. The idea was to be able to learn from these experiences rather than point the finger of blame and the form was designed with that in mind; with fields such as 'ratio of adults to children' 'atmosphere'. Over the years only around 20 of these have had to be filled in. And in all cases damage was the result of an accident.

The talk will describe some of the programmes at the museum and how objects and specimens are used in them: primary school and secondary school sessions, regular handling tables on the galleries, community outreach and special programmes. The process by which objects are chosen for use will also be outlined.

This will be followed by presentation and analysis of the damage forms, what the implications are, how we monitor used and damage and how use was changed as a result. Are particular objects at greater risk? Do certain types of event present a greater risk? We have found that damage forms are very informative in deciding future choices of objects and the type of handling/touch, and thus in minimising potential risk. Some examples of such lessons learnt will illustrate this part of the presentation.

The talk will end with some conclusion regarding the Museum's general approach to object handling.

Conservators as Enablers of Sustainable Enhanced Access: A conservator's experience at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter

Morwena Stephens

Contrary to the caricature of conservators standing firmly between the public and the collections it is argued that conservators actively improve access to objects and are well qualified to do so, including to ensure that physical access is meaningful and sustainable. Fundamental parts of conservation work include: improving the stability of objects, removing soiling that is inhibiting visual access, making mounts which can aid interpretation, and improving collection care to ensure objects are accessible for future generations. Furthermore, during treatment investigations conservators collect data about the materials, construction and history of an object that can be shared with the public to aid understanding. Conservators can also be advocates for objects and share their excitement or wonder at working so closely with historic artefacts.

Informed by experience with RAMM's Community Participation team, 'Visitors Choice Viewpoint' and the investigation of whether the Exeter museum's stored costume and textile collection can become an active cultural resource for learning, inspiration and well-being, it is suggested that conservators are well placed to facilitate meaningful and close access to objects. The risks of enhanced access, including handling, are considered and examples of significant benefits experienced with groups during handling sessions are shared. For example, members of an art group for service-men and women suffering from PTSD were visibly moved when they were able to handle a Blackfoot moccasin, which contrasted strongly with their experience of army boots. The museum itself can benefit from enhanced access as users share their experiences, sometimes even expertise, which can improve the museum's understanding of the object and its potential to engage other visitors.

As part of the work at RAMM we are developing pathways for access to ensure that the experience is as meaningful as it can be for the participant and that the risk of deterioration can be carefully managed. This involves potential users consulting the online collections database to decide which objects they would most like to see and even touch. Suggestions of particular objects to explore certain themes can be provided to guide the users' selection. Existing collection condition surveys can be used to provide baseline condition information about the objects, with any changes recorded before and after a handling session. This data also enables objects to be scored for level and frequency of access and identify which require additional storage support/mounts to aid viewers to interpret them.

All handling sessions begin with handling training from a conservator outlining the associated risks and how to minimise them. The level of training is adapted to the group and the vulnerability of the objects to be used. For example, it is not considered appropriate to ask dementia sufferers to use gloves as this can be perceived as an intimidating barrier to access, so robust artefacts, or those protected by physical enclosures are used together with objects from the handling collection. A conservator is present during the handling session to support and supervise the experience of enhanced access. Conservators participate in the evaluation of the benefits and any damage associated with a session.

Improvements in the collection care of objects on open display at the Science Museum

Jannicke Langfeldt

The Science Museum is known to many as a museum where you can touch things, see working objects or make things work by interacting with them. We have two interactive galleries for children that have no objects in them at all as well as many interactive demonstration models spread throughout our galleries. However we also have other galleries and many objects on open display which are not interactive and we sometimes struggle with making it clear to the visitors that these should not be handled.

This talk will look at the ways we have recently improved collection care of objects on open display in our galleries. Some things are working really well and we are looking to expand on these, other things less well, and we are taking a pragmatic response and learning from our mistakes.

