

Helpful tips for preserving your precious documents and memorabilia

Tips on Caring for Works on Parchment

By the Carnegie Historical Museum of Fairfield for the Iowa Conservation and Preservation Consortium

Parchment or vellum is a particular material made from animal skin (generally cow or sheep) that has been cleaned, stretched, and allowed to dry. It can generally be found in archival or book collections as a substrate for important documents or manuscripts. Knowing how to care for your works on parchment, and when to seek the help of a professional conservator, is imperative to their preservation. The following tips highlight the basic steps to follow when considering the safekeeping of vellum or parchment documents.

Tip #1—Always wash your hands with soap and water before handling parchment. Avoid wearing any lotions or pieces of jewelry that could scratch and harm the object.

Tip #2— Conduct a visual examination to confirm that the object is made of parchment. It is important to be able to identify when you are working with parchment versus an alternative material (such as parchment paper or tracing vellum), since the appropriate treatment methods for each differ. Parchment will have two distinct sides. One side will be smoother and relatively whiter in color; this is referred to as the flesh side. The rougher side, called the hair side, is generally more yellow in tone and may contain visible follicle marks. Since parchment is made from cleaned and stretched animal skin, it is not uncommon to see traces of its origin left on the document. These identifiers include uneven edges, thin spots or holes, and veins.

Tip #3—Parchment is hygroscopic in nature. This means that it can absorb and release water. As a result, this makes it highly susceptible to moisture damage. Do not attempt to clean or relax a work on parchment via the direct application of water or steam. This can cause swelling and distortion in addition to a potential loss of any ink or attachments (such as seals or tags).

Tip #4- Due to its ability to retain moisture, parchment can be a growing ground for mold. Watch for any new stains or discoloration, and consult a conservator for removal.

Tip #5—Prevention is the best policy. Monitor your environment to prevent moisture damage. Parchment should be stored slightly below a comfortable room temperature (at approximately 20°C/68°F). It is also important to consider relative humidity or RH. RH is the amount of water vapor present in the air compared to the total saturation of water vapor at that temperature, expressed as a percentage. The ideal RH for

parchment is between 50-60%. However, any drastic shifts in RH can be more harmful to the object than if the humidity is slightly but consistently below this range. Avoid storing objects in the basement or attic. Consider using humidifiers, dehumidifiers, and/or fans to maintain proper moisture levels and help with air circulation.

Tip #6—If your work does accidentally get wet, contact a conservator immediately. Do not expedite the drying process or apply heat. Hot air (such as from a hair dryer) will cause the parchment to shrink dramatically.

Tip #7—Parchment documents should be stored flat, between individual sheets of acid-free paper. Objects with a three-dimensional component or flaking decoration can be stored in acid-free boxes.

Tip #8—If you would like to display your piece, it should be mounted in a way that allows for the slight movement of the object while still maintaining tension. Parchment will shrink and expand a bit throughout its life, as the humidity in the surrounding environment rises and falls. Any mounting system should be carried out by a professional.

Tip #9—Cleaning and repairs should be performed by a conservator familiar with parchment. This will help avoid any further harm and ensure the object's long-term preservation. A list of available conservators in your area can be found on the AIC's website: <https://www.conservation-us.org/membership/find-a-conservator#.W3CPKX5lDOQ>

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Created August 2018



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Online Resources

- The AIC's guide to the proper care and maintenance of your family heirlooms
<https://www.conservation-us.org/about-conservation/caring-for-your-treasures#.W3CZQ35IDOT>
- The AIC's Wiki on parchment conservation
[http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Parchment_\(PCC\)#Housing](http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Parchment_(PCC)#Housing)

