

## A Note on Performance Standards and Conservation Specifications for Exhibit Cases

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A conservation-grade exhibit case is a well-designed and carefully fabricated display enclosure. It is possibly the most important and cost-effective tool for preserving vulnerable collections on exhibition.

Park museums put their most significant objects onto display and, by doing so, place these collections at much greater risk than if they had remained under the controlled conditions of protective storage cabinetry. Although display in cases and vitrines is the norm for most museum exhibits, the pitfalls and benefits of conventional display enclosures are only now being calculated by conservation and exhibit specialists.

The display case, unfortunately, has been taken for granted as an effective means of mitigating damage while objects remain on exhibit. The truth is that, until recently, exhibit specialists have had little information on the impact of common exhibit cabinetry on vulnerable collections or the degree to which they actually provide protection. As we learn more about the traditional exhibit cabinet from scientists, we have serious reason to be concerned. Research indicates that the exhibit case has an alarming potential for adding to the deterioration of its contents.

The good news is that an enclosure that is properly engineered has an equally surprising potential for protecting and preserving vulnerable collections. When objects on display are

housed in well-designed and carefully fabricated cases, they can be effectively preserved at levels remarkably close to those provided in storage.

The technology is now available for National Park Service (NPS) staff to insist that their display enclosures balance the need to present and interpret cultural resources aesthetically with the conservation characteristics necessary to protect them from needless loss. Conservation features can be specified as standard components if the staff is aware of what constitutes a conservation-grade case. In weighing the advantages and costs of different exhibit enclosures when procuring new casework, NPS exhibit specialists will soon have access to new tools to specify what preservation features and levels of performance are to be expected.

The NPS publication *Exhibit Conservation Guidelines* is currently available through the Harpers Ferry Historical Association by calling 1-800-821-5206; a companion publication, *Performance Standards and Conservation Specifications for Exhibit Cases*, is under development.

