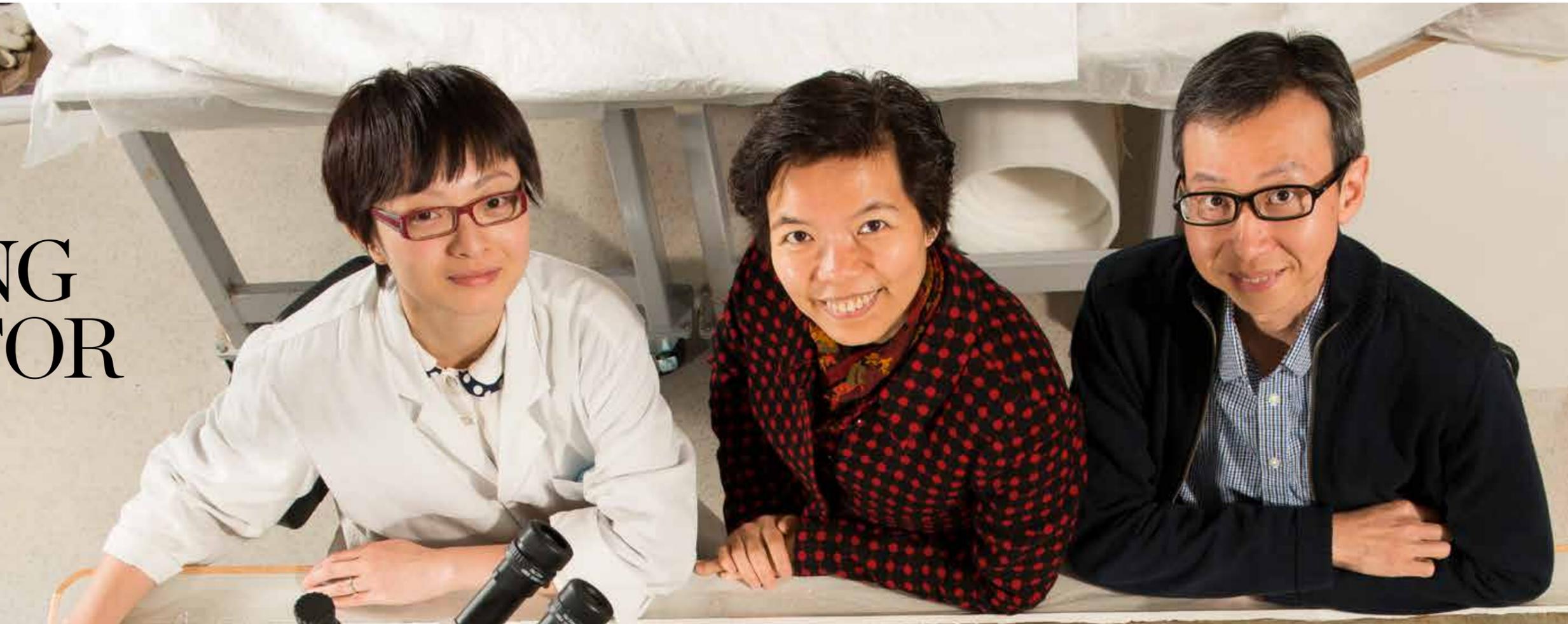


PAGING DOCTOR ART

Restoring masterpieces requires the finesse of an artist, the know-how of a scientist and precision of a surgeon.

STORY **CHRISTY CHOI**
PHOTOGRAPHY **GARETH GAY**



(From left) May Long Chui-in, assistant curator (conservation), organic materials, Alice Tsang Chee-ho, curator (conservation), 3D objects, and Albert Lai Yip-kai, assistant curator (conservation and wood objects), who all work at the Leisure and Cultural Services Department's Conservation Office.

Smashed, scratched, punctured, nicotine-stained, even eaten away by insects – there’s a lot that can happen to a treasured piece of art. Need a fix? Enter the art restorer.

Many may conjure the image of a figure hunched over a painting, brush in hand, painstakingly recreating a lost portion of a masterpiece. Such people are arguably another manifestation of the artist: just perhaps a little more of a ‘Type A’ workaholic about cleanliness.

Perhaps you see Sigourney Weaver or Monica Potter, who portrayed art restorers in the movies *Ghostbusters* and *Head Over Heels*, respectively.

You’re not likely to see Albert Lai Yip-kai, Alice Tsang Chee-ho or May Long Chui-in, who work at the Conservation Office at the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD).

Clad in their white coats, the bespectacled trio look more like lab technicians than their Hollywood incarnations, and their restoration space at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum looks more like a science lab than an artist’s studio.

