

Cleaning Display Cases

Dusting or Polishing our Challenges?



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Abstract This article introduces the reader to the considerations that had to be taken when cleaning and refreshing two of its large display cases at the Jewish Museum of Greece. Those display cases contain a mixed collection of variable items namely costumes, photographs, prints and watercolours. The staff of the museum planned in advance, ensuring the safety of the objects and staff. Eventually it is natural for unpredicted problems to occur in the real time process. The Museum acknowledged the convenience of the visitor pathway and, moreover, granted visual access to the treatment actions by encouraging communication with the working staff, enriching the visitor experience. Finally the process was beneficial for evaluating the staff's teamwork and the production of a record, and a methodology to be followed for other display cases of the museum and potentially by other institutions.

Cleaning a display case might sound easy, simple and fast. This is not the case though when this display case is large, contains sensitive objects of historic value and is part of an upcoming museum exhibition. The Jewish Museum of Greece (JMG) experience proves the opposite. Planning and preparation should be made in advance as any mistake can be disastrous causing not only inconvenience to the upcoming event, but the loss of irreplaceable cultural heritage. Curators and conservators should plan carefully following preventive conservation guidelines and international standards while at the same time acknowledging that each situation is unique.

This article introduces the reader to the considerations that had to be taken at the Jewish Museum of Greece and its preventive conservation policies when cleaning and refreshing two of its large display cases. Those display cases, the "Costumes" and the "Circle of Life", contain a variety of objects namely costumes, photographs, prints and watercolours. The staff of the museum planned in advance the cleaning process, giving attention to the arrangement of working space, treatment of items and display case component materials, handling and security. Health and safety regulations of both staff and visitors was an important factor for using equipment and

coming in close contact with objects untouched for ten years. Even after good planning, it is natural for unpredicted problems to occur in the real time process. The Museum acknowledged the convenience of the visitor pathway and at the same time granted time giving them partial visual access to the treatment actions. The working staff encouraged communication thereby enriching the visitor experience.

Finally, the outcome of this process was beneficial for evaluating the staff's teamwork and the production of a record of the process: creating a methodology that could be followed for other display cases at the museum and potentially by other institutions.

The Museum

The idea of building a Jewish Museum of Greece was first conceived in the 1970s by members of the Jewish Community of Athens, who offered every kind of assistance towards the realisation of this dream. The Museum was first established in 1977 and housed in a small room next to the city's synagogue. It changed location once more before coming to its current location. On March 10, 1998, the new building of the JMG was inaugurated and a new era began for the Museum (JMG website).

The new building is of architectural and aesthetic interest and with an area of 800 square metres. It houses a collection of more than 8,000 objects. The collection is still expanding as the Museum has been receiving an average of 250-300 new artefacts every year, since the year 2000 (JMG website). Even though the collections include all kinds of objects, in Bill Gross' opinion, the most important portion, both in number and artistic value, is the textiles collection (personal communication). The document and photographic archive of the museum are also particularly rich.

The JMG is situated in the historical centre of Athens, in Plaka, near the Syntagma square. Athens is a relatively polluted capital. The city is situated in a plateau surrounded by four main mountains. For that reason, on the geographic scale, streams of fresh air are reduced and reach the plateau at a slower ventilation rate. The JMG is not unaffected even though some measures to prevent indoor pollution have been taken. There is no direct sunlight² to the exhibition rooms and generally moisture appears to be relatively low, depending on the exhibition room level.

Preventive Conservation Policy

Ever since the collections were housed in the new museum, there was a plan for the creation of an interventive conservation laboratory. This plan has not yet been carried out due to funding limitations. Despite this, a joint decision of the museum board, the director and the conservator was made to focus on preventive conservation and high standard storage. The 'future lab' space given is used for accession of new objects and management of preventive conservation of the collections (Kapotsi

2005, 33). Ten years of practice have proven that this system works extremely well. Its financial cost is quite low, whereas repeated inspections have shown the collection to be adequately protected and in unchanged condition (JMG website).

A special study resulted in specific policies for the protection of the collection in the Museum's storage facilities, as well as determining access and handling protocols. The stored collection was placed in three separate rooms³ according to the material of the items. This ensured that each item was stored in suitable conditions relative to their optimal environmental requirements (Kapotsi 2007, 7).

The Two Display Cases

All large display cases at the JMG consist of a cove on the wall lined with plaster board enclosed with glass. Light comes from florescent lamps covered with UV filters. There is no direct light on any of the objects as metal reflectors distribute it equally throughout the case. The displays are lighted during the visiting hours and the rest of the day remain dark whilst sunlight is absent from the exhibition spaces. Objects therein are mounted on wooden and Plexiglass® mounts, mannequins or are fixed on two-dimensional mounts attached to the wall.

