



MANL Note

Care of Collections

A Publication of the Museum Association of Newfoundland and Labrador

Doll Collections

As a separate collection or part of a larger mixed one, dolls represent an important part of the past. Such collections usually contain children's toy dolls, but also may include commercial fashion dolls, and objects of ethnographic origin. Such artifacts serve as reflections of past stages of fashion in appearance, as well as production technology. Various types of dolls require a range of conditions for storage and care. It is important to note that a doll may logically be expected to demonstrate some degree of wear, due to use or children's play, and this is considered to be part of the object's history. However, further deterioration/damage may be avoided by understanding the material components of a doll, and the best strategy of care and storage.

Needs Assessment

Most dolls are considered composite artifacts, in that several materials are used in their construction and decoration. The basic body may comprise a painted wax or ceramic head and hands, with a cloth or leather body stuffed with sawdust or straw. The hair may be real or synthetic and may be glued or rooted to the head. The clothing may be as elaborate as any human clothing, with mixed materials and accessories, including metal fasteners, ivory, bone, or leather. Others may be entirely composed of wood or cloth. Each component plays a large role in determining the storage and handling of a particular doll. If there is doubt as to the construction of a doll, it is best to avoid any possible sources of damage.



Material	Special Considerations
Wood Leather	--insects --high RH and temperature increase risk of mould and pests --humidity fluctuations cause physical changes
Composition or "compo" (=pulped wood/paper molded under pressure)	--extreme temperature changes --often contains a celluloid component (inevitably deteriorates)
Papier-mache	--extreme temperature changes --direct light --glues attract pests, host moulds, especially at high temperatures and RH
Wax	--light --heat
Porcelain (China= glazed, Bisque= unglazed)	--breakage --wear of overpaint
Rag/Cloth	--bright light --direct contact with mothballs --biological damage from pests, mould

Celluloid (1860s-1950s)	-- FLAMMABLE! --light --high RH and temperature accelerate deterioration
Vinyl (Post WWII)	--extreme temperature changes (heat and air conditioning) --sunlight and fluorescent lights --avoid tightly sealed cases (condensation)

These considerations have different effects on different types of dolls. Humidity fluctuations cause structural damage to wood/ wood products, and leather. High humidity and excess moisture encourage insect activity and pervasive mould, and causes metal components to corrode. Unfiltered light may cause fading of inks, paints, and fabric dyes. High temperatures accelerate deterioration of plastics and can cause deformation in vinyl and other plastic dolls, as well as leather.

Preventive Conservation

The best way to prevent damage to a doll is to inspect it on a regular basis (but avoid over-handling), and avoid some general evils:

- bright light;
- fluorescent lights;
- extremes in temperature;
- excess moisture;
- high RH;
- mothballs (off-gassing);
- airborne pollutants and particulates.

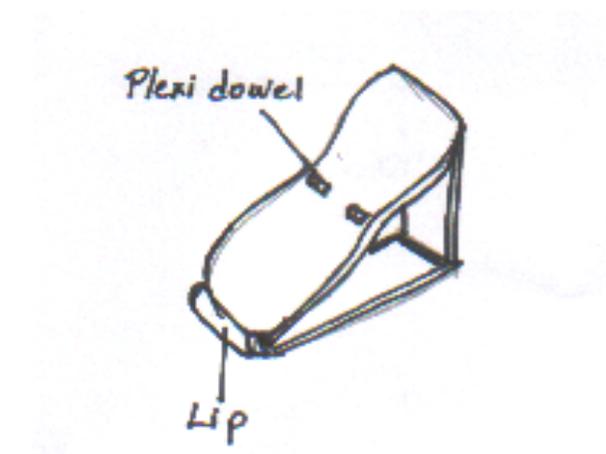
(A) Display

Display behind glass is a useful method of protection from handling, as well as airborne particles. However, dolls should not be placed in a tightly-sealed case, as this may lead to an increased temperature if in direct light. Ultraviolet filters should be applied to any windows, case glass, and fluorescent lights to reduce UV radiation levels.