Cabinets filled with beakers and vials of chemicals line the far wall. Staff peer through high-powered microscopes or at computer screens, while the soft whooshing sound of the ventilation system fills the air.

“Ninety per cent of our colleagues have a chemistry background,” says Tsang, a ceramics, paper and photography expert who heads one of the teams at the Conservation Office.

The other 10 per cent have degrees in materials science, an interdisciplinary field that deals with the discovery and design of new materials. “There are a lot of dangerous chemicals in this lab. We need people who understand how to handle them,” explains Tsang.

A NEW SCIENCE

While people have been repairing works of art for as long as art has existed, the modern study of conservation has only been around for the past 50 years, says Lai, who has worked as a restorer for 18 years, specialising in organic materials (such as wood, bamboo, leather and lacquer), and also restores paintings for the museum.

Much of the field of restoration focuses on techniques that not only preserve the works but also are reversible. For this, an understanding in chemistry – and therefore an understanding in how paint and other materials react to chemicals and environmental agents – is a must.

As staff at the Conservation Office explain, if a priceless wooden sculpture is discovered underwater in a shipwreck and needs to be preserved, the wood specialist needs to be able to figure out what kind of wood they’re dealing with, and what chemicals can be added to keep the wood from breaking into a million tiny pieces once the water is drained.

Painting conservators need to know how solvents will react to paints and varnish. They need to be able to run analyses on paint and mix their own concoctions that can remove accumulated dirt or adhesives or bad restoration jobs without stripping the original paint. Paper specialists need to know what kind of bleach will get rid of mould stains but leave the paint intact, and so on. “You have to modify it. Like a prescription,” says Tsang.

This is the science of art.

In Hong Kong, the people with such knowledge are few and far between. Around 30 work for the Conservation Office, which covers eight different fields: from ceramics and inorganic materials, to painting, to textiles, natural history specimens and archaeological finds.

The rest in the city number about half a dozen, who are private restorers mostly tied to galleries and auction houses.

HANDLE WITH CARE

Fred Scholle, proprietor of the Galerie Du Monde, is one of them. The 75-year-old has been restoring paintings and paper works in Hong Kong for 35 years.

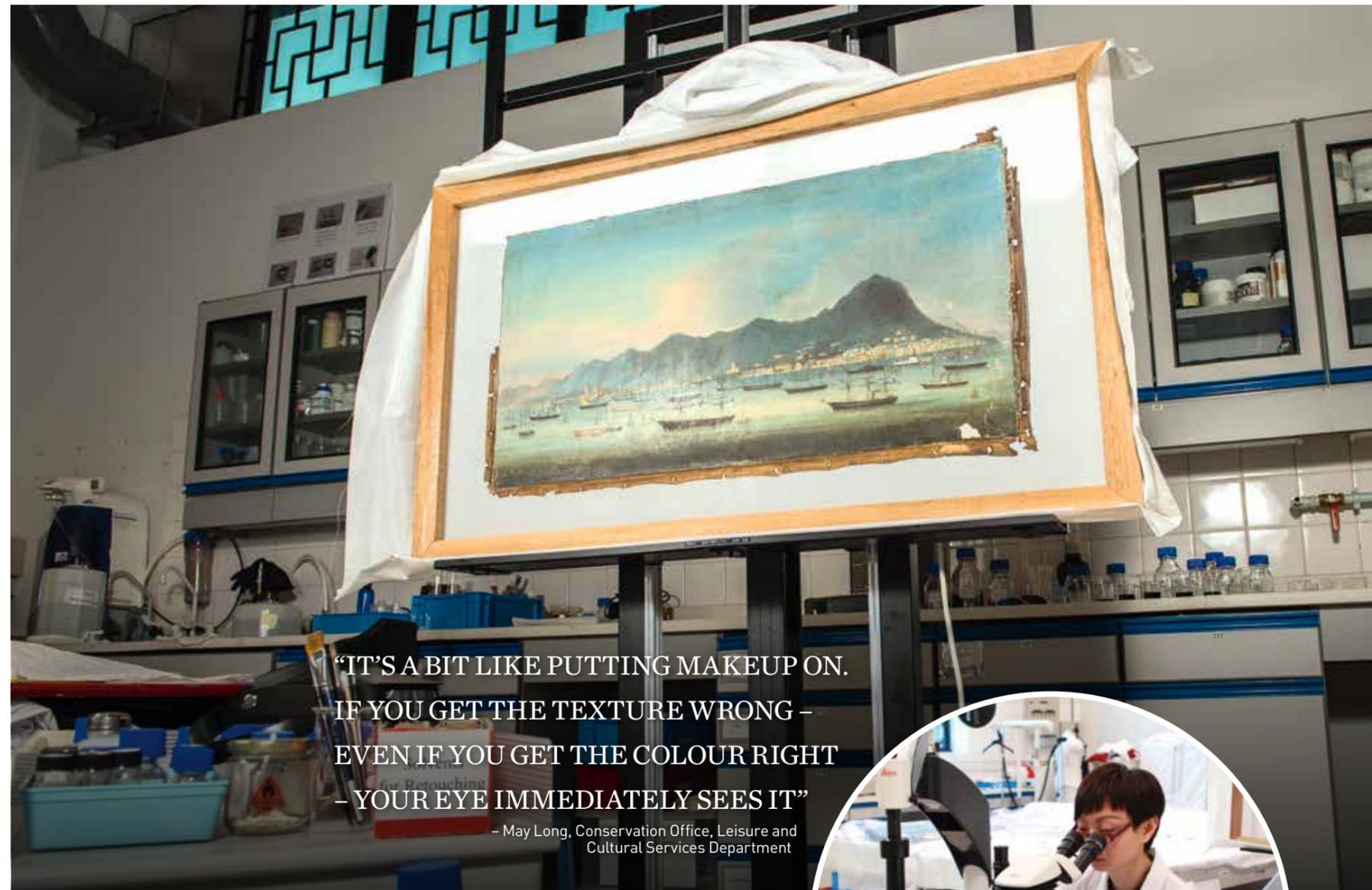
“Treat [works of art] like you would people and keep the air-conditioning on even when you go out,” he says, sitting in the aptly cool interior of his Central-based gallery. “You’re paying millions of dollars for your paintings. Pay the extra several thousand a month in electricity bills instead of hundreds of thousands of dollars to restore them later on.”

