



# → Useful knowledge...

Caring for the palace  
and its art collections





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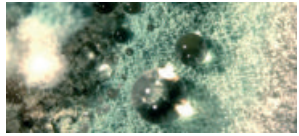
**Running a house is an art.  
When that house is a royal palace  
and the furnishings and objects in  
it form a unique collection of art that  
is part of the national heritage,  
then “daily management” turns  
into a huge responsibility.**

### **Threats**

The biggest threats to the collections are fire, water, light, improper humidity and temperature levels, biological factors, such as fungi and bacteria, rodents and insects, chemical pollution. People can be a threat as well, stealing objects or causing damages, either intentionally or not. The palace interiors used to function in a different way in the past. For one, the use of the building was much less intensive than it is today, especially as not all the rooms and furnishings were in use simultaneously and all the time.



Wilanów flooded – water standing on the lower terrace of the baroque gardens, July 1934, photo National Digital Archives



Difficulties with heating in winter left some of the rooms unused, especially the grand reception halls, which were simply too big to be heated effectively. Furniture and tapestries, which were not in use, were protected from light and dust with white covers. Chandeliers were wrapped in gauze and carpets rolled up. Valuables were locked away in treasuries and displayed only on particularly important occasions.

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Interiors were lighted with only so much light that could enter in the conditions of the Polish climate through windows glazed with small panes of thick glass. Larger panes of window glass came into use at the end of the 18th century.



Candles and fireplaces were the main source of light in the evenings and these were used prudently.

Special care was taken of candles – they were not lit without reason and never left untended. After all, the flame was a fire hazard, while the smoke and the blackening produced were difficult to

remove. Chambers were lighted up with candles, torches and oil lamps only on special occasions, such as weddings and funerals among others.

Damp was also a serious problem. Fireplaces exuded warmth, acting also as ventilation flues. Windows were seldom opened in fear of draft.

Life in the palace is different today. The furnishings are no longer used. They are on display instead – material witnesses of a distant past. They can be admired from a distance, which should apparently improve their safety, but does not. Paradoxically they are now on view to the general public all day, almost everyday and practically in all of the rooms. Even winter does not bring a respite, because the palace is heated and equipped with artificial lighting.

Thousands of visitors pass through the palace chambers every year. Groups of thirty visitors each enter the palace every ten minutes during visiting hours. People inadvertently bring in on their clothes and shoes dirt, sand, mud and damp. Vandalism is an unfortunate occurrence and objects can be damaged unintentionally by carelessness, inattention or simply ignorance.



Visitors do not realize sometimes that the art collections in the palace are public property, hence they belong to each and every one of them. It means that everyone has the right to admire them, but also that everyone should take some responsibility for their wellbeing. The rules that visitors are asked to comply with are intended for the good of the palace and its collections. It is important to respect these rules and to follow instructions from the palace caretakers.

## The wellbeing of the Wilanów Palace collections

The palace staff includes personnel charged directly with caring for the good physical condition of the collections.

Throughout the palace visitors can meet caretakers from the Public Service Department who monitor the display and are responsible for maintaining order. They act as liaison between visitors and other museum staff hidden behind closed doors in the offices and labs.



Art conservators are charged with monitoring the condition of artworks, developing protection strategies for the collections and ensuring proper conditions of storage. If damage occurs, their role is to document the scope of the problem and to take the necessary steps to preserve art objects. Museum conservators specialize in the conservation of painting, furniture, textile and sculpture restoration. There are separate facilities where this work is done.

Working in close cooperation with the conservators are art historians and specialists from other fields of science, as well as technical staff.



Palace security is responsible for the physical protection of the collections and people. Uniformed officers equipped with short-wave radios can be seen in the palace gardens as well as in the museum interiors.





## Caring for a historical interior and art collection

### I. Regular monitoring and inspection of rooms and collections

Regular monitoring and inspection procedures are the best way to identify potential threats in advance and to address problems before irrevocable damage takes place.





## II. Avoiding predictable hazards and counteracting unavoidable problems

The chief hazards include:

- **Excessive light**

The dim lighting that visitors frequently complain about in some of the palace rooms is not oversight, but an element of caring for the art collections kept in the museum.



Textiles are especially sensitive to light. So are watercolors and prints on paper, as well as some pigments and lacquerware, which loses its unique shine because of too much light.

Light can cause colors to fade or darken.

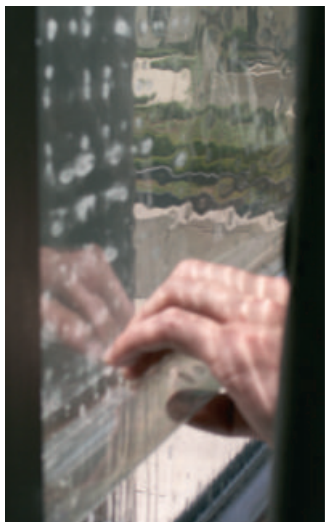
Discoloration, such as yellowing, may occur and the inner cohesiveness of objects may deteriorate.

For instance, cellulose fibers can become fragile and brittle and some binders may decompose.



