

# Items of Value, Inc.

A Full-Service Appraisal and Estate Sale Firm

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## Displaying and Protecting Your Possessions

Most damage that occurs to objects in your home is caused by people and things people bring into it. We tend to think of damage caused by natural disasters such as fire and water and we buy “catastrophic” insurance to protect us against this. However, other damage of a far more “casual” nature frequently happens. We do not take enough precautions to prevent this. Knowing the different causes of noncatastrophic damage that occur may sensitize us to preventing “casual” damage.

Breakage inside the home is probably the first thing that comes to mind. You can obtain breakage insurance from your insurance company at a slight additional cost over and above your regular casualty coverage. Check with your insurance company to see whether this covers breakage caused by guests, cleaning people, and/or family members including children. Owners of collections of glass or porcelain such as Hummels and Lladro are the ones who most often think of this.

You can guard against breakage by taking certain precautions. Keep breakable items not only away from children but away from wagging dog tails and jumping cats. Do not set breakable items too close to the edges of tables or shelves. Be sure display case shelves and tables can hold the weight of items you put on them over a long time. If you like to display collections on antique tables, check the glue joints of the table legs periodically to be sure they are not pulling loose. A woman who has a large collection of 18th and 19th century glass kept the best pieces of her collection on a Victorian marbletop table. One day the table collapsed when a leg finally pulled away from the center post. Because the owner did not have breakage insurance, the only compensation she had was to take a casualty loss writeoff on her income tax for several thousand dollars.

Animals can cause severe damage by breaking, urinating or defecating on items, or pawing or pulling on them. Such damage occurs especially to carpets which become spotted with urine and feces, and to the front edges of upholstered sofas and chairs that cats use as clawing posts. If feces and regurgitated food are allowed to sit on rugs, they may permanently alter the color of the fiber. Avoid pushing feces into carpet fiber as you pick it up. Wash quickly with soapy water and rinse. Dogs also like to pull on carpet fringes and bump chair and table legs, eventually making rings and dents. When vacuuming carpet fringe, push the vacuum out over the fringe but do not pull it back in over the fringe. Instead, lift the vacuum or bring it in from the side of the carpet.

Items generally break when dropped, not when moving in any other direction. So, when unwrapping an item, unwrap it either on a table or on a floor so that if you drop it, it will not fall far. When you wash items, they may slip out of your hands just when you are rinsing them. Be sure to hold onto items securely when washing and rinsing. Remember to wash and rinse over a pad or towel placed in the sink to cushion the fall if you drop them. If you live in an earthquake zone, place valuable items on shelves with edges or tie them down with fishing line. You will see items secured near their base by fishing line in the Art Museums of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco.

We hear more and more about “airborne pollutants”. In your home, airborne pollutants include nicotine from cigarette smoke. Upholstered furniture, paintings and glass over framed pictures will turn yellow from nicotine. If you scrape the glass on a framed picture coated slowly over a period of years with nicotine, it will give off the smell of nicotine.

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Sulphur in the air can deteriorate stone, clay, glass and paint. Dust is corrosive. It can eat through finishes over time. Dust will eventually pit the finish on chandeliers and brass beds. The remedy is to dust regularly. Plain old dirt and dust can grind into a carpet, wearing away the pile. It is important to remove dirt and dust from rugs regularly or they will act like sandpaper to destroy the fibers. Silk rugs are best placed in an area where they are seldom walked on or walked on only by bare feet. Expensive silks are best displayed on a wall. Paintings are best protected from air pollutants by varnishing them. After varnish darkens, it can be removed and the painting revarnished. An unvarnished painting will lose some original paint when cleaned because air-borne dust will combine with the paint.

Water and water pollutants also cause damage. Vases cloud up because of minerals in the water put into them. Despite the cures recommended in news articles, none works well because the damage is not a stain on the glass, it is a permanent alteration in the glass itself. Moisture in a bathroom will erode the silvering around the edges of a mirror and rumple the backpaper and prints in frames. Likewise excessive humidity will warp paper and cause lifting of veneers. Mold and mildew will grow on items stored in damp environments. Continual air circulation around items is essential to prevent or reduce mold and mildew. The worst moisture damage occurs to paper items and textiles.