A standard cleaning and revarnishing by Scholle for a 1 metre by 1.5 metre painting can cost HK\$15,000–HK\$20,000, while any serious damage can see the bill hit HK\$100,000.

A cleaning can take around three weeks or more, depending on the surface of the painting. Each painting is cleaned by gently rolling a cotton-bud dipped in a cleaning agent over the surface. Something with texture, such as works by the Japanese artist Kazuo Shiraga, might take longer because of all the dips and grooves in the paint.

Anything with more serious damage that might require whole canvases to be replaced and paint reattached could take six months or longer to repair. Scholle typically restores 12 to 15 paintings a year on top of his work at the Galerie Du Monde.

There are times when restoration just isn’t possible. One such piece was an early work by Chinese artist Wang Guangyi brought to Scholle by a museum. “It was in terrible condition, cracked, peeling, and people had tried amateurish restorations,” says Scholle. “I’d be covering up a lot of the area ... it would have diminished its historical value.” He adds: “[In restoration], you retain as much of the artist’s original work as possible. Minimise what you change.”



“IT’S A BIT LIKE PUTTING MAKEUP ON. IF YOU GET THE TEXTURE WRONG – EVEN IF YOU GET THE COLOUR RIGHT – YOUR EYE IMMEDIATELY SEES IT”

– May Long, Conservation Office, Leisure and Cultural Services Department



ABOVE One of the paintings being restored by the Conservation Office at the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD).

INSET May Long, assistant curator at the LCSD’s Conservation Office, inspects a painting.

The early oil paintings of many of the Chinese artists of the 1980s like Wang Guangyi are often in bad condition because of the poor materials they used. The only white paints they had during that period were building paints, and artists used fish oil to thin paints and make them more transparent and glossy, as linseed oil was not available.

But coming across a case like the Wang Guangyi piece is uncommon. In Hong Kong, most of the damage to artwork is caused in three ways, Scholle says: improper framing, poor care allowing the artwork to be exposed to sunlight and humidity, and shipping damage.

“Hong Kong’s population is quite transient and many give their

artwork to regular movers to pack, and because they haven’t replaced the glass with acrylic, they break and come back with holes and tears,” says Scholle.

Bad framing jobs might use adhesives that decay and discolour, or untreated wood that leeches acid, which damages and discolours papers, canvases and paint.

And then there’s the humidity and mould. Unless treated immediately, the mould will stain the painting and can sometimes affect the colour of the paint. “I really have to emphasise the care,” says Scholle.

The art restoration business in Hong Kong has evolved over the last decade, with the launch of ART HK in 2007, and auction houses and galleries moving in with ambitions to make the city a regional art hub that could one day rival New York and London. Because of the

increased visibility and interest in art, Scholle sees much less damage from neglect.

