

Preservation Newsletter—November 2019

### The [In]Fortuitous Interaction

The inherent conflict between preservation and access is most apparent during exhibition: the potential risks to the stability of materials on display are legion and can keep a conservator awake at nights. Look at [this nightmare](#) that the Washington Post has filed under “entertainment.”

Chilling.

At the Center for Jewish History we take extreme care to mitigate the risks to collections that can come from exposing them to conditions outside of storage by maintaining temperature and relative humidity inside exhibit areas similar to that in our stacks, limiting exposure to damaging light levels, and using cases and hardware to keep the objects from being knocked over or stolen. But what happens when the threat is coming from *inside the case*? The materials used in the fabrication of display cases and supports—wood, lining fabric, gaskets, adhesives-- can damage collections, especially when allowed to build up unvented inside the case over time. Even the gases released from the collection items themselves can initiate or increase the rate of chemical deterioration.



Deposit on covered jar from exposure to polyester polyurethane foam during exhibit. ©The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image retrieved from AIC News v. 37 n. 1 (2012)

Last week I had the opportunity to learn more at the Materials Testing Symposium at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, highlighting the research that’s being done by the American Institute for Conservation’s Materials Testing Working Group. Only two years old, this group has made incredible progress on improving existing test

protocols, creating new analytical tests for materials, and making the results of their tests more readily available to other institutions. Some prime takeaways that I'd like to share:

- Many institutions are now sharing the results of their in-house [Oddy testing](#) online via the [Materials Working Group wiki](#). Materials are cross-referenced by manufacturer and supplier and results are supplied not only in the usual "Pass/Temporary/Fail" metric but also with a high-resolution image of the test coupons so that designers, conservators, and installers can use their own judgement.
- Oddy tests are done on individual products. Products that pass the Oddy individually may, when placed together in a sealed case with collections objects, may combine to form adverse chemical reactions. Using tested and approved materials does not take the place of routine examination over the course of an exhibit.
- Manufacturers often change the formula for their products without widely announcing the fact. Older testing results and "approved lists" may no longer be accurate.
- The Oddy test and the Photographic Activity Test are not interchangeable. Materials that pass one may fail the other.
- "Green" materials made to be less harmful to humans are not necessarily better for use in exhibits and may still result in the off-gassing of VOCs.
- And finally, the beloved National Park Service's *Exhibit Conservation Guidelines: Incorporating Conservation into Exhibit Planning, Design, and Fabrication (1999)* will be receiving a needed upgrade—online! No more CD-Rom!

*The Werner J. and Gisella Levi Cahnman Preservation Laboratory*