Insects love dark and damp places, especially where items are undisturbed. Moths may nest in carpets, in wool or fur coats and hats, and in the felt hammers of pianos. Check pianos for little brown moths. If you see them inside or fluttering around outside, flush the area with air (not necessarily hot) from a hair dryer or fan on high speed, then put moth flakes inside. For a carpet, vacuum both sides and hang it to beat it if possible. Then put some moth flakes underneath and check periodically for more eggs. Silverfish like to eat paper trails into mats behind pictures framed under glass. You may also find them in linen and other textiles. Try to store such items in dry places. Silverfish like dark places where items are undisturbed.

What can be done about brown spots you find on framed prints and on porcelain figures in showcases? Brown spots appearing in prints, especially prints framed before World War II and in the 19th century, may have been backed by pine boards without rag paper in between. In time the resin in the board can penetrate the paper causing brown spots. Also, if the paper is made from tree pulp instead of linen rag, the resin in the paper itself may turn dark in time. This is called "foxing". Prints can be remounted using rag mats and rag backing that will not stain the paper. Prints can also be cleaned, but this may or may not be cost-effective, depending on the value of the print. When matting prints, use rag paper in front and in back.

Brown staining that appears on porcelain, glass, ivory and metals displayed in a showcase for many years is known as "showcase rot". However, it is not a rot and is entirely removable. Slow growing fungus may form that consumes wax or oils in the wood finish inside a showcase. This may fall and continue to grow on the objects in the showcase. To clean, wash each item with dish detergent and rinse well, holding it securely all the time so it will not slip out of your hands. Paper and leather items should be dried in natural sunlight instead and then dusted lightly with a fine bristle clothes brush.

Leather is one of the few items that can be rejuvenated by treatment. Because leather is organic, it dries out over time, losing its original suppleness. You can restore the suppleness and strengthen the leather by treating it with a commercial leather balm.

Ivory, like wood, is organic, and can crack as it loses moisture. Ivory is best displayed in an area of higher humidity than most other materials. You might consider placing ivory in kitchens or bathrooms for your enjoyment.

If you hang textiles for display, beware that hanging by hooks or nails unevenly distributes pressure and the weight of the hanging item will eventually cause the top to form waves or undulations. It is better to hang

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rugs, quilts, coverlets and tapestries on wide Velcro strips with the soft Velcro side stitched to the textile and the bristle Velcro side stapled to a board screwed to the wall.

Natural light causes color change in most materials. It will lighten dark colors and darken light colors. Such lightening is well known as fading, while the darkening is called "light burning". Color photographs exposed continually to light will progressively lose colors until blues and blacks only are left. Colored prints and textiles will fade. It is best to keep these items away from both direct sunlight and indirect reflected sunlight if you want to preserve their value. Consider putting filter film on window panes to protect items from damage by sunlight.

Heat is less a destructive factor. Heat dries out items. It can cause glue joints to loosen, paper to become brittle, ivory and wood to crack. When coupled with high humidity, it will cause veneer to raise, varnish to blister or drip, and mold and mildew to grow. Store items away from excessive heat.

Items to be stored are best stored in linen or paper, and not in wood or plastic wraps or containers. Over time, wood may spot paper or textiles. Plastic, especially saranwrap, may stick to items. It can adhere to glass, ceramic, and silver. The worst damage occurs when saranwrap tears and air penetrates the hole. This can cause staining in sterling, silver and silverplate known as "tea stain", which may be impossible to buff out. It is far better to let items "breathe" and to let silver tarnish slowly. Items wrapped tightly in plastic may seal in accumulated moisture that under increased heat leads to growth of mold. Avoid plastic.

Textiles from rugs to linens are best stored rolled as opposed to folded because folds stress the fabric by thinning and lengthening the fibers in the folded areas. If textiles are folded, it is good to refold them periodically so that folds do not continue stretching fibers in certain sections.

Be aware of the many "casual" causes of damage to items. Most of them can be avoided by knowing in advance what they are and taking steps to prevent damage. With the exception of some types of breakage, most casually caused damage is not insurable. Therefore, it behooves you, the owner, to take precautions to preserve items for continued enjoyment as well as to preserve value.

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