



What's Eating Your Collection?

Further advice: Physical damage

What is physical damage?

Physical damage is generally taken to mean damage caused by physical means, i.e. as a result of interaction between two objects or an object and a human, possibly also as a result of damage caused by environmental factors.

Note that “object” in this context refers to any item that forms part of the collection, whether 2D or 3D.

What should I be looking for?

Textiles

Ragged edges; these generally denote tears.

Straight edges; insects generally make holes or graze in small areas. A clean, straight edge will have been made by some physical means.

Fibres pulled away: this indicates an area being caught OR gnawed by a rodent.

Stains associated with damage: often a brownish-orange, this usually shows rust staining that has caused the object to deteriorate.

Colour change: this usually denotes light damage. There may be associated ragged tears. Silk is particularly prone to light damage.

Wood

Failed joints; often the evidence of old glue or adhesive will be visible. The two edges should fit together neatly. This also applies to the failure of a joint between the main substrate and veneer or other applied decoration.

Breaks; these are usually signified by two pieces that have very jagged edges.

Impact damage; this type of damage usually has a centre where the damage will be most severe surrounded by less deep/severe damage.

Gouges; these will be a round point or a line. They will be pressed in from the surface and will not usually reveal the substrate.

Some old insect damaged wood may be very weak and pieces may easily be knocked off, revealing tunnels and frass.

Books and Paper

Tears; this type of damage often has two edges that will fit together. If a piece has been torn out there will often be a chamfering to the edge of the damage, showing that slightly more paper has been lost on one side of the paper than on the other.

Loss; this may be characterised by the loss of a large area of paper with associated damage as noted above. There may be several pages missing, indicated by a gap in the spine. Some or all of the binding may be missing and this may have associated loose threads and damage to the

remaining binding.

Holes; prints and other paper items may have been displayed by pinning through the paper. The resulting holes have their centres on the reverse.

Natural History including basketwork

Breaks; this type of damage often has two edges that will fit together. For many objects, the break edge will be sharp or jagged. Insect damage is more ragged.

Loss; this is often characterised by a whole part being missing, e.g. a whole feather or flower head.

Splits; taxidermy can be prone to splitting along the stitched joints in the skin. Both sides of the split will be sharp with perhaps tears around the stitch holes. There should be corresponding holes on the other sides of the skin.

What other evidence do I need?

Check the object record. This may have information about the object being dropped, handled badly etc. Talk to your colleagues. They may remember the incident that led to the damage.

Think about the composition of the object. If it is made from stone, metal, ceramic, glass or most plastics, the damage will not have been caused by insects.

Think about where the object has been displayed or stored. If it has been placed on the floor on a route through a store or in an open display where there has been little supervision (for example) it is likely that the damage has been caused by physical means.

What should I do?

Record the damage on the object's record. Take photographs if possible. Depending on the severity of the damage, it may be necessary to have the object conserved. Consult the Conservation Register -www.conservationregister.com- if you need to find a conservator.