

HOW TO SAVE ARTWORK FROM MOLD AT FINE ART INSTITUTIONS



Written by Isabelle de St. Antoine

Mold can appear on artwork in different ways. Mold damage can either go undetected or appear minor; however, if not tackled right away, it can lead to significant damage. Isabelle de Saint Antoine from Huntington T. Block sat down with Greg Smith, a world-renowned fine art claims insurance authority at Berkley Asset Protection to get his insights on what the main causes of artwork mold are and how to best prevent mold from occurring.

Isabelle: Mold affecting artwork is a concern for all institutions. Based on your experience, what are the main causes of mold growth on artwork at fine art institutions?

Greg: Simply speaking, moisture is your enemy. Mold can either be weather or mechanically driven. Mold can appear following a weather driven incident, like a hurricane or severe cold snap which could cause water infiltration whether by a roof failing or a pipe freezing and thawing. Mold can also be the result of a mechanical failure of an HVAC system, which may be undetectable at first and could lead to moisture ingress in the walls of the affected areas.

Isabelle: Fine art institutions vary from buildings built during the 19th century to brand new builds. Does this have an impact on mold ingress and the artwork held there?

Greg: Absolutely. Older buildings tend to have more porous structures allowing moisture to get in, enabling mold. As mold is the result of a sudden change of humidity and temperature controls, heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems are one of the tools to avoid conditions for mildew and mold to form. HVAC malfunctions are one of the leading causes of mold, especially if not detected right away. All systems should have monitoring devices for higher levels of humidity.

Newer buildings can also be vulnerable to mold. Newer built institutions' HVAC systems tend to run via Building Management Systems (BMS), which monitor changes in humidity controls. When these systems malfunction, especially the temperature and humidity controls, it can take a while for them to restart. However, they normally have alarm components to alert that they are not functioning properly.

Isabelle: What risk mitigation suggestions can you provide to avoid mold occurring?

Greg: By controlling the level of moisture in the air, you can greatly improve your chances of preventing mold growth. All areas where art is displayed or stored must be monitored. Once an adverse change to humidity is detected via an HVAC system or BMS, it is crucial that there is an immediate mitigation plan in place as mold can grow quickly. What is your plan?

Mold also tends to appear in storage areas as these areas are lower trafficked areas and tend to be dark. This is a concern as these are areas where there tends to be a large volume of high valued items stored. It's important that mold detection is integrated in safety and security "walkthroughs" of buildings as mold can be hard to detect. This could include regularly checking the humidity levels in areas set below 40 °C to make sure that temperatures aren't rising.

Over, please.

Isabelle: What mold prevention measures could museums take following a water leak?

Greg: When artwork is damaged by water, the primary focus is addressing the cause of the water leak and restoring the damaged items. Looking for eventual mold ingress into the walls is not always a top priority.

However, it's important to make sure that the walls surrounding the water leak do not have moisture as this could lead to mold related damage down the line. Following a loss, an institution should ask its water remediation company to use its Moisture Mapping Equipment to check affected water damaged areas.

Isabelle: Adverse and unpredictable weather continues to affect the U.S. Does this raise concern for increased mold damage?

Greg: Yes, as HVAC systems don't tend to be able to adjust quickly to erratic changes in temperature, it's important for museum registrars and their conservation staff to plan ahead. They should decide ahead of time whether the temperatures need to be adjusted or no temperature change is needed as the artwork would be able to absorb the predicted changes in temperature and humidity. Buildings are like freighters; they need time to change course. So, when dealing with the quick changing weather patterns, gauge how your building acclimates to the change and act accordingly.

Isabelle: Greg, can you give us some final thoughts that we can share with our museum clients?

Greg: Mold damage is an important issue which is not always top of mind for museum staff. We are all worried about theft and damage. Mold also has to be on the list of perils to defend against. Due to the severity of damage that can result from mold, I hope that this interview will encourage museums to include mold mitigation within their risk mitigation plans.

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