



# CoCA RESOURCE: **CARE OF CERAMICS**

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**York Art Gallery**

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# CoCA RESOURCE: CARE OF CERAMICS

## Who is this resource for?

1 Organisations and individuals interested to ensure the care and long-term preservation of ceramic works.

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## How will this resource help you?

The resource is designed to help you:

- Create conditions for the optimal storage of ceramics.
- Effectively handle ceramics.
- Inspect ceramic objects.
- Understand the possible causes of damage to ceramic objects.
- Package ceramics.
- Be aware of other things to consider when caring for ceramics.

The information presented in this resource is authored by ceramic restorer F. J. Hutchinson. It was developed to support learning at a Collections Care Day, held on the 15 August 2019, as part of a CoCA Subject Specialist Network (SSN) events programme, funded by Arts Council England.

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## Conditions for the optimal storage of ceramics

- Clean
- Dry
- Stable temperature
- Avoid using wool products for layering
- Consider the overall weight of objects
- Shelf depth appropriate to size of object

Caring for objects is a huge part of the job, being a curator or a conservator. The above list gives a few points to consider when undertaking that task.

A clean and dry area is essential for storage of any object; a stable temperature is also important.

When storing ceramics on open racking, make sure that each object is safe and secure but in its own space. The racking or shelving must also be appropriate to the size of the objects. Bear in mind that you should not have to reach over one object to get to another. Objects can have a cover of a piece of acid-free tissue to keep off any dust but still remain visible.

Using plastic crates is another good, safe method of storage, where the object is settled in a 'nest' of acid-free tissue, with a good layer covering the bottom of the crate to offer insulation against careless handling. You can use cotton tape to secure a package; it is so much better than plastic tape and much easier to undo.

Don't be tempted to use sections of wool blankets to layer between plates. I have seen this in several big house collections, and they bring their own problems, as they are a food source for carpet beetle larvae. Whilst the creatures are not a problem to most ceramics, they do encourage unwanted dirt on ceramic surfaces and an infestation to the house. Use instead folded tissue or bubble wrap to layer between the plates. Do not be tempted to over stack piles of plates – be mindful of the cumulative weight.

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## Effectively handling ceramic objects

- Plan ahead
- Create a clear working space
- Check the condition and previous repairs
- Check for cracks or any instability
- Have an appropriate dress code
- Be confident when handling – don't be afraid of the piece
- Do not pick an object up by the handle, knobs, or any potentially weak area
- Always support the object

Before you start, check your surroundings: Do you have a clear working space? Can you move round it without stepping over any other boxes, furniture or suchlike? Check for lights/cables above head height.

You need to be able to move confidently around your object, concentrating on that, and not what you might fall over.

Check yourself – wear close-fitting clothes – nothing long or floaty. Remove any jewellery that might be a nuisance (rings, bangles or a dangly necklace), tie long hair back, and put your tie into your shirt! Nitrile gloves can be worn to protect the ceramic when handling unglazed wares or if the glaze is fragile.

Never be frightened of an object. Assessing the piece before you handle it gives you lots of time to become familiar with it. Then you are already aware of any potential problems that you might encounter, and what to do should you be faced with such a situation.

It sounds obvious, but do not pick up an object by its handle or knob, and be very mindful of old repairs as these can degrade over time and become loose or fragile.

When you are handling an object, support it at all times; put your hand underneath so that it isn't going anywhere.

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## Inspection of objects

- Consider the reported/recorded state of object
- Visual assessment
- Tactile assessment
- Assess current damage and any previous restoration
- Record with photographs when item is unpacked
- Count the pieces

When faced with a new object, it is important to become familiar with it.

Be aware of what you are handling – make various assessments, visual and tactile. Can you see any visible damage? Can you feel any movement, or can you hear any movement?

Make notes on your initial observations – if something is damaged, make a note of the number of pieces, and be sure to keep all of the object together.

With various country house collections I have been involved in, I have been made aware that because there are so many people involved in an object's life, bits can get separated. If someone has accidentally knocked a piece off something it can be vacuumed up, put in the nearest piece of furniture for safe keeping or put on a shelf somewhere else. It is best to be aware of this!

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## Possible causes of damage

The following have led to items requiring restoration:

- Pets
- Grandchildren
- Wildlife – animals and birds
- Sweets
- Over stacking
- Shelf collapse
- Deterioration of previous conservation
- Deterioration of picture cords
- Inappropriate packaging
- Accidental damage

Causes of damage are a constant source of fascination for me – I think I have heard it all and then along comes another one!

From my experience both collections and the general public bring a wealth of breakages.

Pets are inevitably high on the list; cats, dogs, people swatting flies... and missing! Wildlife too, I have had incidents of both owls and rooks down people's chimneys flapping about a room and causing havoc, even a trapped squirrel on the rampage in someone's lounge – the list goes on.

Sweets... not dangerous you would think, but when one fell out of a visitor's mouth as they leant over an open staircase in a big country house, this boiled sweet then fell three floors and went through an Imari plate like a bullet leaving a hole as if the plate had been shot. This I would not have believed had I not seen the damage with my own eyes!

