

Care and Display of Glassware

If you own pieces of antique glass, think about how your treasures are displayed or stored. How are they faring? Do they need to be reorganized, sorted, documented, dusted or stored in a better way? Glass can be damaged by the environment it is in. Taking preventive action will help keep these pieces in good condition throughout the years. Below is a checklist to get you started.

Caring for your glass: A checklist

- Handle objects carefully, one at a time, with clean, dry hands.
- Wash glazed and glass objects by hand; don't use a dishwasher.
- It is best not to wash unglazed ceramics or those with gold edging, hand-painted decorations or repairs.
- Avoid dusting sprays, polishes, or commercial cleaners for glass and ceramics.
- Display antique objects in a cabinet with glass doors if possible.
- Display objects on level shelves, out of bright sunlight, in moderate temperatures.
- Do not heat ceramics much above room temperature; be careful not to expose warm items to things that are cold or vice versa.
- Do not store items in direct contact with other items; separate plates, and wrap each item separately for packing.
- Use paper toweling, flannel, or a thin layer of polyethylene to wrap or separate objects; avoid newspaper or even clean newsprint.
- Do not use heirloom glass or ceramics for food storage, live flower arrangements or for holding colored water.
- Collect all the pieces, including tiny fragments, of a broken object in separate paper towels; do not try to glue them together; take them to a professional.

Environment

Glass is affected by light, heat and moisture. Deterioration is sometimes difficult to detect.

Temperature. Antique glass is brittle and should not be exposed to extremes in temperature. Store valued glass items in a stable environment away from heating and cooling vents, fireplaces, etc. Possible damage increases with sudden changes in temperature and relative humidity. Glass objects may shatter when taken from a warm area to a very cold one.

Light. When glass is exposed to ultraviolet light, manganese dioxide (a decolorizing agent used primarily from 1880 to 1914) becomes "photo-oxidized" and turns pink or violet. The process is slow but will permanently alter glass containing manganese dioxide. Many old telegraph insulators are examples. Glass may also contain selenium, a decolorizer that photo-oxidizes to an amber color. Selenium was used primarily from 1914 to 1930.

Avoid placing valued glass keepsakes in sunlight or using ultraviolet filters to prevent these changes. Sunshine can also cause temperature and relative humidity changes. Do not store valuable glass in a damp place such as a damp basement or attic.

Cleaning

First, examine the surface for cracks, and previous repairs under light and with a magnifying glass if possible. Consider the type of glass and value of the keepsake. If in doubt about the glass and methods of cleaning, consult a museum curator, glass expert, or other resource. If glass has been repaired, avoid cleaning it or clean without immersing it in water, as the adhesive may be damaged. It is better to do nothing than risk damage to a keepsake you value highly.

Rarely used glass should be washed occasionally. Dust and grime build up may cause corrosion. Glassware should also be dusted. Dust filled with abrasive particles can cause wear on glass surfaces. Abrasive particles may cut into the bottom of the glass or cause damage if the lip is stored upside down or as it is being moved. The insides of glass may also show scratches from regular wiping with a dry cloth.

Glass in good condition can be washed in warm, soapy water. Do not use hot water. Avoid using harsh abrasives or strong detergents on gold, silver, enamel or luster color applied to glassware. Use a mild, good quality detergent or a deionized soap such as “Orvus”. Distilled water should be used for washing, but room temperature tap water will work. Adding a small amount of water softener product to the water (e.g. Calgon) will prevent chemical build-up and filming on glass if the water is hard.

Wash each piece in a plastic container or line the bottom of the sink with a towel to help avoid glass breakage. The water faucet can also be covered with a protective cloth. Use room temperature water for rinsing. Add five percent ammonia to the final rinse. Ammonia, however, should NOT be used on glass with metallic decoration.

Drain and dry the glass to prevent surface deterioration. Water trapped inside items will over time pit and dull the item. Dry glass with a soft lint-free cloth. Avoid storing bottles or decanters with their stoppers in place as condensation can result.

Glass bottles and items that are extremely soiled can be cleaned by soaking overnight in water softener products, detergent and water. Then add a handful of uncooked rice and gently swirl to dislodge any dirt. The bottle should be at least half full of water. Use about four tablespoons of rice depending on the size of the bottle. Rinse. Do not pour the rice down the drain since this action could clog the drain. Fine sand may also be used. This method IS NOT suited to all glass. Old organic deposits, such as dried milk or food, may be difficult to remove. Soak in a solution of deionized soap, ammonia, and water if the glass is in good condition. A twenty to thirty percent hydrogen peroxide in water may bleach the stain if the soak does not work.

Avoid using the dishwasher for valuable glass keepsakes. Some types of glass (the types are not predictable) will develop an amber or multicolored iridescent film (silica film) or a cloudy film (etching). Both are usually caused by a combination of too high of water and drying temperatures, insufficient rinsing, use of alkaline washing solutions and/or soft or softened water, and are irreversible.

Crystal chandeliers and candelabra can be cleaned with a cloth moistened with alcohol or a solution of ammonia and water. Test first and handle with care.

Display and Storage

Metal can scratch or stain glass and is not recommended to hold or store glass items.

A thin piece of padding, such as expanded polyethylene, can prevent breakage and shocks when setting glass objects down.

In storing, pack each piece separately in tissue and cushion each piece with a layer of air-cap or bubble-wrap or expanded polyethylene. However, because these wraps may contain unstable

substances, wrap the glass in acid-free tissue first for long term storage. Be sure items are completely dry before packing. Label carefully.

Avoid using valued glass items for storing liquids for any length of time. Store stoppers separately from bottles. If a stopper should become lodged, place the item in the refrigerator to contract. Remove the stopper. Remember to slowly bring the item back up to room temperature to avoid shattering the item.

Resources

Seek expert help in any matter concerning the care of rare and valued glass keepsakes. If there are no local sources, contact the Kentucky State Historical Society or write to Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, New York 14830.

Trade names used in the publication are for information only and do not imply endorsement of products named nor criticism of similar products not mentioned.

References:

Caring for Your Family Treasures. Harry Abrams Publishers, Inc. 2000

MacLeish, A. Bruce (ed.). *The Care of Antiques and Historical Collections.* Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for state and Local History. 1984.

Niemeyer, Shirley. *Care and Display of Glass.* Nebraska Cooperative Extension Service. 1995.

Rottenberg, Barbara Lang. *Care and Display of Glass Collections.* Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, Technical Leaflet No. 127. 1980.

Linda Adler, M.A.
Extension Specialist for Home Furnishings

February 2007

Copyright 2007 for materials developed by University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension. This publication may be reproduced in portions or its entirety for educational or nonprofit purposes only. Permitted users shall give credit to the author(s) and include this copyright notice. Publications are also available at www.ca.uky.edu.

Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of race, color, age, sex, religion, disability, or national origin.