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After the Storm

Essential Steps for Preservation and Recovery of Artwork and Collectables

After a storm, when artworks are exposed to flooding or water intrusion, it becomes highly vulnerable to mold, water damage, and staining if not addressed immediately. Different materials react differently to environmental changes, and knowing how to handle each type can help you preserve your artwork and collectables.

1. Identify the Materials

What is the artwork made of?

Different materials require different responses:

- Most Vulnerable Materials (Organic):
 - Works on Paper (Prints, Drawings, Photographs): Paper absorbs moisture readily, leading to warping, cockling, and mold growth. Ink and photographic emulsions can bleed or distort.
 - Wood: Wood expands and contracts with moisture changes, causing warping, splitting, or cracking. It is also prone to mold and insect damage when damp.
 - Textile: Natural fibers like cotton, linen, silk, and wool can weaken, deform, and develop mold. Dyes may also bleed when exposed to water.
 - Canvas: Canvas fibers swell and shrink with moisture changes, which can lead to cracks in the paint layer, deformation, or delamination.
- More Stable Materials (Inorganic):
 - Metal: Metals are more stable but can corrode, especially if salt is present. Clean metal surfaces carefully to avoid rust or corrosion.
 - Glass: Glass is less affected by moisture but should still be cleaned and dried. If possible, use distilled water to avoid introducing contaminants.

2. Steps for Drying Out the Artwork

- Circulate the Air:

Dry the artwork by circulating air around it. Use dehumidifiers and fans to help reduce moisture.
- Slow and Controlled Drying:

Remove as much water as possible slowly to prevent further damage. Air dry the artwork in a climate-controlled environment—air conditioning can help pull moisture out of the air. Use dehumidifiers to speed up drying, and fans to circulate the air. It may take a week or longer for the artwork to fully dry and acclimate to normal conditions.
- If Framed, Unframe Carefully:

If the artwork is framed, carefully remove it from the frame to allow it to dry. The frame may be salvageable but preventing mold growth is the priority.

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- **Avoid Sunlight:**
Do *not* place artwork in direct sunlight, as it can cause further damage, such as warping or fading.

3. Understand Your Resources

Have the following supplies ready if possible:

- **Fans:** To help circulate air.
- **Dehumidifier:** To reduce moisture levels.
- **Archival Supplies:** For safe storage and to prevent additional damage.
- **Safe Storage:** Ensure you have a dry, climate-controlled area for storing artwork during the drying process.

4. When to Call a Professional

If the artwork is severely damaged, it's best to consult a conservation professional. Attempting to repair damaged items without expertise can lead to further deterioration.

The information was provided by Ashley Burke, Burke & Co. Fine Art Consultants. They are a St. Petersburg based business specializing in documentation, preservation and valuation of Fine and Decorative Arts. Any further questions or any additional information requests can be sent to ashley.c.burke@gmail.com.