

Spring Cleaning:

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Maintaining Your Art Collection - One of the greatest joys in life is beautiful art. However, life in the tropics comes with a variety of challenges that can pose a threat to the enjoyment of our collections. More than a little care is required to protect our treasures from humidity, insects, mould and even our gorgeous Caribbean sunshine. Dust gives moulds and insects a place to take hold. Silverfish are one of the most damaging little household pests that crawl about unseen for some time. Along with other local insects, silverfish are not connoisseurs of fine art; they will eat nearly any fibre in your home. If you find one dead between books on a shelf or behind a frame, assume hungry live ones are also around enjoying the feast. The solution is to place Silverfish Bait behind your books and in the closets, away from children and pets. You can find it at the local hardware or grocery store (guys: it is not in the sport fishing section!).

Termites - A friend of mine did not realize that his house had termites until one ate its way through a beloved, and very expensive, oil painting. One evening he just happened to notice a bug doing a victory dance on the front of his painting, next to many small pinholes. He looked behind the canvas and discovered a labyrinth of a nest, which had gone completely unnoticed by him and his housekeeper. Sadly, the beautiful painting was ruined; most of the canvas was eaten away, with only the paint and frame holding it together. So take a peek now and then, and be sure to dust the front and back of your artwork regularly with a feather duster.

Handling is one of the most common causes of damaged artwork.

Sadly, I speak from experience here. Murphy's Law is alive and well, and applies to fine art. I shouldn't need to say anything about the obvious accidental damage of coffee, food, smoking or the open stray pen on the desk. Just remember Murphy Rules, and anything that can happen, will.

Always handle artwork by the outer edges and, if at all possible, with tissue or clean cotton gloves. Artwork on paper is easily crumpled, torn or stained; over time, fingerprints yellow and darken from the oils and acids on the skin. Paintings on canvas can be easily punctured, scratched or cracked with the slightest pressure on the back, even finger pressure.

Your best defense is to have your artwork framed as soon as possible. If the art is on paper, frame it under a double archival mat (acid free) to provide airspace between the artwork and the glazing. Artwork on paper "moves" with the humidity level, so the mat is more than decorative; it also provides a necessary breathing space between the art and the glass.

Adding a good acid-free backboard and dustcover are also essential. These help keep the fluctuations of humidity to a minimum and damaging dust, mould spores and insects out. The frame itself provides rigidity and is a way to handle the art without directly touching the surface of the painting. If the painting is in an area where it could be bumped or splattered with food or beverages, as in a kitchen or dining room, then a glazing of either glass or acrylic is essential.

To clean the glass in a frame, use a standard window cleaner and mist it lightly on a soft paper towel or old linen tea towel, then wipe the glass. Do not spray anything directly on the glass, as the cleaner can quickly run and seep in between the glazing and the frame and be absorbed into the mat and artwork, ruining it in an instant.

Beautiful Natural Light

Especially here in the Caribbean, never place artwork created on paper or canvas in direct sunlight; avoid exposure as much as possible. Adding a glaze with an ultraviolet filter helps prevent fading, ageing and cracking from indirect light. Light damage cannot be reversed.

Directing spotlights at a painting can also cause light damage, if left on for extended hours. The use of high wattage bulbs can actually warm the surface and causes hot spots in the canvas and paint. The result can be heavy cracking and fading. If needed, use a low watt bulb. If you can feel the heat on your palm near the canvas, you are slowly baking your painting.

The best defense in protecting your art collection is to take a little care in placement and dust your artwork regularly (front and back), and it will stay in beautiful condition for years to come, even in paradise. Now, fix your favourite drink, sit back in your easy chair and enjoy your works of art—hopefully for a lifetime.

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