The aim of the project was to clean the contents of two of the major display cases of the museum: 'The Costumes' and 'The Circle of Life'. Both of the display cases are particularly large and contain mixed, and sensitive to physical damage, types of collections. Another area of difficulty was that the laboratory is relatively far away. A decision to move all objects there and back would expose the collection to unnecessary hazards associated with transport, even with the use of experienced staff. Therefore, all work had to be done as close to the display case as possible, within the space available. The third difficulty was the fixed deadline of two weeks for the whole project. Deadlines are common in museums, usually related to financial parameters and the opening of a new exhibition, which was the case for this project. The objective was to work effectively as a team, of conservators and non-conservators, and to make the best use of space and time.

Other important aims and objectives are:

- After cleaning, objects need to be rotated
- Mannequins had to be replaced (see planning section below)
- Observations that will evaluate, when to update, the display environment of the showcase
- To test the strengths and weaknesses of the museum's team work
- The production of a methodology that will be available when cleaning other display cases in the museum and which would be available to the public at the JMG library



Figure 1. The "Costumes" display case before treatment. *Photo by Aristotelis Georgios Sakellariou.*

The Costumes

The Costumes display case consists of costumes and accessories of the Greco-Judaic (Romaniote and Sephardic) life of the past two centuries (Figure 1) with a mixed collection of outfits, jewellery and shoes, amulets and accessories. The display is complimented by photographs, prints and watercolours. The highlights of this display are the festive and wedding outfits of the Sephardic women of Thessalonica and the Romaniote costumes of Ioannina. According to the floor plan (Figure 3), the display case can be accessed from two side doors, through two storage spaces.⁴ The access spaces are rather narrow; therefore difficulty occurs when objects from the middle need to be approached without moving objects on the sides.

The Circle of Life

The Circle of Life display case (Figure 2) consists of items of religious-social significance. They are presented by means of both household objects that were used daily and those used only on festive occasions or for rituals. They include a mixed collection of outfits, amulets and jewellery, manuscripts, prints and food (dry bread and sugar-based sweets). Additionally, on the right side of the display, there is a wall panel painted colourfully in the style of the traditional living rooms of Northern Greece. According to the floor plan (Figure 3), the display case can be accessed



Figure 2. The “Circle of Life” display case before treatment. *Photo by Aristotelis Georgios Sakellariou.*

from one side, through a storage room. Even though the display is much wider than the previous one, the access door is narrower. In order to get through, one needs to climb up four steps, and respectively climb down them, from the storage room. This route proved rather uncomfortable and hazardous when handling large objects such as the mannequins or textile panels. Thankfully, due to the staff’s good care, there was no damage during the process.

Planning

Planning involves thinking about the steps required to create a desired outcome on some scale. Before taking any action with The Costumes and The Circle of Life display cases, planning had to be done in order to answer two main types of questions: “why” and “how”.

“Why” Planning

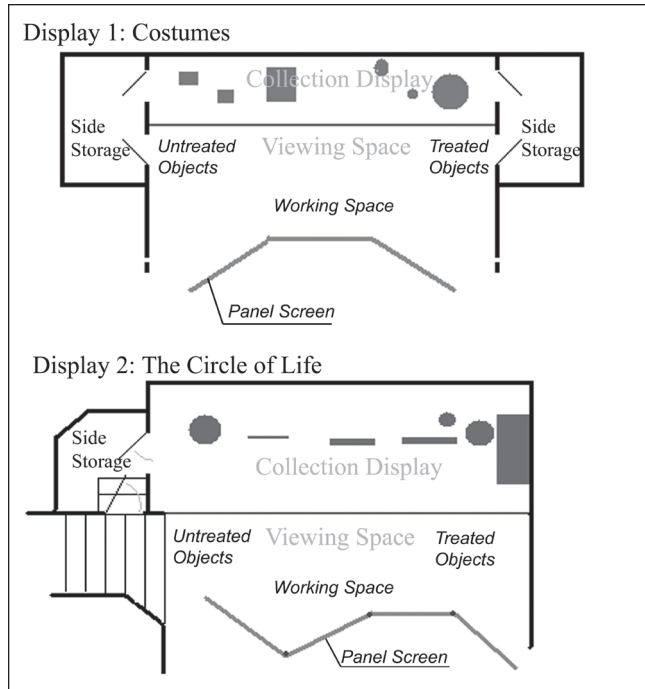
Considerations had to be taken when cleaning and refreshing the two display cases at the Jewish Museum of Greece. Reasons as to “why” the cases should be cleaned and refreshed, took the following into consideration: cleaning, rotation, and interpretation.

