

The Mysterious Case of the Blue Feather

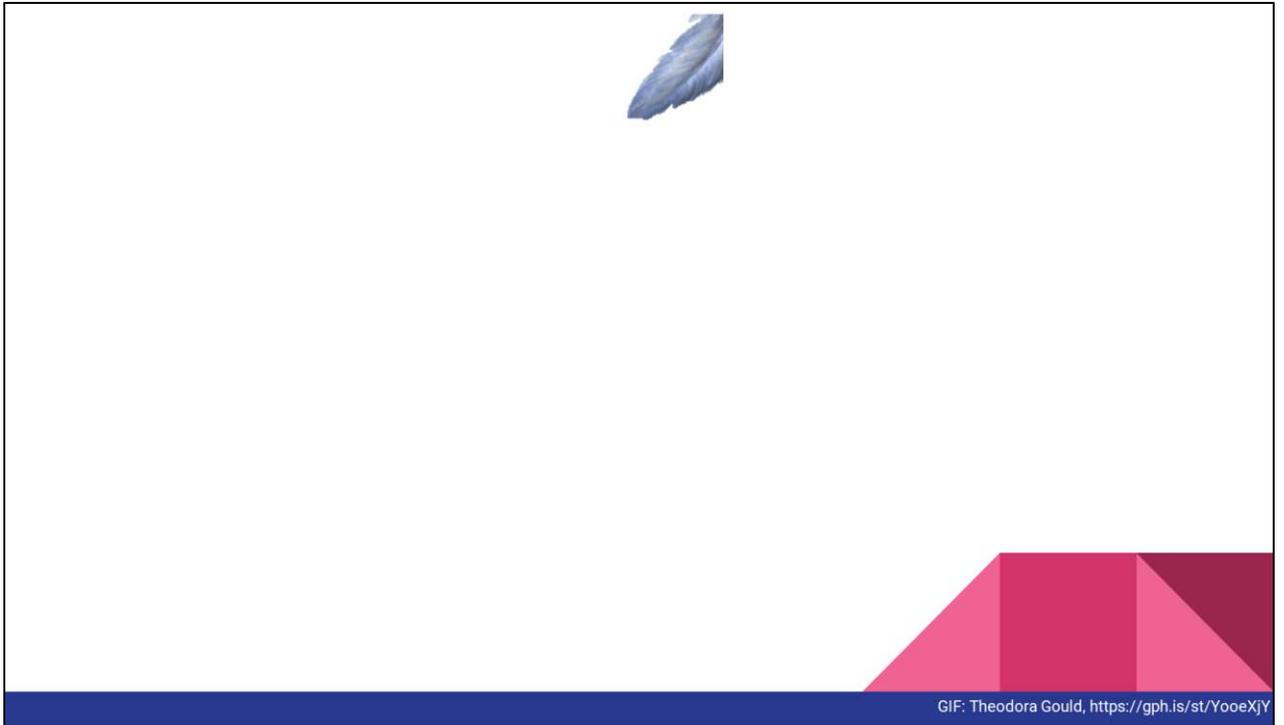
Keeping an eye on materials approved for museum events

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Introduction

Julie McInnis - Collection Care Specialist at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Based in Conservation, and the scope of my work is rooted in Preventive Conservation. Overseeing our IPM initiatives in art spaces, environmental monitoring, and care of items in our permanent collection.

The events around this mystery took place soon before our shelter-in-place mandate in late January 2020. I felt this is a good time to share this story as many institutions are in the process of reopening, and I imagine soon we will be looking to ways to safely host special events. Now is an excellent time to revisit and refresh policies and procedures in place to prevent museum pests from joining those parties.



GIF: Theodora Gould, <https://gph.is/st/YooeXjY>

It's a morning in late January. I'm leaving the elevator and on the side of my vision I see a fluorescent blue feather coming out of a trash can being rolled away by a member of our janitorial team. I picked it up and deposited it back in the trash, wondering to myself how this lone, very blue, feather could have made its way into museum trash. But the thought came and went - and I continued along with my day.



Back at my desk I check my email and see that a member of Facilities had shared this photo taken of the aftermath of an after-art-party (probably one of the last the museum threw) in one of our museum spaces. Some may look at this and have the first thought “wow that looked like fun!” but in addition to feeling empathy towards the staff who then would have to clean up, my initial thought was “That’s a LOT of feathers”.