Damage Reporting system- raising awareness:

We use Mimsy at the Science Museum and there is a damage report on Mimsy that until recently was relatively under-used. Our conservators tended to use condition reports instead to record the damage. However as we realised that the damage reports actually gets read and have a much higher impact than condition reports we have become quite diligent in filling them in. This helps raise awareness of damage that happens due to 'visitor interaction'.

Collaboration with other departments and training:

What conservators often don't realise is that we are not the only ones worrying about the visitors. In fact the security guards and visitor experience staff who patrol the galleries are often more worried than us. Recent changes to our security contracts gave us the opportunity to suggest improvements to the cover on the museum floor. This involves staffing levels and training.

Language of design:

We have in the past year added many do not touch signs to the galleries. Some of them are better than others. Other language that designers use in the galleries are not always effective, and we have some good examples of what works and what does not work from our new gallery Information Age.

Additional object protection:

Information Age opened in September 2014, and although the designers tried to make it obvious with visual language that there are some objects that should not be touched this hasn't always worked. We are now re-visiting these objects and adding another layer of protection to them. This has involved making small Perspex covers for particularly fragile parts, such as keyboards and buttons that can be tempting to press.

British Museum's "Hands On" Desks

Aislinn Smalling

The British Museum Hands-On desks provide a chance for visitors to interact with objects relating to several themes. It originally started in 2000 with 1 desk, in 2009 there were 6 (Shearman 2009). Initially, conservation was not involved until an object broke (Shearman 2009). In 2009, Fleur Shearman presented for a Conference Catch-22 at UCL on the Hands-On desks. In this talk, she mentioned several findings from her work on this project, conservation risk mitigation, and issues which arose when objects broke (Shearman 2009). Shearman (2009) recommended providing a photo log of object condition, better object selection and packaging (Shearman 2009).

Five years later, this presentation addresses the current conservation responses to the scheme. Firstly, it discusses current object selections, chosen through discussions between the curator, volunteer coordinator and conservator. Then, the presentation covers the on-going condition assessment of all objects currently on the Hands-on desk, along with an evaluation of current protocols. Overall, many of the issues covered by Shearman (2009) five years ago remain problems. My current work is to create more thorough documentation through condition photographs and improved documentation forms.

Next, the presentation addresses issues affecting condition. First, it assesses the risks to objects relating to preventive conservation such as storage limitation impacting packaging. Next, it discusses the risk of damage and treatment responses. Often these objects are treated only when damaged rather than subject to regular maintenance, like cleaning. Treatment decisions are often formed based on the best ways to mitigate risks, such as coating all metals and strong repairs over reversible ones.

Next, the challenges of managing these desks need consideration. Currently there is no formalised a way of monitoring risk or object condition on the desk, and this responsibility is often a side task when a conservator or an intern has time. As museum funding becomes more limited, justifying conservation resources becomes more important. This presentation considers whether the treatment of unregistered objects is the most prudent use of resources. Additionally, it suggests increasing volunteer training, with the potential to expand volunteer damage logs to include condition reporting.

The presentation's final section discusses public engagement. First, it addresses volunteer training to mitigate risk. Next, the results of public and volunteer surveys from the *Vikings* exhibition's Hands-on desk demonstrate the response to increased access. Of note, a sword which was touch only, rather than handling, was one of the favourite objects (British Museum LVA 2014). Such results demonstrate that mitigating risk does not have to result in less engagement.

Overall, many issues continue to re-emerge. However, the current work expanding the Hands-On scheme through two new desks represents the museum's ability to learn and adapt from the older desks.

Sources

British Museum LVA, 2014. Results from Vikings Desk Survey. Unpublished document British Museum, London, UK.

Shearman, F., 2009. Public Handling desks: a conservation response to the *Hands-On* scheme at the British Museum. Presentation at Cultural Encounters and Explorations: Conservation's Catch-22 Work Shop 3: Physical Encounters; Access to objects, 2 June 2009 UCL, London