If you over stack objects in storage, the weight can total an enormous amount so that the bottom two or three pieces are in a very vulnerable position. It is best to add another shelf to a cupboard rather than over stack.

Shelf collapse can be avoided by doing a regular visual check on them to make sure nothing had moved or has become weak. If possible, attach a rack to the wall behind it so there is no chance of it moving.

Deteriorated picture cords – pictures hang on walls for years, particularly in a domestic surrounding and they can eventually and unfortunately suddenly give way, landing on the things below. Again, a periodic check avoids this potential hazard.

Inappropriate packaging – this is more aimed at some of my clients. Years ago, I received a plate sent through the post in a Jiffy bag?!! What goes through people's heads?

Accidental damage – well this is one of those unfortunate facts of life. I would always encourage looking with your eyes... not your hands! A good rule to learn and to instil in the general public.

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## Other things to consider when caring for ceramics

- Museum putty
- Sand for stabilising
- Use of thin Nitrile gloves
- Gilded ceramics
- Dust-free storage environment

Personally, I am not a lover of museum putty. It has its place and can be very useful. However, it can be a nightmare to get off an object (particularly if it is a very textured piece), and sometimes a bit left over on the base of a piece can be an unnerving experience when you expect to pick a piece up without hindrance.

For unstable pieces, I suggest using oven dried silver sand – either put some in a bag inside a pot or pour into the pot to create the weight at the base so it is less likely to tip over. This works very well to weigh lamp bases that get grabbed at by their enthusiastic owners.

Nitrile gloves are great to handle objects, offering protection to vulnerable ceramic surfaces and a similar sensitivity that our fingertips would give.

Gilded ceramics are not generally a problem, but it is worth being mindful of the condition of the gilding. As gilding is always the last part of the process in the original making a ceramic piece, it is also the lowest fired surface, and therefore the most vulnerable.

If ever you find an old label stuck to a gilded piece, seek advice before trying to remove it. The likelihood is the gold below could also be removed unless great care is taken when removing it.

As good natured as ceramics are, a dust-free environment is always a good policy for storage.

The cleaner the storage environment, the less handling/cleaning is required when the ceramics are next needed for display.

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## Packaging ceramics

- Acid-free tissue
- Bubble wrap
- Newspaper
- Cardboard boxes – adequate size for object
- Polythene storage crates
- Foam
- Custom packaging
- Polystyrene chips... (personal hate)

Packing any object will be necessary at some point.

I have spent many hours packing lots of different objects over the year, from ships in bottles back in the 1970s to now with wonderful pieces of ceramic, so I am well-practiced.

In the museum environment, acid-free tissue and bubble wrap are excellent for the job and readily available.

In private practice with a wealth of bizarrely shaped objects I sometimes need to be more creative in my approach. I pack objects to send all over the world, and newspaper is the main component of any parcel for me. However, a good strong box is the first requirement. It needs to be comfortable for the size of object, with plenty of space around it (so probably double what you think you need). Make sure the base of the box is taped and safe before you start.

It is then very important to start this packing process with a cushioned base in the box or crate to offer good protection to the piece. I use a lot of newspaper because it is the best possible material for absorption of movement. The paper needs to be scrunched up but not solid. If too solid the absorption properties of the paper are lost.

For a box base of 50cm x 30cm I would use approximately 24/30 sheets of a broad sheet newspaper – So that once the layer is down it will be about 5/6cm deep.

If the object to be packed is an easy “smooth” piece – a vase or a bowl etc, then this can be directly wrapped in acid free tissue, and then into bubble wrap double protecting anything vulnerable like a rim or a handle, then placed in the newspaper nest. Then pack around it with newspaper or tissue, not tight, but so that it can’t move.

However, if the object is a Ewen Henderson or similar of a random shape, with a rough texture, sharp corners, heavy and awkward to get a hold of, then this is a different challenge! Again, I would start with a well-prepared box with a layer of newspaper – but this time lay a large layer of bubble wrap in the bottom of the box on top newspaper.

Looking at the object decide where will need extra support, and how best to get hold of it. Lift it into place in the box, and ease the bubble wrap up around the piece, and then start to systematically fill in around it between bubble wrap and box. I pack equally – one end and then the other, and then the sides – push crumpled paper under any high sections to offer support and gradually the piece is encased so there is no chance of it moving in transit and being damaged. Fold the bubble wrap over the top of the piece, and then pack the same on the top with the newspaper as the base.

Foam if soft enough can be useful to compress and put into place, but if forced or too strong/firm be mindful it could cause damage, so consider this.

I personally dislike any form of polystyrene or corn starch packing chips and do not use them under any circumstances. Polystyrene chips tend to appear solid in a box, but in my experience most things packed in this way will “settle” – the chips rise to the top of the box and the object becomes very vulnerable at the bottom of the box.

You can turn packing into a very enjoyable art form – very therapeutic too.