1. *Cleaning.* Upon observation through glass cases, the displays seem to be in very good condition after ten years. However, museum policy requires a closer examination to observe behind the protective glass and verify the state of items within the cases.
2. *Rotation* Some of the objects on display were in very poor condition and need to be restored. Some objects needed to be rotated and exchanged with new ones, to give them 'rest' to the more stable environment of the storage one. Moreover, rotating gives a motivation for visitors to come again and see new objects on display, a point that is verified by Neal Putt's statement that care of collections is not just an aim in itself, but needs to be achieved in a way that enables public access to the collection (Putt and Slade 2004, 1).
3. *Interpretation* Initially black lining was chosen to cover the costume manikins and to better show the costume. Eventually this lining had to be changed due to misinterpretation by the visitors. This realization came about when the staff noticed a worrying number of visitors were interested to know whether or not Greek Jews had actually African physical appearance. In order to correct this, the new manikins have been created with a flesh tone that is lighter than the previous mannequin and closer to that of the people who were originally wearing the costumes.

"How" Planning

Four steps laid the groundwork for this project being conducted at the Jewish Museum of Greece. These steps involved recruiting a team, conducting a bibliographic search, arranging a work space, and establishing an inventory. The first step was to recruit a team. When responsibilities are clear, a group can work more successfully. Vincent Wilcox mentions that 'Museums tend to suffer from the lack of a common understanding of what staff does and how they go about specifically accomplishing their duties' (Wilcox 1994, 148). In the JMG the opposite is certainly the case, due to past experience of teamwork as well as the excellent oversight and understanding of the director. The director herself undertook the step of recruiting a team. The team consisted of: the Museum conservator, a preventive conservation post graduate student, a Jewish art expert, the director and other staff members, such as the educational officer and the receptionist, would contribute when they had time. In addition, valuable support to the team was provided by the cleaning and the security staff. In the case of preventive conservation, teamwork brings together all staff whose works impacts on the collection and its care. In bringing those people together teamwork allows planning to be done by the people who will do the work (Putt and Slade 2004, 1). Their participation prepares them to anticipate challenges or problems that might occur during the cleaning process. The second step was to

Figure 3. Ground plan of the two display cases. The space was arranged sufficiently, in a similar way to both display cases. The panel screens were erected in a way that enabled staff to carry on working while the visitors continue their tour. *Image by Aristotelis Georgios Sakellariou.*



conduct a bibliography research. This was done by the conservators who updated any information on the subject. They considered the following subjects: general housekeeping for museums, mounting objects and costumes but most important, the possibility of reviewed environmental standards. For this, the museum's internet access and the conservation recourses in its library were used. Additional information was obtained from the Northumbria University Library, Newcastle. The third and very important step was to arrange a working space, where the visitors could continue their tour uninterrupted whilst the staff worked without any physical interference. Mark O'Neill mentions that "Good extroverted museums are people-centred . . . They draw their strength and confidence from sharing their enthusiasms with, and making their collections accessible to, visitors with little or no specialist knowledge." (O'Neill 2001, 22). Therefore the staff was not resistant, but rather encouraged by the possibility of allowing visitors controlled access to the cleaning process. Erecting panel screens (screen) was thought to be the most suitable method, while on the same time visitors could still have some visual access through the staircases: revealing a working space as well as areas for untreated and treated objects⁵ (Figure 3). The final step was to establish an inventory, listing all the tools to be used, thereby decreasing the time needed to move between the display case and the laboratory basement. This would obviously prove to be very time effective (see Appendix 1).

Special attention had to be given to security of the objects that were taken out of the display cases. The hazard of objects being stolen had to be considered, as the panels were only a small protection measure of physical access of the visitors. Three security measures were implemented to protect against this: The first is that the objects were to be constantly observed by the working staff and as a related measure, the working space never to be left unattended. The second involved the use of CCTV at that JMG and observation of the working spaces by a security guard at all times. The third was controlled access through in and out of the Museum by a side door.⁶

The Process

Every effort was made to ensure that disruption to the visitors was kept into a minimum (Kapotsi 2007, 9). Visitors were given the opportunity to observe what was going on above the staircases and could occasionally ask questions. Working staff devoted a few minutes to explain the project or process to interested viewers. The director, for example, acknowledged visitors and explored how the JMG practically cares for its collections and takes action for their maintenance and preservation.

