

# Caring for Wooden Furniture



Ford Conservation Center

2017

## About Furniture

Everyone has furniture in their homes, which is usually out in the open and subject to use and abuse by the home's inhabitants. The long-term preservation of furniture is dependent on how it is cared for, and the environment in which it is displayed. Listed below are simple guidelines for cleaning, waxing, and displaying wooden furniture.

## Handling Furniture

Because furniture may have hidden weaknesses or loose components, it is important to handle it carefully. Before moving a piece of furniture, examine it to determine the location of any weak areas, and handle it accordingly. You should generally pick furniture up by its seat frame or table frame, and not by its back, arms, or legs. Use both hands when picking it up, and ask for assistance if it is heavy or unwieldy. Determine where you are moving it before you begin, and remove any obstacles in your path. To protect the furniture from scratching, marking, or bumping, remove dangling necklaces, sharp rings, protruding belt buckles, pens and pencils from shirt pockets, and tuck neckties into shirts.

If your furniture is damaged during



handling, do not panic. Take a photograph to document the accident. Retain all pieces, however small, and place them in labeled zip top bags. **Contact a conservator to learn the best way to proceed.**

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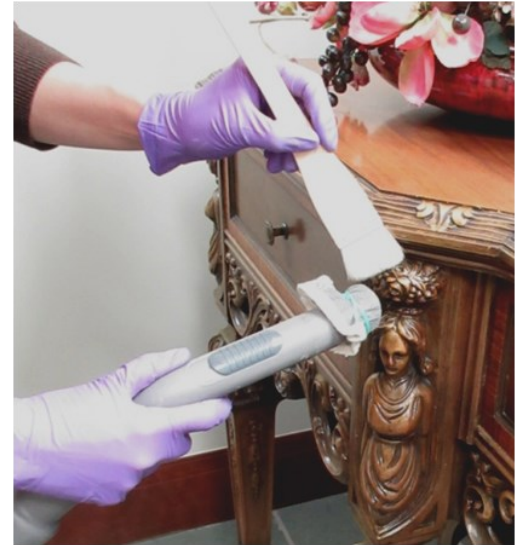
## Cleaning

### Materials to Have on Hand

- Clean, soft dry cloths
- Variable speed vacuum with soft brush attachment
- Nylon screen or cheese-cloth ( to cover the end of the vacuum nozzle. A large sheet of nylon screen can also be used to safely vacuum upholstery)
- Gloves: nitrile (these gloves offer the best protection when working with mineral spirits and wax. Latex gloves do not offer adequate protection.)
- Mineral spirits
- Soft clean natural bristle brushes, such as haké, watch, or paint brushes
- Apron or smock to protect clothing
- Clear paste wax, such as Johnsons® paste wax, or a clear hard paste wax available in hardware stores such as Behlens® paste wax.
- Clean natural bristle stippling or stencil brushes, or shoe buffing brushes, for waxing and buffing
- Polyethylene sheet (to protect floor and possibly non-wood and metal elements )

Dust is an air-borne particulate that is a problem for antique furniture. Dust attracts moisture and pests, and as a result can contribute to the deterioration of the furniture. Before any cleaning or waxing methods are attempted it is important to check the condition of your furniture. Do not attempt to clean or wax a surface that is severely deteriorated or has loose parts such as decorations, screws, or nails. These projects are best handled by a conservator. If the piece is in good condition, use the

following procedures for cleaning and coating.



### Procedure

Remove loose dust and dirt from your antique furniture using a clean, soft, dry cloth. Gently rub the cloth over the surface. Be sure to change the dusting cloth as it becomes soiled. Heavy accumulations of dust on antique furniture can be removed by using a variable speed vacuum in combination with a soft brush attachment. It is a good idea to cover the nozzle of the vacuum with a square of nylon screen or layers of cheesecloth to catch any loose matter that may be sucked up by the vacuum.

On the lowest setting, use the soft brush attachment to run the brush over the surface. Gently run the brush over carvings, ledges, moldings, and recesses. A small, natural bristle brush may be needed to access dirt in cracks and crevices. The

metal ferule on the brush should be wrapped with tape to avoid scratching the wood. Brush the dirt away from the area you are dusting toward the vacuum nozzle. If old upholstery elements need to be vacuumed, a large piece of nylon screen can be held down on the surface and the upholstery can be vacuumed through it. This helps minimize the amount of abrasion and stress the upholstery experiences from the vacuuming process and direct contact with a brush. Never do more than dust or vacuum surfaces that have not been coated with a finish. These surfaces usually include interiors, cabinet backs, backs of doors, and inside drawers or compartments.

For heavier surface accumulations, consult a professional conservator.

A conservator can sometimes make recommendations of cleaners to use that will not cause discoloration or damage to the furniture's finish from blanching or blooming. Blanching is a whitish discoloration of the finish caused by the introduction and evaporation of a solvent or water. Cloudy, translucent discoloration with a white or blue tint is known as bloom. This discoloration occurs after the introduction of water to the finish.



## Coating

We have all heard it said that “Wood needs to breathe,” or “Wood needs to be fed.” These statements are not true. Wood is not alive. A living tree has very few living cells within its trunk; and when it's cut, the remaining living cells die. By the time the lumber cut from the tree has been made into furniture, the wood has been dead for a long time. If the wood is dead, it does not need to breathe nor eat. “Feeding” furniture oils to wood will not have a positive impact on the long-term preservation of a piece of furniture and may in fact decrease its valued lifespan.