When displayed, a doll should be supported entirely, as some may be “top-heavy” and topple over. Doll stands, where circular arms encircle the doll’s waist and/or legs, may not be suitable for all dolls, particularly larger or more fragile examples. In such cases, a stand may be constructed of Plexiglas to support the doll on a slight incline, with Plexi dowels attached in strategic areas to keep the doll in place. Wood may be substituted, and covered with Marvelseal. Padding would also be necessary.

Design by Sara Kuziak/Suzanne Moase, Collections Conservation and Management (CCM3), Sir Sandford Fleming College.

It is also possible that the doll stand may damage a doll, if forced to fit around the torso. The arms should be widened and padded to prevent this from happening. If a doll is to be displayed in a diorama with other objects, it may be safer to lay it out on another stable piece (or reproduction), with protective material in between the two.



(B) Storage

Safe storage of dolls involves the use of acid-free tissue, as well as archival-quality boxes. Storing them in a standing position may avoid crushing the costume, but, if not practical, the costume can be padded out with acid-free tissue. Some sources suggest removing the clothes from the doll and storing them separately. This is frequently done with vinyl dolls, as corroded metal fasteners may stain the body. However, removing the clothes

increases the risk of loss, and is particularly hazardous if the costume or doll is in poor condition. If there is a possibility of damage from within the costume, block areas of contact with acid-free tissue or inert plastic (e.g. Mylar). Other dolls require special storage arrangement due to mechanical design. "Sleeping" dolls, whose eyes close when laid flat, are often found to have the counterweights wedged against the face when left on their backs for an extended period of time. Storing these dolls face-down in a cradle, with a strap supporting the forehead, will keep the eyes open and prevent eventual damage to the face.

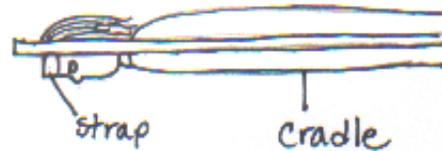
Design by Paul Storch, Minnesota Historical Society.

Dolls should be stored in an area of low, stable temperature and humidity; avoid basements and attics, where conditions are more extreme. If dolls must be stored together, group them by type of material, if possible, and store in one layer per box. The ideal storage conditions include darkness, limited oxygen, cool temperature, and insect prevention.

Conservation vs. Restoration?

Conservation treatment of dolls is a very subjective area. Many sources of information advise the use of common household chemicals and cleaners that may do more harm than good. A doll may be kept clean by dusting the surface with a soft brush, and possibly using a small vacuum and brush for the costume, if in stable condition. If the surface is unstable, or flaking, consult a professional before cleaning. Research the doll and consult a conservator before using any chemical cleaner, however "mild", on the doll, hair, or costume.

Restoration of dolls is commonly practiced, but be wary, and research the options. Try to avoid removing original components. If this cannot be avoided, record the changes and use material as close as possible to the original. As with any artifact, choose a restorer carefully, and request samples of other work. Be specific about the treatment, and keep in contact with the restorer to ensure the end result is satisfactory. Request a treatment proposal and full documentation



including photographs. Remember that a certain degree of wear is to be expected and is even attractive--not all dolls can be restored to mint condition.

Alison G. Freake
Conservation Intern,
Newfoundland Museum
April 2001

References:

Not all material found online is conservation-based, but the following pages had some useful historical information and handling guidelines.

E-Bay

[www.pages.e-bay.netscape.com
/community/library/catindex-dolls-history](http://www.pages.e-bay.netscape.com/community/library/catindex-dolls-history)
"A Brief History of Dolls"
"Displaying Your Collection"
"Caring For Your Collection"
Accessed 02/02/01, 3:04 PM.



Lewis, Susanna

www.sashadoll.com. Accessed 02/02/01,
2:48 PM.

Minnesota Historical Society

www.mnhs.org/preserve/Dolls/dolls
Accessed 02/02/01, 3:37 PM.

Other Resources:

Kuziak, Sara, and Suzanne Moase.

"Storage and Display of Doll Collections",
unpublished project report, Sir Sandford
Fleming College, Peterborough, ON, Fall
2000.