In the palace objects on display are integrally connected with the interior decoration, hence they cannot be segregated by their sensitivity to light. To redress the situation windows in the palace have been equipped with special filters blocking the most harmful UV radiation in sunlight. Moreover, most windows are furnished with roller blinds reducing the overall radiation and sometimes also with shutters.





Traditional light bulbs, which are being withdrawn from circulation, are also gradually being replaced. Recently a new lighting system was installed in the Royal Apartments. It resembles candlelight and is both energy-saving and safe for the priceless wall tapestries. LED light sources without the dangerous UV radiation were used in this system.



Specially designed stylized LED torches have also been introduced to light up less visible elements of the display.



- **Improper humidity and temperature levels**

Interiors should be neither too dry nor too humid, hence the need for monitoring humidity as well as temperature. Quick reaction helps to avoid violent changes of conditions, which are perhaps the single greatest threat to objects of historical value.



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Recent research has grounded the belief that in a typical European climate optimal conditions for preserving diverse materials used in the construction of historical substance comprise 45%-55% levels of relative humidity and temperatures of about 18°C-21°C. Lesser humidity may lead to overdrying, which is especially disadvantageous for wooden objects, textiles and paper, whereas excessive humidity is dangerous to metal and glass artifacts, and is one of the causes of corrosion. High humidity combined with high temperatures are ideal for microorganism growing on organic substances, like natural adhesives, cellulose, silk and wool, which make up most artworks. Sudden changes of humidity and temperature levels result in deformation of materials like wood and fabric, which change their volume depending on the level of humidity in the air. This leads to cracking and deformation. If the wood or canvas ground of paintings undergoes too many cycles of shrinking and expanding, it will cause the paint layer to crack, peel and blister, and this in turn may lead to a powdering of the paint.

- **Mineral, chemical and microbiological pollution**

Air pollution is a serious issue today. Volatile compounds, such as sulfur and nitrogen oxides, chlorides and sulfides, penetrate from outside. So do loose mineral and organic deposits of diverse composition, commonly referred to as dust. Combined with light and humidity, they can effect extensive damage.





Dust with other air pollutants in a humid environment forms difficult to remove cemented deposits on the surface of artworks. In such cases simple dusting is not enough and artworks have to be handed over to conservators to be cleaned.



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Dust is also an excellent culture medium for diverse microorganisms growing on the ancient substance.

City air with its content of exhaust fumes is a source of pollution just as much as air exhaled by visitors to the palace.

It is important thus to curb the amounts of dust and dirt penetrating inside the building. Special door mats installed in the entrances and cloakrooms dry and clean footwear and visitors are also asked to leave their outerwear in the cloakrooms.



Air-cleaners in the palace rooms eliminate chemical pollution as well as bacteria and fungi spores.

Qualified museum staff cyclically dust all the objects on display and the palace interiors. Objects of historical value are cleaned with special disinfecting microfiber cloths, soft brushes and vacuum cleaners with HEPA or water filters, specially made for art collections, and small brushes and muslin on the nozzles to avoid losing beads from fragile objects. Each item has to be approached with individual care and utmost caution.





Dusting and any sort of movement around artworks may cause unintentional damage, like rubbing the gilding on a picture frame or crumbling of fine threads in a textile, peeling of the paint layer in paintings or breaking of a piece of sculpture. There are no strict rules for how frequent dusting should be with regard to museum objects on display. Each case is an individual one. Caretakers monitor the places under their control, where they know that dust tends to collect in greater amounts, and they determine what the risks are and how often cleaning is required.

Visitors are asked to respect museum rules and keep a safe distance from artworks in order to protect these items from dust and unintentional damage. Bigger bags and backpacks, as well as child strollers need to be left in the cloakroom.





- **Moving and transporting artworks**

Take extra care when moving, hanging, installing or transporting artworks.

Items travel mostly on loan to periodic exhibitions. They are moved in special crates in appropriately adapted and air-conditioned trucks.









Anti-shock foam lining of the crates protects objects from breaking. Hollows of matching shape may be cut in the foam to hold the object. Air-conditioned cases are used for especially valuable items.

Packaging is cyclically disinfected or custom-tailored to the needs of given exhibitions. It is usually made of wood, which is treated to be fire-resistant. Modern kinds of packaging are made of durable synthetic materials.

Unwoven polyester and polyamide fabrics are used for packing. These breathing materials protect from pollution and are disposable. A professional restorer accompanies objects on the move, evaluating their condition before and after transport.

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## **Rules to follow when moving items of historic value**

**1.** Do not lift or carry heavy items by yourself  
– accidents can happen – do it together with someone else.

**2.** Always use gloves. Skin has a natural greasiness that may leave marks or stains that are difficult to remove, especially on gilded and lacquered surfaces. Sweat is particularly harmful to metal objects because of the acidic reaction speeding up processes of corrosion.

### **III. Take action**

Should an object be damaged in spite of the steps taken to ensure its safety, take remedial action promptly and call in the art conservators.

In museums there are appropriate conservation labs which take care of objects on an everyday basis. Specialists from these labs will decide what should be done and how.

As for artworks in private hands, the awareness of their owners and their common sense determines the condition of these objects. Qualified specialists should be commissioned to take care of individual objects.

**Nonprofessional conservation is often the cause of irrevocable damage!**





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