Many different compounds have been used throughout time to polish furniture. Today in museums and historic homes, furniture polishes are no longer used. The current best practice for the care of furniture is to apply a protective layer of paste wax to the finished wood surface. It is important to remember the reason for waxing or polishing a piece of antique furniture is to maintain the finish, not improve or repair it. Each finish should be tested for compatibility with the paste wax in an inconspicuous area before any waxing is started. Recommended paste waxes include Behlen's®

Paste Wax or Johnson's® Paste Wax. Follow all of the instructions on the packaging and do not apply the wax more than once a year. The wax will protect your furniture's finish. Do not use commercial products such as Pledge® or lemon oil. These products cause deterioration and gummy build up on the surface over time. Similar materials contain silicone compounds that are impos-

**WARNING:** Paste wax is solubilized with organic solvents. When working with solvents, always follow all recommended safety precautions noted on the containers. Mineral spirits can be harmful to your health if not used as instructed. Nitrile gloves should be used during the cleaning and waxing procedures, as they offer protection from mineral spirits and the solvents present in the wax mixture. **Always be aware of the location of the nearest fire extinguisher when working with flammable solvents and waxes.**

sible to remove and will compromise any future refinishing attempts.

The properties of buffed paste wax help keep dust and moisture away from the wood surface, which will only require gentle dusting with a clean, soft cloth. When waxing your furniture, you only need a small amount on your brush or soft cloth;

if too much wax is applied there can be a noticeable accumulation in the wood grain and crevices. Before you begin waxing your furniture, protect any elements that you do not want exposed to wax (such as upholstery) using polyethylene sheet.

### Display and Long-term Care



As with any other antique or historic object the environmental conditions in which furniture is stored is critically important to its condition and survival. Organic materials, such as wood, absorb moisture as the relative humidity rises and release moisture as the relative humidity is lowered. This cycle of swelling and shrinking as the environment fluctuates results in weakening of the wood fibers, cracks, and shrinkage.

It is important to store your furniture in stable relative humidity and temperature conditions. Avoid storing items in the attic, where the wood may dry out and crack and surface coatings may become sticky, or in the basement where the air is damp and mold growth or corrosion to metal elements may occur. Antique furniture should be stored around 50% relative humidity and at a temperature below 72° F.

Light also plays a large part in the deterioration of furniture. It has cu-



National Museum of Ireland - <http://www.museum.ie/The-Collections/Conservation/Preventive-Conservation>

mulative effects on wood that are irreversible. Light is known to

bleach dark woods, darken light woods, and alter finishes, stains, or paints; the result leaves discolored, brittle, or cracked materials. Eliminating damage from light is a relatively easy step. Avoid placing furniture in direct sunlight. Close the shade or drapes during sunny periods throughout the day. Installing awnings or shutters is another possible way to eliminate light damage.

Pest infestations can also be a problem for furniture. The first sign of a pest infestation is a small amount of what looks like fine saw dust. This is called frass and is left behind by insects that have burrowed into the wood or upholstery and laid eggs. The larvae mature and chew their way to the surface leaving tiny exit holes. If you think you have a pest problem, consult a professional. They will be able to determine what type of pest it is and recommend treatment.

Eating, smoking, and drinking while using furniture puts it at greater risk for damage.



Nikolaus Wilke Thermo Lignum – museumpests.net

“Eating, smoking, and drinking while using furniture puts it at greater risk for damage.”



<http://www.pacific-tint.com/window-tinting-protect-your-wood-furniture/>

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## Consulting a Conservator

If you have any concerns about the care of your wooden furniture, consult a conservator in your area for further guidance. A conservator will be able to assess the issues relating to its condition and long-term care. Conservators can provide basic structural repairs, aesthetic compensation, and protective coatings for a range of materials.

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## Additional Resources

Edlin, Herbert L. (1969). *What Wood Is That? A Manual of Wood Identification*. New York: The Viking Press.

McGiffin, Robert F. (1992). *Furniture Care and Conservation*. Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) Press.

Williams, Marc A. (1988). *Keeping It All Together? The Preservation and Care of Historic Furniture*. Worthington, OH: Ohio Antique Review, Inc.

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## Conservation Suppliers

Most materials listed for cleaning, waxing, and proper storage can be found at hardware stores, art supply stores, or online. The following are recommended resources that carry more specialized supplies needed for the care and long term preservation of objects.

### Conservation Resources International

5532 Port Royal Road

Springfield, VA 22151

Toll free: (800) 634-6932

[www.conservationresources.com](http://www.conservationresources.com)

*Archival housing/storage supplies, photographic supplies, general*

### Gaylord Archival

P. O. Box 4901

Syracuse, NY 13221-4901

Toll Free: (800) 448-6160

[www.gaylord.com](http://www.gaylord.com)

*General conservation supplies, housing supplies*

### Hollinger Metal Edge, Inc.

6340 Bandini Blvd

Commerce, CA 90040

Toll Free: (800)-862-2228

[www.hollingermetaledge.com](http://www.hollingermetaledge.com)

*Archival housing/storage supplies*

### Light Impressions

100 Carlson Road

Rochester, NY 14610

Toll Free: (800) 975-6429

[www.lightimpressionsdirect.com](http://www.lightimpressionsdirect.com)

*Photographic supplies, housing, matting and framing supplies*

### University Products

517 Main Street

P. O. Box 101

Holyoke, MA 01041

Toll Free: (800) 628-1912

[www.universityproducts.com](http://www.universityproducts.com)

*General conservation supplies, housing and matting supplies*

### Talas

330 Morgan Ave

Brooklyn, NY 11211

Telephone: (212) 219-0770

[www.talasonline.com](http://www.talasonline.com)

*Conservation supplies, photographic supplies, general*



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