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Article: Avoiding mistakes: How not to lose things

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# AVOIDING MISTAKES: HOW NOT TO LOSE THINGS

ANTHONY SIGEL

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Disassembly of objects with many pieces can be difficult to keep track of. To avoid losses, print out an image of the disassembly layout to store the pieces on. If one goes astray, it will be immediately noticeable.

KEYWORDS: Mistake, Accident, Loss

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 A DISASTROUS MISTAKE

Some years ago, I was treating an Islamic plate (fig. 1). Restored multiple times, it contained reused sherds, manufactured replacement sherds, plaster fills, and overpaint.

The orange-brown stains were partially dissolved shellac adhesive, absorbed into the fritware body and deteriorated glaze during a previous disassembly. After disassembly, each sherd was wrapped in lens tissue and poulticed with a solvent gel—some only one to two times, others as many as four to five times—to remove as much staining as possible (fig. 2).

Keeping track of everything became more difficult than a typical treatment in which all elements are subjected to the same processes at the same time. The numerous changes of poultice happened over the course of several weeks. Only at the end of the lengthy process did I discover that I had lost a sherd (fig. 3). It had no doubt stuck to the bottom of some toweling and was inadvertently tossed in the garbage at some point in the process. Even though all of the residue-encrusted tissue was saved, bagged, and labeled from each poultice session, the sherd was gone. A lengthy exploration of our dumpster yielded nothing.

### 1.2 A NEW PROCEDURE WAS CREATED

I was horrified by this mistake and resolved to change my working process to ensure that it could not occur again. I now photograph sherd groups after disassembly and directly print them out on a laser printer slightly over life size (fig. 4). Taped together and to a mounting board, it provides a storage location for all sherds, and if one is missing it can be instantly and easily detected (fig. 5). If a lengthy, messy cleaning procedure is envisioned, covering the printout with a sheet of Mylar will preserve it and allow easy cleaning.

All of our Fellows are now taught this procedure (fig. 6). Interestingly, when the plate was reconstructed, it became apparent that it was a badly warped and shattered kiln “waster,” probably recovered from a kiln site discard pile and restored for the trade in the late 19th to early 20th century (fig. 7).

This method has utility beyond ceramics treatment, indeed any disassembly of an object with multiple pieces or fragments that could be misplaced. The image can also be used to make notes for each fragment or group, recording the cleaning process, interesting features, or treatment progress, and retained in the treatment file.

The takeaway: It is only by acknowledging and sharing our mistakes that we can learn from them and find solutions to do things better in the future.



Fig. 1. Before treatment. Syrian, *Laqabi plate with Hare*, ca. 12th to 13th century, fritware, 3.5 x 23 cm, Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, 1934.48 (Courtesy of Anthony Sigel)

