

Preservation Newsletter—January, 2018

Dust and your Collections—How Bad Can a Little Dust Be?

Answer: It can be bad. Also, kind of gross.

Dust is composed of a variety of organic and inorganic fine particles, including pollen, human skin and hair, paper and textile fibers, dirt and road dust, and millions of dust mites. It attracts and harbors pests and carries pollutants. Even though microscopic, hard or sharp particles can abrade surfaces, while organic particles can cause chemical damage. In addition, dust can cause staining and even collect in pockets, physically damaging objects by distorting their shapes and causing cracks. Dust can increase the relative humidity around an object by attracting water vapor from the air, creating slightly more humid microenvironments around exposed collections. For these reasons, it is very important to control the amount of dust in the stack areas!

What the Center does to control dust in collections storage areas

- The CJH facilities team cleans every stack floor at least once per month using a high-powered vacuum equipped with HEPA filtration;
- The CJH facilities team mops the stack floors twice per year using hot water and a mild, collections-safe soap;
- CJH engineers install gaskets and sweeps on storage area doors and maintains positive pressure in the stacks to keep fine dirt and dust from infiltrating from the hallways and stairwells;
- The engineering team also has installed fine particulate and carbon filtration in the air-handling units, minimizing the amount of outdoor pollutants entering through the air supply registers.

What YOU can do to control dust in your stack areas

- Wipe off shelving units and box tops weekly using a microfiber (Swiffer) cloth;
- Avoid tracking dirt, slush, and road salt into the stacks on your shoes;
- Dust exposed (unboxed) collections materials twice a year using an air gun, soft brush, or a HEPA vacuum especially created for cleaning museum and library objects;
- Provide secondary housings such as boxes or gasketed cabinets for fragile, vulnerable materials such as photographic prints and negatives or metallic objects.

Metal shelves are best cleaned with a magnetic wiping cloth, which attracts and holds dust with an electrostatic charge. Dust cloths that are chemically treated to hold dust can be used to clean shelves but are not appropriate for cleaning books. Feather-type dusters, even a magnetic feather-duster, should not be used. These dusters only redistribute the dust. As a result, more frequent cleanings are necessary.

By properly eliminating the dust and dirt that abrades pages and binding surfaces, attracts insects, and contributes to an environment that supports mold growth, staff members are contributing greatly to the preservation of their collections.

If you have any questions or concerns, don't hesitate to contact Jennifer or Kat in the Preservation Lab—we want to help you!