HOW TO PROTECT YOUR FURNITURE

Many owners of old furniture may only start to think about its condition when something they own is damaged. However, routine maintenance can prevent damage from occurring, enhance the furniture’s monetary value, and prolong its useful life. In order to take proper care of furniture, it is important to understand that it is composed of a variety of materials, including metal, bone, plastic, shell, leather, and fabric, as well as paints and natural and synthetic resins. All these materials must be taken into account to care for and maintain furniture properly.

STORAGE AND DISPLAY

The environment can have a profound effect on the preservation of furniture. Light, particularly visible and ultraviolet (UV) light, is very damaging to organic materials such as wood, and damage from light is cumulative and irreversible. Clear finishes often turn yellow or opaque in response to light, and the color or cellular structure of the wood itself can also change. The resulting damaged finishes and bleached wood cannot be restored to their original color without stripping and refinishing, a practice not recommended as loss of the “patina,” or evidence of use, can negatively affect the furniture’s monetary value.

To limit the effects of light, move all furniture out of direct sunlight, and utilize blinds or curtains to block the light’s intensity. UV light, which is particularly damaging to wood and fabrics, can be screened out by applying a UV-filtering film to windows.

Furniture can also be affected by the amount of moisture in the air. Wood and other organic materials respond to changes in relative humidity (RH) by expanding or contracting as they try to maintain equilibrium with the moisture in the environment. Ideally, RH levels should be maintained within a 40 and 60 percent range. If the RH is too high (above 70 percent), wood and other materials expand. If they are constrained in any way, they may split upon shrinking when the RH drops to a lower level. Changes in RH can even cause a coating to detach. A prolonged high humidity environment will also promote the possibility of mold growth and insect infestation. To prevent damage, place furniture in areas of minimum temperature and RH extremes. Avoid storing furniture in attics and basements or placing pieces near fireplaces and heating vents.

Monitoring temperature and RH in an environment can be done with thermometers and hygrometers purchased at electronic or hardware stores and the RH can be modified to stay within acceptable ranges through the use of humidifiers and dehumidifiers.

INSECT ACTIVITY

A common furniture pest is the powderpost beetle, less than a quarter-inch long, which lays its eggs in small crevices. The insect larvae burrow into the wood, creating networks of tunnels as they eat their way along the grain. As they mature to adults, they bore out of the wood leaving an “exit” or “flight” hole and fly off to lay their eggs, completing the cycle.

If flight holes are observed in furniture, it is important to determine if the infestation is active. Active flight holes are light-colored and contain a fine, sawdust-like material called frass. Any material resembling sawdust that appears on the floor underneath a piece of furniture could be a sign of a possible infestation. Frass from an infestation that is no longer active can be dislodged if furniture is moved or jostled, giving an impression of insect activity, but should frass continue to appear after being swept away, it is likely that the infestation is active. If furniture or other wooden objects appear to have active infestation, they should be isolated immediately by placing them in a large sealed plastic bag. As fumigation may be the next step—and there are a variety of methods available to accomplish this end—a conservator, or exterminator familiar with conservation issues, should be called immediately.

CLEANING AND HANDLING

It was once thought that furniture needed to be “fed” with various mixtures of oils and other materials to keep it from drying out. However, a better approach would be to keep furniture in a stable environment. Furniture oils are not recommended for maintenance as many of them contain linseed oil or other drying oils, and when used repeatedly will create a gummy, insoluble surface coating that darkens and obscures the grain of the wood. Other furniture polishes contain non-drying oils such as lemon oil, but attract and entrap dirt and grime. Silicone polishes are also not recommended as they leave a film that is difficult to remove and can interfere with future finish treatments.
The recommendations in this document are intended for guidance only. The AIC does not assume responsibility or liability.

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