Taking Care of a Collection

by Ruth Walker

There comes a point in every collector's experience when the housing and care of books and ephemera becomes as important as new acquisitions and cataloging. I have found that my enjoyment and dedication to my "treasures" knows no bounds; however, I am often overwhelmed by the care and space considerations. How about you?

To make this simple, let's begin with **optimum environmental requirements** for maintaining a collection for many generations:

❁ **Subdued sunlight** is necessary as prolonged ultraviolet light causes paper to become brittle, fades cloth spines, dries leather bindings so that the leather eventually crumbles and powders, and causes vellum bindings to warp. Incandescent lighting is preferred; however the damaging rays can be filtered out of fluorescent lighting. Book cases should be placed in rooms that do not receive direct sunlight, or placed at right angles to windows.

❁ **Constant room temperature** eliminates potential dampness that encourages the growth of mold (mildew). By keeping the temperature at least between 62º and 70º and the relative humidity at 50% to 60%, the mold spores already present in older books and the environment are less likely to become active.

❁ **Air circulation.** Since dampness is the most critical and often least considered problem in conservation, it is important that bookcases should be backed and never placed directly against the wall. Always leave a small space for air to circulate. Never keep books on the floor, carpeted or not. Bookcases and boxes of books should be installed along interior walls. In the case of closely fitting glass-fronted bookcases, the doors should be left open from time to time on warm days for better air circulation. Books should be placed on the bookshelf so that there is room for air to circulate behind them. The number of books per shelf should allow for ease of removal so that a book does not need to be pulled or forced off the shelf.

Handling and Care

As you remove a book from the shelf, always extend the index finger over the top of the spine about an inch, so that pressure is not applied directly to the head cap. Many books are damaged in this way, especially leather bindings.

When a book is being opened, the right or left hand forms a 90º angle for cradling the book. Never open a leather bound book to a full 180º as this damages the spine and joints.

It goes without saying that food and drink near books and bookcases are hazardous, with spills leading to stains. Cloth bindings cannot be cleaned successfully except with a soft brush or dry eraser. Leather bindings can be treated with a preservative that cleans, moisturizes, and polishes. These supplies can be ordered through University Products, specialists in archival quality materials, at universityproducts.com.

The care of books requires a frequent vacuuming and dusting of the area in which they are housed. Also, take time to look for insect infestations, such as silverfish, brown clothes moths, etc. The books need an annual dusting, with the tops vacuumed not wiped, as a wiping of settled dust from the top of a book can drive dust and dirt into the text of the book.

Last but not least, what about the books and ephemeral material that there are no shelves for, or that must go into storage? I recommend that you spend money on sturdy, uniform (easier to store), archival, acid free cartons that can be labeled to give some sense of order and sanity. Find an appropriate environment as discussed without resorting to the garage floor. Use good quality wrapping paper, never newspaper. Annually, on a warm day, take the books out of their boxes and stand them up, fanned out, for a 24-hour period. Use dehumidifying silicate in bags to keep moisture from collecting in the cartons.