**Preservation of Archival Collections**

Whether one works in an archives or one works on a group of family records, or a personal collection, there are some simple guidelines that we can follow to help preserve the collection for a longer period of time and keep the information about it (context) from being lost.

There are a few common problems in preserving and conservation of archival collections and they are listed below with some of the solutions. We hope they help you to manage the care of your own records:

**Light, especially sunlight, will increase the rate of deterioration.**

Keep records and artifacts away from windows and do not work on them in the direct sunlight. If displaying treasures on walls or in cabinets or on shelves, make sure the matting and framing is done by a professional using acid free materials and UVA and UVB protective glass. Do not hang them or place them where they will be exposed to sunlight. Do not place items like photos or drawings or documents in a cabinet close to an electric light.

**Poor environment, especially high humidity and still air, but also fluctuations between temperature and humidity.**

Keep your collections in a room that has fairly tight temperature and humidity controls. In the University Archives we strive to keep the temperature between 18 and 20 degrees and the humidity between 40% to 50%. De - humidifiers are a must in Hong Kong, as are air conditioners. Do not run them during the day only. They must be on automatic 24 hours a day during the monsoon season. Big swings between a hot and humid environment and a cold and dry one should be avoided. It will increase the brittleness and the buildup of chemicals.

**Environmental dirt and dust – please keep collections clean.**

Keep collections boxed, wrapped, and shelved or placed in drawers. Surface dirt from the environment can build up and be difficult, if not impossible, to remove. Dust the area and the containers regularly with a clean, slightly damp cloth – no chemical cleaners.

**Environments where water or fire could be a danger**

Do not store your family records under or near water pipes, furnace or HVAC units, water heaters, air conditioners or windows. Do not store them in attics, outbuildings, or basements unless you can control the temperature and humidity, and other environmental factors as well as you can in the main part of the house or flat.

**Archival housings, storage materials, to fold or not to fold.**

There are a number of suppliers of acid free (pH between 7 and 8), or “archival” (pH between 8 and 10) storage containers of many different types and uses. Some of them are “buffered” with a solution of 3% calcium carbonate to make them more alkaline. I have included a few links to suppliers I have used and know to be reputable. Explore their sites and have fun – it is shopping after all…☺

University Products <http://www.universityproducts.com/>

Light Impressions <http://www.lightimpressionsdirect.com/>

When storing items in acid free folders and boxes do not leave them folded in any way. Folds are where acid and dirt build up, and fibers are weakened by being bent, and cause documents or photographs to rot more quickly along those folds. Store everything unfolded and pressed flat, cleaning any built up dirt out of old folds by gently brushing with a soft brush.

**Adhesives, staples, paperclips, plastic binders**

Are not our friends! Do not use tape, glue, mucilage, or “Post it” sticky notes on archival materials. They will hasten the deterioration of anything they touch. Metal fasteners are equally bad, especially in this climate where they rust quickly and stick to whatever they are holding together. DO NOT place your photos in albums with “tacky” or sticky pages. Do not use plastic binders or folders as they will “off gas” particularly if they are made of PVC (polyvinyl chloride). If you use plastics make sure they are from reputable archival supply dealers and they are chemically inert and slow to build up a static charge. Polyester for encapsulation of documents or photos is a safe bet. Melinex or Mylar are good brands but not the only brands available.

**Acid bleeding, contamination from other collections, mould, bugs, mice, birds.**

The problem with many organic and chemical threats to the collections is that if there is not a regular program of maintenance to control these things, they can spread and infect healthier materials that are stored with the infected materials. So it is good to check new records or collections in another room first, away from your clean collections.. Then when you have determined that there are no bugs, mice, mould, off gassing or extremely acidic materials in what you are bringing in, you can clean, re-house, and place them with the rest of your collection. Pest control is extremely important. Newspapers are extremely acidic and should not be placed next to other materials. Photocopy or scan your newspaper articles onto acid free paper for safekeeping and then throw the originals away.