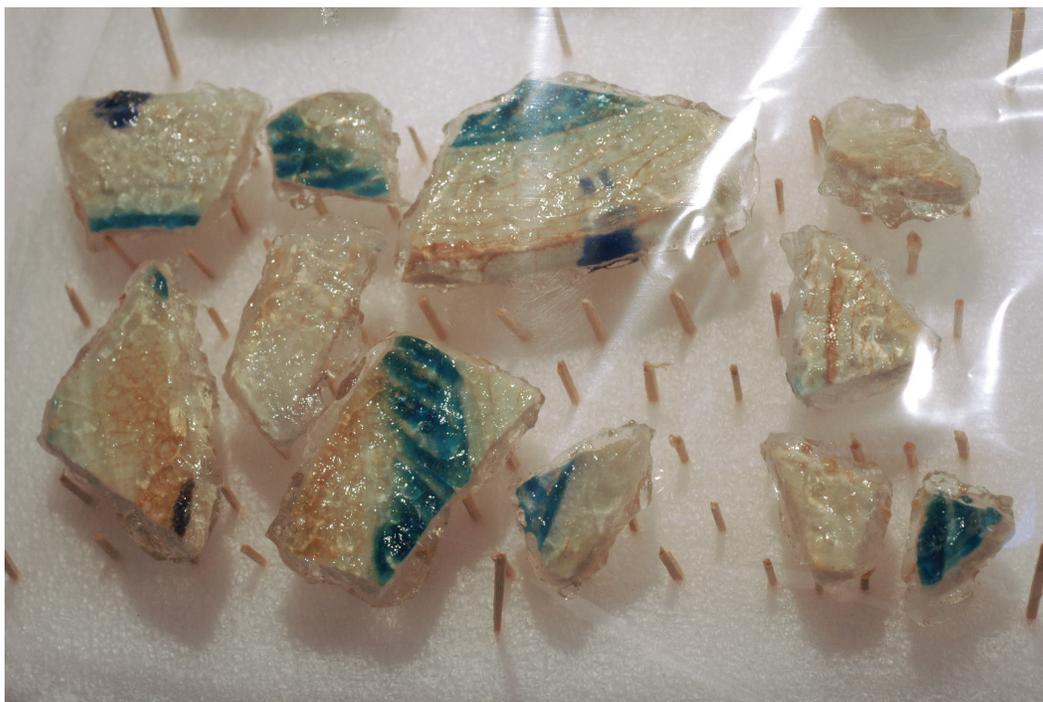


Fig. 2. Tissue-wrapped sherds during cleaning (Courtesy of Anthony Sigel)



Fig. 3. Disaster: a new, missing sherd (arrow) (Courtesy of Anthony Sigel)

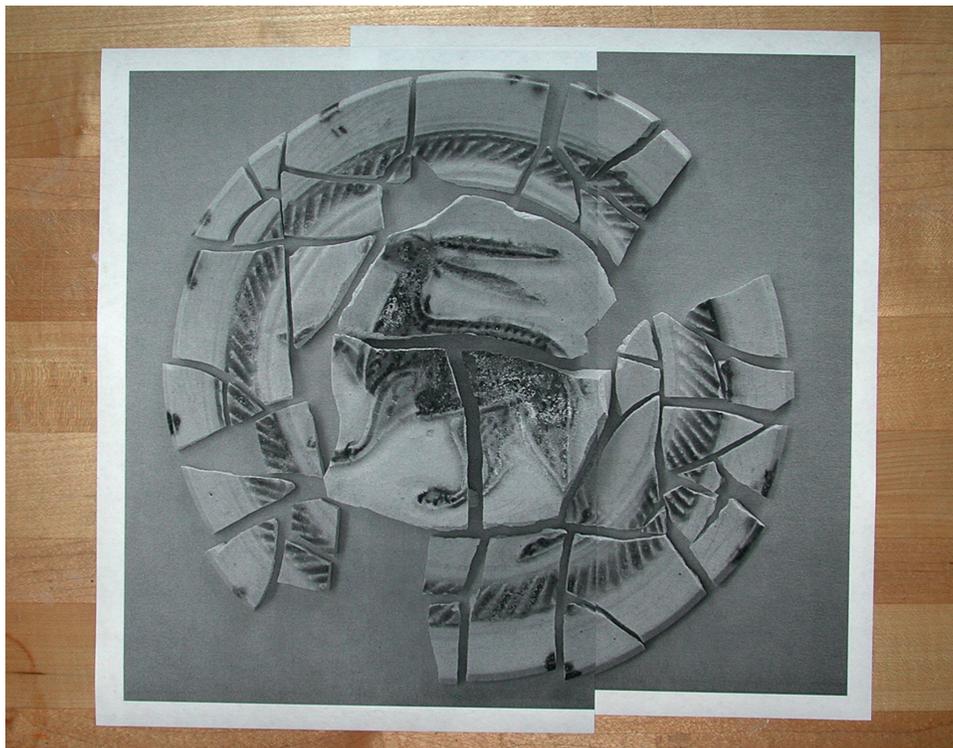


Fig. 4. Quick laser-printed photo of sherd layout (Courtesy of Anthony Sigel)



Fig. 5. Sherd layout photo in use (Courtesy of Anthony Sigel)



Fig. 6. During treatment image showing Mylar overlay by Jess Chloros, 2008 Straus Center Objects Lab Fellow. Persian, *Mina'i Bowl with Horsemen*, ca. 1200 to 1250, fritware with overglaze painted decoration in mina'i technique, 8.7 × 22.2 × 22.2 cm, Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, 1936.34. Sarah C. Sears Collection (Courtesy of Anthony Sigel)



Fig. 7. Reconstructed plate showing original warping and losses (Courtesy of Anthony Sigel)

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## SOURCES OF MATERIALS

Mylar sheet

University Products  
 PO Box 101  
 517 Main St.  
 Holyoke, MA 01041-0101  
 800-628-1912

<https://www.universityproducts.com>

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