

Conservation Policy

UNRESTRICTED

This Policy was approved by the Board of Trustees on 5 December 2024 and will be reviewed not later than 2029 (5 years). This policy is published on the British Museum's website in the Governance section.

Introduction

Under the British Museum Act (1963), the Trustees of the British Museum are responsible to Parliament for the safekeeping and care of the collection and for making it available to the public.

This policy sets out the principles according to which the British Museum conserves objects in the collection.

This policy is part of the Collection Management Policy framework and should be read in conjunction with these policies, this includes but is not limited to:

Acquisitions Policy

De-accession Policy

Loans Policy

Policy Statement

The objects in the collection are preserved for the benefit of the public, present and future. The purpose of conservation is to minimise deterioration or damage to the collection.

To ensure that the collection is preserved, it is the policy of the Museum to:

Use a risk managed approach to the conservation and preservation of the collection.
While conservation treatment will be necessary to enable objects to be used, where

possible, the collection is preserved by reducing the potential for deterioration and damage rather than through treatment and repair. That is, preventive conservation methods are applied in preference to interventive conservation treatments. Conservation treatments are based on a minimal intervention approach and to be retreatable.¹

This policy does not apply to unregistered handling collections as these are expected to be handled to breakage or destruction and then replaced.

Conservation Principles

The Museum's Conservation team are responsible for providing both preventive and interventive conservation support to the collection and associated training to colleagues. The team works in close collaboration with curatorial, collections, and other Museum colleagues to fulfil the essential work of preservation. The principles that the Museum's risk managed approach to collection care and conservation are informed by:

- a. sector professional standards, ethics and best practice
- b. compliance with relevant legislation, national and international regulations²
- c. colleague knowledge, specialist training and experience
- d. proposed use of the collection
- e. research and analysis
- f. sustainability
- g. emergency plans including the Collection Protection, Rescue and Recovery Plan (CPRR)
- h. effective communication of conservation and collections care issues to stakeholders.

Preventive conservation principles

1. Preventive conservation requirements seek to balance, as far as possible, access and use of the collection with the need to preserve objects.
2. Preventive conservation advice and support is provided by the Museum's team of qualified preventive conservators.
3. Suitable, secure and well-maintained buildings are provided for the display and storage of the collection.
4. Guidelines are provided for the appropriate environmental conditions in which to store, handle, display, study and transport the collection.
5. Systems are provided to monitor and measures put in place to maintain and improve the state of the collection and the environments and spaces in which they are stored or displayed.
6. Measures are taken to minimise the risk of deterioration and damage of objects wherever they are stored, handled, displayed, exhibited or loaned.

¹ Institute of Conservation, 2024, [Conservation glossary \(icon.org.uk\)](https://www.icon.org.uk/glossary) [accessed 03 June 2024]

² Institute of Conservation, 2024, [Conservation standards \(icon.org.uk\)](https://www.icon.org.uk/standards) [accessed 03 June 2024]

7. Display and storage materials, equipment and methods used for, or in proximity to, objects will be appropriate for use.
8. All staff follow agreed Museum procedures, guidelines and training for preventive care and handling, cleaning, storing, transporting, acquisition, display, lending, disposing of collection items and reporting collection incidents.
9. Researchers and volunteers are briefed, and when necessary trained, to use the same standards of collection care as staff.
10. The risk of damage to the collection by pests is reduced by implementing and maintaining a comprehensive integrated pest management (IPM) programme across the entire Museum estate.
11. Collection items which are inherently hazardous are managed to reduce current and future health risks.
12. Any location change of a collection item should result in it being placed in matching or improved environmental conditions.
13. Surveys of the collection in storage are conducted periodically, the frequency depending on the vulnerability of the materials they contain.

Conservation treatment principles

14. Conservation treatments are conducted by the Museum's qualified Conservation team, or trainees under their supervision.
15. When in house capacity or specialism is not available, use of external conservation contractors will follow this policy and Institute of Conservation, or equivalent international bodies, accredited³ contractors will be employed. In some circumstances, non-accredited contractors but otherwise appropriately trained and qualified conservators may be employed. All contracted work will be supervised by the Museum's Conservation team, or an authorised staff member agreed with the Head of Conservation.
16. The condition of all objects required for acquisition, study, display, exhibition or loan is assessed and documented.
17. No item in the collection will be modified or altered until advice has been obtained from the Conservation team.
18. The treatment of objects required for public and scholarly access or whose condition requires urgent action to prevent loss, will be prioritised over conservation of objects that are stable but not required for immediate use.
19. All treatments carried out on the collection are fully documented and these records are understandable, the resultant records are input on to the collections management database as each item is treated.
20. Treatment methods use safe, stable, tested materials that, where possible, compromise neither future conservation treatment or scientific examination, nor the authenticity of the object.

³ Institute of Conservation, 2024, [Conservation glossary \(icon.org.uk\)](https://www.icon.org.uk/glossary), [accessed 03 June 2024]

21. The Museum does not provide advice to the general public on how to undertake conservation or recommend any one particular specialist. Enquiries are referred to the Institute of Conservation, Conservation Register.

Operating Objects

22. There are a small number of operating objects in the Museum, these are mainly clocks and watches. Clocks and watches are cared for and maintained by qualified horologists who work with the Conservation team to conserve these items.
23. The care and maintenance of operating objects is carried out in line with this Conservation Policy.

Research

24. Scientific and technical examination, analysis and experimentation are used to maintain and improve the preservation and treatment of the collection and to increase information on materials and manufacture for display and research output.

Sustainability

25. Conservation guidelines and measures are reconciled with the Museum's sustainability policy.
26. Materials are used that are not believed to pose a current or future health hazard and that can be re-used or disposed of in a sustainable manner.