Each display case contains about thirty items. A map of photographs and drawings were made by the museum photographer or the conservators in order to enable easy repositioning afterwards. This process proved particularly helpful especially for the finishing details, such as the fixing of a ribbon or the exact position of a sleeve. All stages of the process were recorded by notes and photographs and group evaluation was completed at the end of each day. In addition, health and safety of the staff were a priority and therefore everyone wore lab coats, latex gloves (when needed), occasionally dusting masks and they were extra careful when using ladders or electric equipment.⁷ The space was clean and tidy at all times in order to enable fast and safe work to be done. After all objects were removed and the display case was dusted the space was kept in soil-free quarantine, with special 'wrappers' fitted around the staff's shoes when they entered the case.

The following paragraphs outline the treatment of two-dimensional and three-dimensional objects in the Costumes and the Circle of Life display cases.

Costumes and Textiles

The costumes were removed from the mannequins and were carefully placed either flat, or folded, dependant upon their size, using acid free cylinders in order to avoid any additional creases (Figure 4). Ultimately, it was decided that the most effective and economic method was to line the existing mannequins with new fabric instead of replacing them. The fabric that was used was cotton, plain weave, in order to



Figure 4. Head bands of the Sephardic female costumes from Thessalonica. Long textiles were wrapped in acid free cylinders after they were cleaned, for safer transportation.

Photo by Aristotelis Georgios Sakellariou.

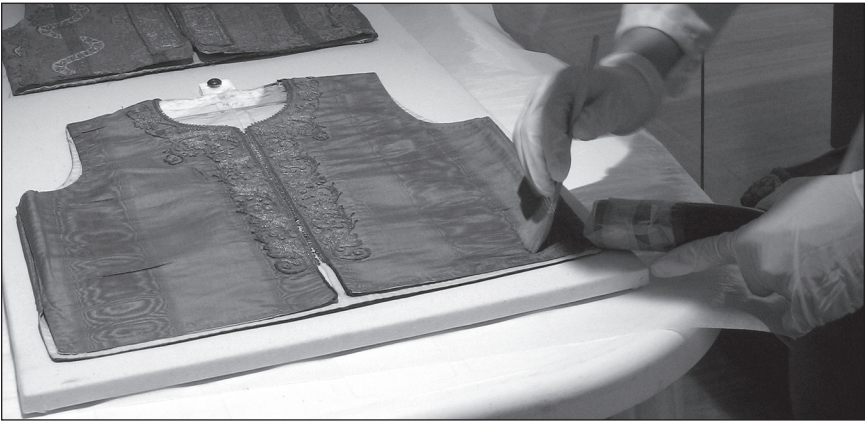


Figure 5. The dusting process of a child vest. *Photo by Aristotelis Georgios Sakellariou.*

match the physical and chemical properties of the original costumes, which are predominantly constructed of cotton components.

Dusting was done using fine brushes and a vacuum with mesh covering its hose (Figure 5). Three-dimensional fabrics were dusted whilst on a padded stand, while two-dimensional ones, vertically on a bench that was lined with acid free paper. The paper was renewed several times in order not to hold dust from soiled textiles and spread it to the clean ones. In the *Manual of Housekeeping*, Caroline Rendell mentions that it is essential to avoid soiling the gloves when handling textiles (Rendell 2006, 413). For this reason, gloves were changed frequently. The costumes

and textiles are placed in the 'treated object' area and were finally repositioned on the mannequins or prepared for conservation treatment.

Manuscripts, Prints, Watercolours, Photographs, and Books

Two-dimensional objects, such as manuscripts, prints, watercolours and photographs, were mounted in Melinex or framed in traditional frames. The Melinex was renewed whilst the frames were dusted using a cotton fabric or extra fine Japanese brushes. Advice was taken from this treatment method by the staff of the paper conservation laboratory at the National Historic Museum of Athens. The treatment of the books was similar to the other paper objects, but additional attention was given to the dusting of the mounts, made of Plexiglas®, which attract dust.

Amulets, Jewellery, and Other Small Metal Items

Many of the items in these cases were made of gold and silver or gold and silver-plated, therefore their condition was physically similar to that at the time of manufacture. As Rupert Harris mentions in the *Manual of Housekeeping* of the National Trust, the polishing of metal leads to rigid cleaning regimes. Such cleaning is cumulatively destructive and no longer appropriate (Harris 2006, 317). Therefore all objects were gently dusted with a cotton fabric.

