



CCI Notes

6/2

Care of Basketry

Introduction

Baskets, mats, woven hats, and similar objects, were originally made to withstand rough everyday use, but in many cases ageing has resulted in brittle, easily damaged artifacts. Although such artifacts may appear to be durable, they often are not; care in handling, display and storage is essential.

Relative Humidity and Temperature

Relative humidity (RH) and temperature are important factors in the safe storage and display of basketry. Low relative humidities -- below 40% RH -- cause embrittlement, while relative humidities over 65% can promote mould growth. Fluctuations of RH are particularly damaging because they cause considerable expansion and contraction of the basketry fibres.

High temperatures will accelerate embrittlement of basketry; a temperature below 25°C is recommended. Be aware that the radiant heat from bright spotlights can raise the temperature of a tightly sealed display case, or heat the surface of basketry on display. Maintain low light levels and use lights which emit less radiant heat to prevent this temperature problem.

Illumination

Some of the dyes used on basketry are among the most light-sensitive materials found in museum

collections. Basketry artifacts, whether dyed or not, should be displayed at low light levels to prevent deterioration: 50 lux with below 75 $\mu\text{W}/\text{lm}$ of ultraviolet light is recommended. Damage due to light is cumulative and irreversible. Information concerning the measurement of light levels can be found in CCI Notes 2/4, *CCI Environmental Monitoring Kit* and CCI Notes 2/5, *Using a Camera to Measure Light Levels*.

Storage

Because of the sensitivity of basketry to light, these objects should be stored in the dark. Fragile objects or unusual shapes should be well supported; they can be lightly filled with unbuffered, acid-free (neutral pH) tissue paper or supported by polyethylene blocks (e.g., Ethafoam). Any materials in contact with the basketry should be acid-free (and, if possible, unbuffered) to avoid further deterioration.

Objects in storage should also be protected from dust. Such protection can be accomplished through a combination of good housekeeping and the use of polyethylene sheeting. Dust is not only abrasive, but can react with moisture, which accelerates chemical degradation. Furthermore, dust can provide nutrition for insects and mould.

Periodic checks (twice annually at a minimum) should be made for insect



infestations, as insects can devastate a collection quickly. Information on biological infestation can be found in CCI Notes 3/1, *Examining for Insect Infestation*.

If small baskets must be placed inside larger ones because of space limitations, separate each with unbuffered acid-free (neutral pH) tissue paper. Storing one basket inside another can cause damage easily; baskets should be stored in this way only if such storage is absolutely unavoidable.

If fibres have become detached through handling, record their loss, place them in a labelled, clear plastic box (e.g., polystyrene) and store them with the artifact. Protruding fibres in danger of catching on adjacent objects can be tied down gently with colourfast cotton thread. Never use monofilament fishing line for this purpose, as it can easily pull and cut through fragile basketry fibres.

Handling

Poor handling is one of the major causes of damage to basketry. Baskets should **never** be lifted by their rims or handles. What were once strong areas may well have become severely embrittled: serious damage can result from this kind of improper handling. Use both hands to carry any object, and support it at its base.

Cleaning

The appearance of basketry is much improved by gentle dusting. Begin by placing the object on a cleared work table. With a soft brush, dislodge dust and debris, directing it toward a gauze-covered vacuum cleaner nozzle. This procedure removes dust without sucking detached fibres or decorative additions into the machine.

Ingrained dirt can sometimes be removed with a cotton swab (Q-tip) lightly dampened with water. It is very important to test all colours before overall treatment and not to over-dampen the basket as this may cause differential shrinkage or expansion. Any treatment should be tested

in an inconspicuous area first. **Never** immerse a basket in water.

It should be noted that what appears as "dirt" may in fact be evidence of the basket's previous use. These deposits (seeds, berry stains, etc.) are very important and should under no circumstances be removed.

Basketry which is damaged should be referred to a conservator before repair is attempted. Irreparable damage can occur as a result of an injudicious choice of materials or method. Please contact the Ethnology Laboratory at the Canadian Conservation Institute for advice.

Suppliers

Polystyrene boxes:
suppliers of plastic products

Polyethylene sheeting:
suppliers of plastic products or construction materials

Colourfast cotton thread:
fabric stores

Cotton swabs (Q-tip):
drugstores

Unbuffered, acid-free (neutral pH) tissue paper:
The Hollinger Corporation
Box 6185
Arlington, Virginia 22206
(703) 671-6600

Ethafoam:
Dow Chemical Canada Inc.
Sales offices: Vancouver,
Calgary, Regina, Winnipeg,
Toronto, Montreal, Halifax or
St. John's.

Bibliography

Canadian Conservation Institute. CCI *Environmental Monitoring Kit*. CCI Notes 2/4. Ottawa: Canadian Conservation Institute, June 1983.

Canadian Conservation Institute. *Examining for Insect Infestation*. CCI Notes 3/1. Ottawa: Canadian Conservation Institute, September 1983.

Canadian Conservation Institute. *Using a Camera to Measure Light Levels*. CCI Notes 2/5. Ottawa: Canadian Conservation Institute, September 1983.

Copies are also available in French.

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