

The private curator

From antique oil paintings to silk curtains, museum curator Faith Carpenter gives us her top tips for caring for your precious possessions and returning them to their former glory

“A mummified Egyptian cat?” The surprise on the faces of the rest of the staff at the museum spoke volumes as they stared at the bandaged item I was holding. “Yes, with a whole collection!” We all went to investigate the Egyptian collection I’d found in the darkest, tallest corner of the museum - a corner where no curator had looked for so long that the knowledge of what lay within had become extinct.

Sixteen years on, finding surprise historical objects and rekindling that knowledge is a small but significant part of what I do. After 20 years working in museums, I set up The Company Curator to identify, organise, digitise and leverage businesses’ own historical collections. This was partly driven by a moment when, as a new Assistant Curator, I found a tiny chest of drawers bearing the copperplate legend ‘Beautiful Butterflies’, yet not one single butterfly remained. The entire collection had been eaten by invading insects - carpet beetles, in this case. I imagined the Victorian collector’s dismay at the loss of these items. The sense of failure I felt has stayed with me, as has the awareness that with proper care it could have been avoided. The butterflies cannot be replaced. That inherent knowledge is gone. My desire to ensure that history is preserved and that this does not continue to happen led to The Company Curator.

Within a few months of setting up, I realised that there was a strong demand for someone

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like me - essentially a private curator - from individuals who had their own collections of items which needed to be organised, documented and cared for. People were asking how to care for collections of jewellery, antiques, ethnographic collections, art, books, even shoes and handbags. Concerns in private collections include insects, damp, fading and how to clean precious objects. With my background, I am able to resolve these

concerns, so I set up The Private Curator so that individuals can access this knowledge.

What is my background? First, A-levels in Art, English and Classics, followed by a degree in Classical Civilisation then an MA in Museology –

the study of the purpose of museums and collections. I worked in several museums before landing the curator role at the Nelson Museum in Great Yarmouth, which honed my skills in collections care, strategy and exhibitions. This is the foundation of the knowledge I now need to give advice about people’s possessions. With the correct care, they stay looking good for generations.

Years ago, when I told people I was a museum curator, there would be one of three responses: 1) ‘What an easy job, looking at art all day!’ 2) ‘You must do a lot of dusting’ and 3) ‘How fascinating! What a wonderful job!’ Only the third one was true. It’s the same now - when I tell people what I do, they say the third thing. Of course, they are right. ♦

Contact Faith Carpenter on 07842 320691 or visit www.thecompanycurator.co.uk



FIVE TIPS TO HELP YOU CARE FOR YOUR SPECIAL POSSESSIONS

While The Private Curator offers specialist knowledge and advice about specific objects, all homeowners can benefit from these general tips:

1 DUST!

Made of soil particles, pollution, pollen, spores, skin, hair, fibres, house dust mites and their faeces, the overall composition is acidic and so will eat away, discolour and stain items.

What to do? If you can’t exclude dust, gently vacuum items on a low setting with a soft brush attachment: dusters merely unsettle dust. Ensure that precious items are vacuumed one to three times a year - dusting weekly can actually damage them more than the dust itself.

2 CARPET MOTHS

Two types of moth are responsible for ruination. Their caterpillar-like larvae do the damage, eating organic fibres in scarves, jackets, coats, hats, taxidermy, rugs, carpets and curtains.

What to do? To find moths, think like a moth. Look in dark, quiet, warm places: under furniture, in cupboards, on shelves. Vacuum there in summer and keep chimneys and attics free of nests, where moths like to lay eggs.

3 TEMPERATURE

Now how can temperature hurt your things? It’s science, I’m afraid. Warm things expand, cold things contract. Think of your beautiful, valuable oil painting over the mantelpiece. When you light the fire every component - canvas, size, gesso, paint, varnish, gilding, plaster, wood - expands, and on cooling, contracts: crucially, at different rates. Worst case scenario? Cracked, flaking paint/gilt, plaster falling off and a warped picture frame. Prints are brittle, browned and wavy.

What to do? Keep your favourite pieces away from heat or cold sources. A constant level of heat is better than a twice-daily cycle; 18 degrees Celsius / 64 Fahrenheit is optimum.

4 INSECTS

“Sweet little black and yellow ladybirds!” I showed this lady that the sweet ladybirds were *Anthrenus Verbasci*, AKA the carpet beetle, and showed the larval damage done to her carpets.

What to do? Check annually for damage. Vacuum underneath furniture and fabrics which sit on natural fibre carpets, particularly in autumn. Look out for hairy brown-and-white rice-sized larvae in early summer, busily looking for your wool, silk, taxidermy and the glues in book bindings and paintings.

5 LIGHT

I was asked to look at ruined dark silk curtains whose edges hung in horizontal beige strips; the damage had been done. Again, it’s science - the ultraviolet rays in sunlight break down chemical bonds causing drying, cracking, shrinking and discolouration (in us too!).

What to do? Minimise light. Have the windows covered with clear UV reflecting film. If you don’t use some of your rooms regularly, cover paintings and furniture with dustsheets and close curtains and shutters. Use blinds when it’s sunny.

GENERAL CLEANING TIPS:

Think before using cloths, chemical cleaners, spray polishes or bleach and even natural things like vinegar, bicarbonate of soda, salt and lemons. They are all either abrasive or acidic/alkaline and will do more damage than good, long-term.

Traditional dusting with cloths can snag and detach parts of objects - try dusting special items with a soft paintbrush to loosen dust and then using a vacuum (set to low) with a soft brush attachment.

Renaissance Wax is useful for wood and metal; cleaning and imparting resilience at the same time. Don’t use water - it can cause more problems than it solves.



Above: Faith Carpenter, director of The Company Curator

Left: When cleaning antiques, think before using cloths, chemical cleaners, spray polishes or bleach, and even natural things like vinegar, bicarbonate of soda, salt and lemons

