

FACTSHEET 3: CONDITION ASSESSMENT

THIS FACTSHEET RELATES TO QUESTION 3.18 OF THE MSPI
(MUSEUM STANDARDS PROGRAMME FOR IRELAND)

Guidelines for the Condition Assessment of Objects within a Collection

This Factsheet is related to Guideline 3.18 of the Museum Standards Programme for Ireland (MSPI).

A basic knowledge of the condition of the collection is required to:

- i) Identify the most important pieces in the collection and take adequate steps to protect them.
- ii) Recognise material that is actively deteriorating and ensure steps are taken to prevent contamination with other material. This entails being able to distinguish between the different types of materials and knowing what materials are most environmentally sensitive.
- iii) Prioritise the preservation of the collection through preventive conservation measures, e.g. using correct archival storage materials, etc.
- iv) Identify areas that require access to preservation/conservation advice, if unavailable in-house this includes either training staff members and/or appointing outside consultants.
- v) Record the condition of an object to ensure it can be safely displayed, handled, consulted, or loaned. For example:
 - Are textiles fading and/or fraying?
 - Are prints and drawings 'foxing', i.e., developing brown spots?
 - Is there mould growth?
 - Is there wood-worm or other signs of infestation?
 - Is paint flaking from oil paintings or manuscripts?
 - Are metal objects corroding?
 - Are documents, photographs or works of art on paper becoming brittle and faded or discoloured?
- vi) Record the condition of a collection. This can be recorded in written form and/or visually with a camera or video and voice-over.

The condition of an object is not easily defined, but may be considered an evaluation of the ability of the object to function within the collection. In this context, function means the ability to display/exhibit, consult, and loan. This in turn may be measured against the importance of the object to the collection, its value, and uniqueness.

The condition of an object can be rated as follows:

Good condition: that the object is structurally sound, that the materials from which it is made are not actively deteriorating; that the object can go on display, loan, and be handled with due consideration.

Fair condition: that the object may be damaged, has previous repairs which may be injurious to it;

that the object is dirty but handled carefully, and with remedial care may be made available for display and consultation.

Poor condition: that the physical and/or chemical integrity of the object is seriously compromised; that the object may be actively deteriorating. Its very condition may render the object susceptible to further damage. The object cannot be displayed or made available for consultation.

There are two standard ways of assessing the condition, either using a condition survey or a condition report.

What is a condition report?

A condition report is generated per object and details the type and extent of any damage. It also assesses the causes of the damage and will estimate whether or not the object is at risk from accelerated deterioration. A condition report may, but does not necessarily make recommendations for conservation treatment and will signal how soon some intervention may be required. They may therefore require input from a conservator; however this is often not possible.

What is a survey?

A survey is an assessment of the condition of objects within a collection and is usually carried out to establish the overall condition status of the collection or a part thereof. It is usually not as labour intensive as condition reporting, as a number of items are examined at once, but that will depend on how accessible they are.

A condition survey can:

- Quantify amount of objects that are damaged
- Highlight type of damage
- Help prioritise preservation/conservation measures and treatments
- Can be carried out object by object or sample group - e.g. every 5 items examined on a shelf and used to estimate percentages
- Can be on-going as time allows or for a concentrated period of time
- Does not necessarily need to be carried out by a conservator, but staff need to have training in correct handling

There are a number of sample condition reports and surveys available to search online; the most useful type need to be tailored to fit the type of material you are assessing.

See Template Condition Report Form provided.

How to find a Conservator

The Institute of Conservator-Restorer's in Ireland (ICRI) maintains a list of conservator-restorers working in Ireland and available for consultation and advice. www.conservationireland.org

Sample Template Form

(This form is not object specific and includes examples of what is meant by physical, chemical, and biological damage)

Name of Collection _____

Assessed by _____ Date of Assessment _____

Inv. No.: _____ Cat. No.: _____ Photo No.: _____

Artist/Maker _____

Type of material _____

Dimensions: Height _____ Width _____ Depth _____ Weight _____

Condition Rating: Good Fair Poor

Treatment Proposal:

Maintain

No further action

Prevention

Remove secondary support

Offer correct support

Conservation

Remedial

Full treatment

Priority Rating: Urgent High Medium Low

Damage description (see below) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

PHYSICAL DAMAGE

(1) Major structural damage

Parts broken or detached

Cracks, holes, tears

Structural weaknesses

Loss of parts

Ruptures

Distortions

Warping

Desiccation

(2) Minor structural damage

Chipping

Edge tears

Creases

Glazes cracked

Loose attachments

Craquelure

Pigment loss

(3) Soiling/surface accretions

Dirt

Old repairs

Grease

Stains

Staples

Adhesives/glue

Retouching

Fly specking

CHEMICAL DAMAGE

(4) Major chemical damage

Excessive fading

Discolouration

Corrosion

Friable leather

Foxing

Friable textile

Pigment burn

5) Minor chemical damage

Fading

Tonal change

Tarnish

Clouding

Foxing

BIOLOGICAL DAMAGE

(6) Fungal

Mould

Mildew

(7) Live infestations

Furniture beetle

Woodworm

Moth

Silver fish

Wood lice

Rodent