A bit about us...

- One institution with two buildings
- Strong IPPM group with institutional buy-in



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Floral Materials **PLEASE RETURN HERE**

The following guidelines are intended to prevent inadvertent damage to artwork from insects associated with floral materials.

Arrangements should consist of freshly cut flowers and plants.

- Other materials are more apt to bring in the types of insects harmful to museum objects.
- Green (freshly cut) branches are acceptable.

Problematic materials will be strictly prohibited:

- Old wood - including furniture, crates, containers, driftwood, logs
- Preserved insects and animals and their nests
- Feathers, fur, and skins
- Silk and wool fabrics, including carpets and blankets

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- Old wood - including furniture, crates, containers, driftwood, logs
- Preserved insects and animals and their nests
- Feathers, fur, and skins
- Silk and wool fabrics, including carpets and blankets

Note: Lacquer coating materials does not preclude infestation, nor does purchasing from specific suppliers.

Containers

- Must be ceramic, glass, plastic, or metal
- Vessels and cases should be checked for leakage. Any container that leaks must be removed immediately.

Live Plants and Trees

- Live plants and trees must have been recently treated for pests, and visually inspected for pests and insects prior to entering the building. Live plants and trees cannot be brought into the museum via any art paths. All plants and trees that will be in must have proper Fire Permits and Fire Retardant.
- Flocked trees are not permitted.

The distance from artworks must be such that, in the event of a disaster, the falling pedestal and arrangement will not come in contact with artworks.

Moth Images: Olaf Leillinger,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tineola_bisselliella#/media/File:Tineola.bisselliella.7218.jpg

To backup slightly with a bit about us:

FAMSF is one institution with two museum buildings. Each building is structurally very unique, and each provides their own challenges when it comes to IPM.

Similar to many of you, clothes moths (specifically webbing clothes moths) are of present and increasing concern to us. They were the first thing that came to mind when I looked at all those feathers. Had we just brought in a clothes moth buffet?

I am proud to work at an institution with a strong IPM program. We refer to it as IPPM, highlighting **preventive** importance in our planning. This work started years before my time here, and boasts strong interdepartmental relationships between conservation, facilities, curatorial, registration, security, and janitorial divisions.

So, we had guidelines in place regarding what problematic materials are not allowed to come into the museum in our Decor and Floral Guidelines. We strictly prohibit many different items, including wood, feathers, silk, wool, food, and any insects, nests, antlers, hay, etc. As we have such strong interdepartmental connection, I knew that not only did our facilities and rental staff know about these guidelines, they believed in them too.

So What Could Have Happened?

- Oversight?
 - All involved parties were immediately invested in what may have fallen through the cracks
- Events team proactively reached out to vendor
- Vendor assured us that the feathers were synthetic