Observations

The two display cases were in a remarkably good state, being undisturbed for about ten years. This is a fine example of the effectiveness of preventive conservation. Even though a few objects seemed damaged or partially perished, this was a result of the pre-acquisition period of the new museum not particularly a result of poor display conditions (Zanet Battinou and Mary Kapotsi, personal communication).

In comparing the two display cases of the Jewish Museum of Greece that were the focus of this study, the 'Costumes' one had slightly more noticeable dust particles than the 'Circle of Life'. This might have been caused by the two access routes to the Costumes case. Even with closed door there might be faint movement of air underneath. An interesting observation, is that when the Melinex mounted manuscripts within the 'Circle of Life' display case (Aleph manuscript collections) were removed for cleaning, a noticeable film of particles (dust, soot, etc.) had accumulated on the wall behind them. This can be explained according to the ability of the synthetic material to attract micro-particles by static electric forces. These accumulated particles were visible on the wall due to its white colour.



Figure 6. After the display case is cleaned efficiently, the objects are put back to their location, according to the photographs that were taken before the process. *Photo by Aristotelis Georgios Sakellariou.*

When removing the objects from the display space, the varnished wooden floor often revealed slight colour difference. It is not clear whether this is caused by some evaporation process of the varnish, or if the varnish is extremely light sensitive. In any case, it should be noted that the lights have UV filters. Further study on the efficiency of the UV filter and sensitivity of the floor varnish has to be done to determine the following: is the display light causing the objects any physical/chemical alternations or is the floor varnish too light sensitive? In this case, the objects in the display case appear unaffected.

Fortunately, due to the construction of the display cases, there was no sign of any pest activity. The temperature and relative humidity, which are monitored by a digital hygrometer, are quite stable (20–22C° and 45–50% RH). According to Jonathan Ashlay-Smith, it is better not to worry if environmental fluctuations occur less than 5% at any one time (Ashley-Smith 1994, 29).

Since the staff were either permanent members of staff or volunteers and the most of the materials were available at the laboratory's supplies, the cost of the operation was very low. The most significant expense was the fee of the Jewish art expert.

Finally, the most important observation of the entire process is that the staff cooperated remarkably well and the successful result yielded within the planned timeline (Figure 6). The key to this success was that all staff involved viewed this project as a personal commission.



Figure 7. The manikin, bearing one of the costumes of the Chief Rabbi Elias Barzilai, before and after the relining. *Photo by Aristotelis Georgios Sakellariou.*

Outcomes

This project produced a methodology to be followed for other display cases of the museum and potentially by other institutions with similar situations. The process helped to evaluate the policy on preventive conservation and staff efficiency of teamwork at the JMG and based upon this experience, both measures were effective. Changing the mannequins and rotating certain objects refreshed the display of the museum, enabling the visitors to have a new, perhaps better, interpretation of the collection (Figure 7) and motivates them to plan a new visit.

The original report of the cleaning of the display cases can be found at the Jewish Museum of Greece Library upon request.

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Notes

1. Bill Gross is collector of Judaica who was asked to evaluate the JMG collections.
2. There is a skylight at the top ceiling where the library and the offices are located, which allows light to the whole building through the stairwell.
3. There are three storage rooms classed as follows: inorganic material room, textiles and costumes room, and an organic materials room that include books and paper and two-dimensional items.
4. All large display cases of the JMG have side storage, designed to keep relevant accessories for each exhibition space, such as mounts or prints.

5. The entire exhibition extends circularly around a stairwell. When one stands next to the balustrade, he/she can observe the previous exhibition levels.
6. During the visiting days, visitors can enter through the side door as it is closer to the museum reception desk. The main door of the Museum opens only in special events, such as the opening of a new exhibition.
7. Accidents to people are also just as likely to involve damage to the objects (Daniels 2006, 651).

Appendix 1

Materials & Tools Used	Quantity
Acid free tissue sheets	1 pack (150 sheets). Not all were used.
Latex gloves	2 packs (1 medium, 1 small, 100 each). Not all were used.
Fine brushes for dusting	4 of different sizes.
Fine cotton cloth	1m ² approx.
Synthetic mesh for the vacuum	1 sheet (30 x 50 cm).
Panel Screens	7 (each 70 x 200 cm). Made of metal mesh.
Hard brown paper for the screens	1 roll (~1 x 20 m). Not all was used.
Shoe wrappers	1 pack (100). Not all were used.

Machinery used

Museum vacuum cleaners with controllable suction