Object Preservation
Wistariahurst Museum, Holyoke, MA

There are several types of objects that need to be treated in different ways to best preserve them. Though objects may not directly relate to our heritage, they do often have sentimental value that we wish to pass down to future generations.

Metals: Metals like silver, brass, bronze, lead, iron and other plated items are susceptible to tarnish, powdery or corrosive layers and even flaking due to atmospheric pollutants.

What can we do? It is important to inspect for corrosion at least once a month. You should wear clean cotton gloves when handling metal items. For silver, brass, bronze, lead and pewter you should remove dust using cotton cloth (Dustbunny brand). For iron and steel you can dust with a tougher clean brush. Well-polished steel can be burnished with clean cloth. Plated materials need to be checked for corrosion more often and should be dusted with a dry cloth. Metals should be stored in a controlled atmosphere and should not be stored in wooden display cases. There is a reaction between oak and lead/pewter that will discolor both the metal and wood.

Ceramics: Ceramics are affected by extreme temperatures and humidity changes, which causes breakage, cracks, staining and the loss of glaze.

What can we do? Ceramics should be dusted with a clean cloth. If the surface is damaged or unstable, do not dust because it may cause more breakage or flaking. It is not wise to immerse ceramics in water. They can be wiped with a very dilute lukewarm solution of Photo Flo, Triton or Orus Wa Paste and rinsed thoroughly. It is best to keep ceramics stored in a stable environment (temperature and humidity), and though they can be subject to fading, they are more stable in UV rays than other items like photos, textiles and documents. It is not pertinent to wear gloves when handling ceramic ware because the oils from your skin do not affect the material.

Wood: Wood is most prominent in furniture, but these hints can apply to things like wood bowls or figurines as well. High humidity, low humidity and temperature fluctuations will cause the warping, twisting and splitting of the wood as well as the embrittlement or mold growth of the glue if it exists. Pests (beetles, termites, carpenter ants) can also cause a problem for your furniture. You will see carcases, fresh wood powder or flight holes if there is an infestation.

What can we do? Gloves are recommended for handling wood items. When lifting heavy wooden objects like furniture, pick up at its most secure point. Dusting once a week with an anti-static lint free dusting cloth is the best. Dust in the direction of the grain to avoid scratches. Do not use Endust or Pledge as they are harsh chemicals. If there is an infestation of your wood objects, it is best to contact a consultant or other collections management technician for advice on how to avoid the further contamination.

Glass: Like other objects, glass items can be affected by temperature and humidity fluctuations. This may cause breakage, cracking, and cloudy surfaces. Some clear glass will even turn a shade of purple when UV light shines on it.

What can we do? Do not store your glass objects in direct sunlight if they are displayed in your home. It is also important to control the humidity of the environment. You can clean glass using clean cloth but if the item is old, do not use spray or liquid cleaners. You can wipe the glass with lukewarm water and wipe off. Again, it is not pertinent to wear gloves when handling glass items.