

HOW CAN YOU SALVAGE PRECIOUS BELONGINGS?

After a flood

Personal safety is always the highest priority when entering buildings damaged by flood. Never attempt to salvage belongings at the expense of your own safety.

- Risks in flood-damaged areas can include mould, bacteria and viruses. These can contaminate seemingly clean material. Other contaminants may include exposed asbestos, lead-containing building materials and chemical residues.
- Wear protective clothing: gloves, face masks, eye protection, sturdy footwear, a long sleeve shirt and pants.
- Where mould is present it is essential to wear a face mask to avoid inhaling microscopic spores.

Checklist: What you will need

For retrieving items:

- Protective clothing as listed above
- Support materials for fragile items
- Boxes and plastic containers
- Paper towel
- Plastic bags

For cleaning contaminated storage furniture (not collected items):

- Paper towel
- Alcohol wipes
- Rubbish bags

General handling advice

When retrieving your items:

- Take photographs of damaged items and contact your insurance agency as soon as possible.
- It is important to limit the amount you handle damaged items. Wet items become very heavy, weak, soft and are easily damaged. Wood, paper and other organic materials may swell & be difficult to remove from storage enclosures.
- If your items were exposed to both heat and water they will be even more fragile.
- Separate wet, dry, dirty and clean items from each other to prevent contamination.
- Lift your objects carefully and avoid weakened areas. Always provide a sturdy support for lifting and carrying, such as a sheet of card.
- Avoid placing pressure on warped, sticky or lifting surfaces, particularly on paintings and photographs.
- Place items in supportive boxes or plastic containers until you can obtain further advice or are ready to begin cleaning. Do not enclose damp items as this may encourage mould growth.
- It is important to keep in mind that the faster the retrieval the greater the chance of successful recovery.

**Go to www.aiccm.org.au
for more detailed salvage information**

Tips for salvaging wet photographic material

- Act as soon as possible to prevent mould damage.
- Wet prints are fragile and can tear — provide support on non-image side and avoid touching the image layer.
- If prints are still wet, remove dirt and dirty water gently with clean cold water. Take care as the image layer may be fragile.
- Separate prints from each other and lay out on clean paper towel, **image side up**. Prints will buckle slightly as they dry.
- Prints and negatives may also be pegged to drying lines.
- Do not allow prints and negatives to dry in a stack as they may become permanently stuck together.
- If quantity does not allow for immediate air drying, **freeze**. Clean as above, if possible, and place into bags. There is no need to separate items before freezing. Both home and commercial freezers can be used.
- Daguerreotypes, ambrotypes and similar formats **should not be frozen or immersed**. Air dry on absorbent paper, emulsion-side up. Provide gentle air flow. Call a conservator for further advice.
- Call a conservator for advice once items are frozen or if prints have stuck together.
- For more detailed information go to www.imagepermanenceinstitute.org/shtml_sub/waterdamage.pdf

Some important considerations

- Mould is a serious health hazard and damaging to collections. Prevent growth by air drying or freezing items as soon as possible. Provide good ventilation & reduce the amount of moisture in the air with fans, open windows and dehumidifiers.
- Freezing is not advised for metal, stone, glass, ceramic, plastics, magnetic media or painted surfaces. These must be air dried.
- Pages of albums and books may be stuck together — do not try to force them open. It's preferable to freeze these to prevent further damage and get conservation advice when time is available.
- Metal objects need to be rinsed, drained and thoroughly dried (especially any internal areas) to prevent corrosion.
- Wood, paintings & complex items are more likely to warp on drying. Try not to dry them too quickly. Don't use heat to speed drying.
- Fabrics may look intact but may fall apart without very careful handling. Support and shape heavy areas with crumpled paper towel.

You have now done a great deal to stabilise your items. It is likely that they will need further attention from a qualified conservator.

Please keep in mind that while things might look irretrievably damaged, there may well be treatments that will salvage these items.

Do not despair, but please seek conservation advice! A list of conservators in private practice can be found at www.aiccm.org.au.

You can also find links to more detailed salvage information on this website.



Images: Flood damaged glass plate negatives and books;
Glass plate negatives after separation, rinsing and drying.
Image credits: Lydia Egunnike.

Conservators work to preserve our cultural heritage. We work in museums, art galleries, libraries, archives and in private practice.

The AICCM is the professional organisation for conservators in Australia.

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The Australian Institute for the
Conservation of Cultural Materials

GPO Box 1638
Canberra ACT 2601

t: (03) 9013 0933
f: (03) 9311 3450
www.aiccm.org.au
secretariat@aiccm.org.au



The Australian
Institute for the
Conservation of
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www.aiccm.org.au

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