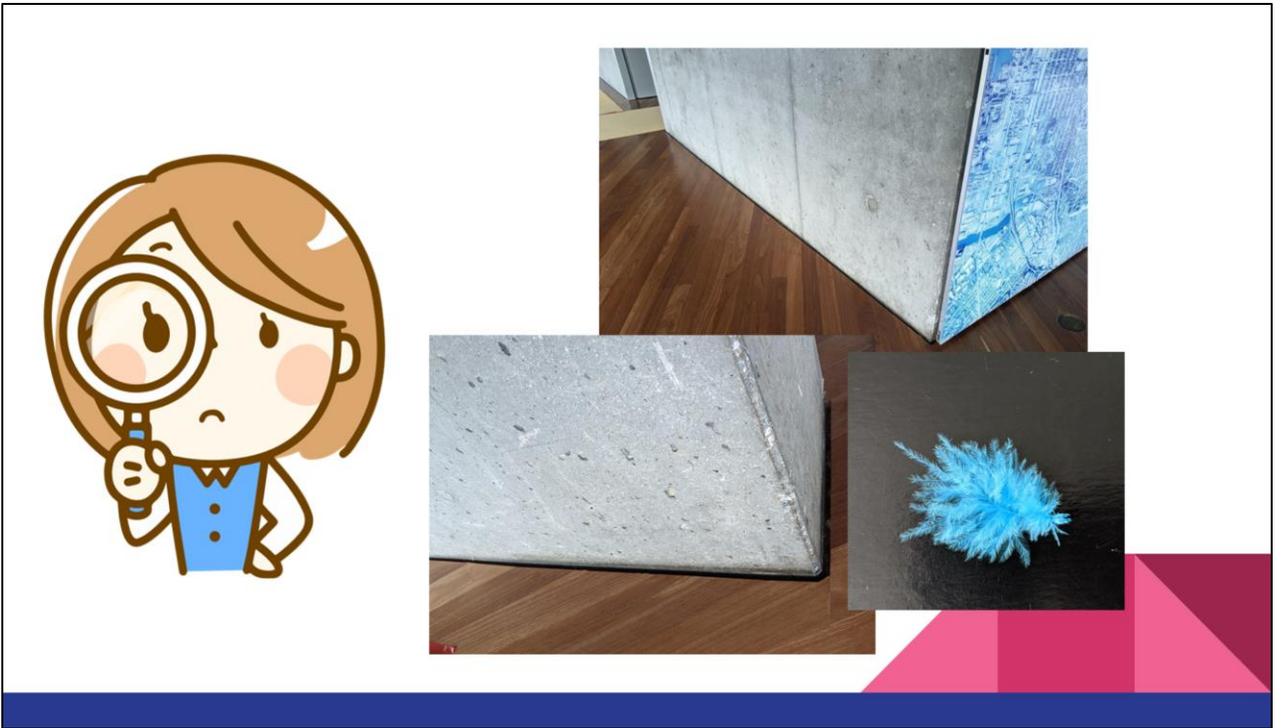
GIF: Theodora Gould, <https://gph.is/st/YooeXjY>

So what could have happened here? I immediately checked in with the rental team to see what could have fallen through the cracks. After all, mistakes happen. I was surprised to hear that they had already been in touch with the vendor who, infact, assured us that they were synthetic.

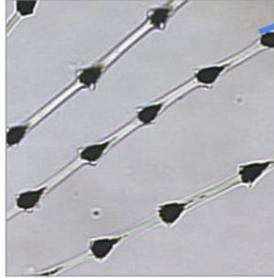
Synthetic?!



Synthetic?! This didn't sit right with me, as thinking back on the blue feather I saw out of the elevator, that one sure looked real. In addition, as part of researching for an exhibition we were planning on having in our galleries, I looked into synthetic feathers, and knew they were pretty fake looking, expensive, overall indelicate. But I wanted to be sure before I replied. I had thrown away the 'feather' I had found that morning. And the janitorial team had already cleaned up that whole party space. How would I confirm one way or the other?



I went hunting. I knew the floors in the party area had substantial gaps between the flooring and the wall. Up I went and began scouring the perimeters of the room where the floor met the wall. If any of the security guards were watching me on the security cameras I'm sure I looked absolutely crazy. Sure enough I found a 'feather' in the gap. I took it back down to conservation so we could take a look under the microscope.



I presented the feather to my colleagues, who at this point were very interested in what's going on. We looked under magnification 50x first, where it actually was not showing signs we were looking for. But then we moved to 200x and sure enough, there in magnification you could see the feather barbules that proved these were real.

Mystery Solved

- They WERE real feathers
- Our team had followed protocol best they could - but incorrect vendor information cause an unintentional danger



So the mystery was solved. (Yay?) They were real feathers.

Our events team followed protocol best they could - but incorrect vendor information created a situation where we brought in a risk.

Fortunately, continued monitoring after the fact didn't show any increase in moth activity. So we

Important takeaways

- Having strong, clear, guidelines is extremely important- but things still happen
- IPM buy-in from all departments creates a network where fast reaction is possible and improvements can be made quickly
- This is a good opportunity to update policies before larger re-opening

Thank you.

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The important takeaways to me are

- Having strong, clear, guidelines is extremely important. Though, things still happen
- Extremely important to have IPM buy-in from all departments in the museum - because we had such a strong foundation already, everyone was on the same page right away. I didn't need to explain why it was dangerous or what risks could be - within an hour multiple departments were communicating and trying to get to the bottom of what happened.
- It presented a good opportunity to revisit the guidelines and update as needed. We added wording to say that all feathers, real and synthetic were not allowed.