

# Preserving Heirlooms

The most common items in a family heritage collection include photos, documents, and albums. Most likely, though, you have other *artifacts* that are heirloom in nature and have special memories associated with them – grandpa’s pocket watch, mom’s high school yearbook, or dad’s military medals. Preserving these heirlooms is not hard, but consideration is needed to insure they will be around for generations to come.

The materials in your heritage collection can be classified into two categories: organic or inorganic. Organic means they came from living things such as plant or animals. Examples include paper, leather, wool, and wood. Plastic materials are also organic as they are petroleum (oil) based. Inorganic items come from non-living matter and include metals, glass, and ceramics.

It’s important to understand the organic-inorganic difference as organic materials are much more susceptible to the environmental effects of light, temperature, humidity, and pollutants than inorganic items. A primary cause of deterioration of inorganic items is simple mishandling. However, some inorganic items can be affected by environmental conditions such as humidity and pollutants.

Below are some tips in preserving both your organic and inorganic heirlooms (you may also want to read our articles on document and photo preservation for tips on preserving those items):

## **Metals (inorganic):**

Metal heirlooms include items such as jewelry, medals, or watches. A major source of deterioration for metal is corrosion. This can come from humidity (water), pollutants such as smoke or cleaners, and oils/acids secreted from human skin. Have you ever seen a fingerprint etched into the surface of a piece of jewelry? If so, then you know the damage your touch can bring. That black tarnish you see on silver is silver sulfide. Car exhaust, some rubber products, and cigarette smoke have sulfur in them, which reacts with silver to form that hard-to-remove tarnish.

Handle metal objects with clean, cotton gloves and store them in acid-free containers. This means wooden boxes are a no-no as wood contains acid. Place your archival storage containers in controlled humidity areas. In other words, a bedroom closet is a better location than your garage or basement!

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## **Textiles (organic):**

Textile heirlooms include ribbons, wedding dresses, or other clothes. Like paper and photographs, deterioration of textiles is chemical in nature. The factors influencing deterioration include temperature (the largest affect), humidity, dust, pollutants, and light. Briefly:

- Higher storage temperature accelerates deterioration.
- Higher humidity promotes mold growth.
- Dust and pollutants may contain acids and be abrasive, and
- Continued light exposure can cause fading.

Preserving textiles involves using archival storage containers and putting them in controlled locations, much like you would your photos and papers. See our document or photo preservation articles for more information.

## **Books (organic):**

If you're like us, you have lots of books you hope to hand down. But while they're on display, stand them vertically on shelves, well supported by neighboring books or bookends. Don't angle a book as that deforms the spine and joints. Likewise, books should not be pushed to the back of the shelf as this reduces circulation, which in turn traps condensation and thereby encourages mold growth.

Use paper bookmarks to minimize tearing and staining that can occur with metal or leather bookmarks, and avoid self-sticking paper as these leave a residue of adhesive on the page that attracts dirt. Follow the general handling guidelines at the end of this article on your special heirloom books.

When books are ready to be packed away for storage, put them in archival storage boxes, just as you would your papers and photos.

## **Glass/Ceramic (inorganic):**

Heirlooms in this category might include wine glasses, vases, or dishes. The primary cause of ceramic and glass objects deteriorating is by scratching, cracking or breaking from improper handling, shipping, or display. We've already broken one of grandma's depression era glassware due to slippery hands, don't you do the same!

In addition to storing your heirlooms in archival containers, consider also wrapping them in acid-free tissue. This provides an added layer of protection.

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Regardless of the type material your heirloom is made of, wear cotton gloves when handling it to avoid soiling it, and keep food, drink, keys, paper clips, scissors, knives, pens and the like away from the handling area. These all have potentially harmful implications if an accident occurs!

Taking a little precaution in storing and handling your heirloom artifacts will allow those to come to enjoy them too!

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