**Security**

Have control over the place in which your collections are stored and do not let anyone borrow the originals or you will not have a complete collection for long. If they are intrinsically valuable as well as emotionally valuable then install a proper alarm system and have the collection properly inventoried and insured.

**Poor handling, to use gloves or not to use gloves?**

In the University Archives we ask our patrons to wash their hands before commencing work and if they are to be looking at photographs, film, negatives, artifacts (particularly the metal ones), or very fragile items we ask that they wear disposable, vinyl or nitrile surgical gloves. We do not use latex for two reasons. One is that it is harmful to metals and some photos and the other is that many people are allergic to it. But gloves can also cause damage by reducing the agility of the fingers so you must be aware of the type of thing being handled and choose frequent hand washing or glove wearing or both as the case warrants.

**Photographs and their sometimes special problems**

Photographs and negatives and film stock all have very specialized needs and there are conservators who deal exclusively with these issues. There are also some good guides written on the subject. If you have a photograph in need of preservation we can help you with good advice about preservation but conservation work should be handled by a conservator who specializes in this work.

**Digitization – fabulous for access but not well understood** **– can it be used for preservation?**

Digitizing content and putting it up on the web is great for promoting wider access to collections. It also means that many people will be satisfied with using the digital content and thus not have to use, and handle, the original collection, which promotes preservation. However the digital images themselves are inherently unstable because they are on a magnetic media. They are easier to manipulate, or falsify, or destroy than hard copy. They are also the captives of proprietary software and hardware configurations that make it difficult to predict how long they can be successfully migrated and translated onto new media without losing their context and eventually their content as well. Archivists have been working on this problem since the beginning of the 1990s and we still do not have an entirely satisfying answer to this problem. However, “Truth is the daughter of time”… and no doubt these difficulties will be surmounted.

**Failing to record contextual information (metadata)**

Please write down as much of the contextual information as possible and keep that information both with the collection and a copy elsewhere, as back up. Label photographs with names, places and dates in soft pencil on the edge of the back side of the photos. DO NOT USE INK. You may use ink only if you buy the photography marker from a reputable archival supply dealer. Contextual information rarely lasts more than one generation beyond the people in the papers, diaries, or photographs, **so write it down – do it now**!

**Failing to make a plan for the continuing care of the collection in the future.**

Talk to your family and to a professional archivist about what you would like to do with family or personal collections for future generations. This can be a bequest or it can be a donation that you work out with the archives of your choice. Make sure there is a proper Deed of Gift. The archivist and you should agree on it before you both sign it and retain copies for yourselves. The stark fact is that very few families have either the ongoing concern, or the means, to successfully keep together family or personal collections past 2 generations. What generally happens is the collection is broken up between family members and loses the historical value of the context. The information about the collection is lost with each successive generation until the value has declined and perhaps only a few pieces are left. This is why we suggest that if you are serious about preserving our historic record, part of that involves thinking about your own collections and preparing for their preservation for the future.

**A word about Preservation versus Conservation:**

Taken from *A* *Glossary of Archival & Records Terminology,* *,* Richard Pearce-Moses, 2005

**Conservation**, n. – 1. The repair or stabilization of materials through chemical or physical treatment to ensure that they survive in their original form as long as possible. – 2. The profession devoted to the preservation of cultural property for the future through examination, documentation, treatment, and preventive care, supported by research and education.

Distinguished from; Preservation, Restoration

Notes: conservation counters existing damage, as distinguished from preservation, which attempts to prevent damage. Conservation does not always eliminate evidence of damage; restoration includes techniques to return materials to their original appearances (which may include the fabrication of missing pieces). – However, conservation is often used to include preservation activities.

**Preservation** n. 1. The professional discipline of protecting materials by minimizing chemical and physical deterioration and damage to minimize the loss of information and to extend the life of cultural property. – 2. The act of keeping from harm, injury, decay, or destruction, especially through noninvasive treatment. – 3. LAW – The obligation to protect records and other materials potentially relevant to litigation and subject to discovery. **preserve** v. 4. To keep for some period of time; to set aside for future use 5. Conservation = to take action to prevent deterioration or loss. -6. LAW – to protect from spoliation.