

The use of white cotton gloves for handling collection items

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General practice at the British Library

The British Library takes appropriate use and handling of collection items seriously and we provide guidance to staff, visitors and readers on how they should handle different types of material.

In general we do not use or provide white gloves for use with collection items. Clean dry hands, free from creams and lotions, are preferable in the majority of circumstances. Wearing cotton gloves when handling books, manuscripts or fragile paper items reduces manual dexterity and the sense of touch, increasing the tendency to 'grab' at items. The cotton fibres may lift or dislodge pigments and inks from the surface of pages and the textile can snag on page edges making them difficult to turn. All these factors increase the risk of damage to collection items.



Above: Letters of different sizes can be difficult to handle when wearing gloves

We have reinforced the importance of having clean dry hands to readers by developing an icon which is displayed in reading rooms and in leaflets. A series of [short videos](#) on the British Library website also demonstrates how various types and format of collection items are used. Included in this series is a video called 'Using Gloves with Collection Items'.

When should gloves be worn?

Staff will advise readers if they need to wear gloves when handling a particular collection item.



Above: The surface of a globe being examined while wearing white gloves

Gloves are used when handling certain materials, for example, lead seals or when touching the surface of a globe. In some institutions it is common practice to use gloves when viewing photographs to protect the surface of the image, but in the British Library these items are generally issued in protective sleeves or mounts making this unnecessary.

Research

Research into the use of white gloves by Dr. Cathleen A. Baker and Randy Silverman is published in the article ['Misperceptions about white gloves'](#) in the December 2005 issue of *International Preservation News*. They discuss that *'contrary to popular opinion, gloves provide no guarantee of protection from perspiration and dirt. Further, they increase the likelihood of physical damage occurring to paper-based collection material'*

by blunting the sense of touchimplementing an institutionally monitored, hand-cleaning policy is a reasonable and effective alternative to protecting artefacts from damage while promoting the essential humanistic experience of touch'. The article also looks at the history of wearing white gloves; a relatively recent phenomenon.

Items on television

When collection items are seen on television, for the same reasons given above, gloves are not usually worn. Any handling during filming is, however, always closely supervised. In normal circumstances access to extremely rare and valuable items is highly restricted. With some rare and valuable items, filming may be one of the few occasions when we permit access, to allow a wider audience to see and appreciate a restricted item.

Direct web links

'Misperceptions about White Gloves': www.ifla.org/Vl/4/news/ipnn37.pdf

Collection Care Handling Videos:

<http://www.bl.uk/aboutus/stratpolprog/ccare/collectioncarevideos/index.html>