“[People] know the value and possible value of the work now... It’s not just something to decorate the walls,” he says.

There’s also been a change in the types of work coming through. In the 1970s, Scholle’s business mostly involved restoring old China trade school art, which documented the early days of trade in Hong Kong, and 19th century oil paintings by British artists who spent most of their lives in Asia, such as George Chinnery, for expat clients.

He now sees much fewer of those clients – many of whom have likely moved back to the UK – and much more contemporary art and ink paintings from the homes of younger collectors, both expat and local.

SAFE HANDS

But while the market for his services has expanded, there are still only around a handful of restorers in the city. Finding the right person for the job can be tricky.

“You have to make sure that it’s not just someone who wants to charge you lots of money. The object [of restoration] is to do as little as possible,” says Scholle. “Ask questions. What will you do? How will you treat it? How many years have you been practising? What are the works you’ve done?”

While some collectors will insist on privacy and do not like others to know restoration has been done on a piece of work – as it can negatively affect its market value – every restorer keeps a portfolio of past works they can show potential clients.

And you could always call the Hong Kong Heritage Museum. They don’t do private work, but Scholle is pretty sure they’ll provide a response if you explain what a restorer has recommended and ask them: ‘Do you think it’s proper?’



COURTESY GALERIE DU MONDE



LEFT An example of a painting which was restored by Fred Scholle. The work involved cleaning, lining, in-painting, glazing and varnishing.

“TREAT [WORKS OF ART] LIKE YOU WOULD PEOPLE ... YOU’RE PAYING MILLIONS OF DOLLARS FOR YOUR PAINTINGS”

– Fred Scholle, Galerie Du Monde



Fred Scholle, the owner of Galerie Du Monde, also restores paintings for clients.

Back at the museum, Long scrapes away hardened epoxy resin with a scalpel, millimetre by millimetre, with the precision of a surgeon. She is working on an oil painting of the *HMS Iron Duke* ship, a piece from the mid-19th century. It is one of the China trade school style of paintings favoured by Scholle’s old clientele. “It was damaged while on display. It wasn’t protected and someone bumped into it,” says Long. The bump caused a roughly two-inch-long tear and scratch near the bottom of the rare painting that documents life in Hong Kong during the early years of British trade with the Chinese.

The 29-year-old assistant curator at the LCSD has spent days painstakingly mending the tear.

“It’s a bit like putting make-up on. If you get the texture wrong – even if you get the colour right – your eye immediately sees it,” says Long.

First, Long stacked heavy glass bars to flatten the surface, and once that was complete, the thin threads of the canvas were realigned individually with tweezers. After that, a thin layer of epoxy resin and paper was applied to the back to mend the tear, and then mostly removed.

With that completed, she’ll go on to filling the surface and painting back the blue of the ocean using watercolour or conservation paints that can be easily removed when the painting next needs to go in for restoration. All these changes and materials are clearly documented for the next conservator that comes along.

Her technique differs to that of Scholle, who would advocate the use of a removable varnish and oil paints instead of watercolour or conservation paints. The varnish would be applied to the area in need of conservation and the new layer of paint applied on top.

The museum’s lab also makes use of modern materials that are inert, meaning they aren’t likely to react with most chemicals commonly found in the environment, while restorers in France and Europe are likely to prefer natural materials. “There are different schools of thought,” says Lai.

While their methods may differ, there’s one thing the experts agree on: “Restoration is the last resort. It’s like going to the doctor. If you take good care of yourself, you’re less likely to,” says Scholle. ☺

EXPERT ADVICE

Experts suggest the following in relation to the preservation of paintings, papers, photographs and film.

01

Paintings

Do not expose to direct sunlight. Cover up the work while you are out of the house. Conventional light bulbs are fine, but do not use lights that are built into the frame. Cracks can form if the temperature fluctuates too much as the paint expands and contracts. Leave the air-conditioning on to keep the temperature constant.

02

Works on paper

Keep out of sunlight. Do not fold or crease – creasing breaks paper fibres and will cause that area to deteriorate faster. Store in an area that’s cool and where the temperature is kept constant to stop fibres from breaking, and humidity low to prevent mould from forming. For very thin documents, keep them sandwiched between two acid-free pieces of paper. Handle gingerly with archival gloves, and with the least amount of pressure and contact with the works as possible.

03

Photographs and film

For the best results, store photographs at a temperature of 4 degrees Celsius. Make sure that they’re kept in a dark place with low humidity and little temperature variation. If you take your photographs out of storage, give them a day or two to slowly thaw to stop water condensing on them. Keep film frozen to slow the chemicals reacting over time.