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Fixit: Protect your valuable artwork from the light

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By Karen Youso, Star Tribune

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Q I know that fluorescent lights will fade textiles and limited-edition art prints (just look at the art in dentists' and doctors' offices). Is that true of the new compact fluorescent bulbs? I'm hesitant to replace my incandescent bulbs with fluorescent ones for that reason.

A

Yes, it's true, but it's true of all light. Sunlight, fluorescent, even the traditional incandescent -- all can fade artwork and textiles. It's basically a matter of degree. Sunlight, for example, is intense and from a part of the light spectrum that causes quick fading and damage.

Light can cause deep and irreversible damage to art, according to the Chicago Conservation Center. It is particularly harmful to works of art on paper, such as photographs, watercolors, pieces with colored inks and any type of negative. Light damage is also cumulative and the subtle changes that occur may not be immediately detectable. Ultraviolet exposure may manifest itself as brittleness, darkening, bleaching, yellowing, general fading or the change of only certain colors.

In your home, however, compact fluorescent lighting isn't a major concern. To begin with, our homes aren't lit as brightly as a commercial building or office space, and we use artificial light less, turning it on as needed rather than letting it shine continuously. In most homes, light coming in from outdoors probably is a greater threat to artworks.

In any case, there are ways to limit light damage, according to the center:

- Keep artwork away from direct light, whether sunlight or artificial sources. Be aware that fluorescent light and sunlight contain high levels of UV radiation.
- Avoid picture lights mounted to the frames. They can create "hot spots."
- Keep curtains or shades drawn and lights off when the room is not in use. UV protective film can be installed on windows where necessary.
- Consider rotating art every six months or so to give pieces a break from the light.

Remember, the eye can be deceived when gauging the amount of light. Light is measured in foot-candles and can be assessed with a handheld light meter, like those

used when determining a photographic exposure. However, light meters do not measure UV radiation. A meter for UV may be worth purchasing if you want to protect a large art investment.

In general, 5 to 10 foot-candles of light is the maximum light level recommended for the temporary exhibition of printed materials, certain photographs and paintings, and textiles. Up to 15 foot-candles may be a safe exposure for many oil paintings, gelatin silver prints and wood objects. Other objects may be virtually unaffected by light.

Know your art: Some pieces will fade in only a few foot-candles of light, so the recommended levels above may be excessive. Ask an art professional to help you identify pieces that need special handling.

Send your questions to Fixit in care of the Star Tribune, 425 Portland Av. S., Minneapolis, MN 55488, or call 612-673-9033, or e-mail fixit@startribune.com. Past columns are available at www.startribune.com/fixit. Sorry, Fixit cannot supply individual replies.

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