I'm Matt Anderson; I work with some of the 250,000 different three-dimensional objects in the Society’s Collection. Consequently, one of my most important tools is my pair of white cotton gloves.

I wear gloves for a couple of different reasons. The primary reason is because no matter how much I might wash my hand or how clean I try to keep them there’s always going to be a fine layer dirt and oil on there and I don’t want those materials to transfer onto the objects. So by putting on the gloves I protect the pieces as I handle them.

An example of one of the three dimension objects in our collection is this Civil War era surgeon's kit. As you look inside the kit you see a variety of different materials and different surfaces. For example this bone saw here has a wooden handle and a shiny metal blade and you can imagine that if I didn’t have the gloves I would be leaving fingerprints all over the blade and then they would be difficult to go back and clean up again for display so the gloves help protect against that sort of thing. The same sort of situation here with the forceps: shiny metal that would show fingerprints very quickly.

This sword belonged to Henry Lester, who was the commander of the Third Minnesota during the Civil War. Again, this is another example of an object with many polished metal surfaces that would readily show fingerprints. Our conservation department puts a lot of time and effort into cleaning up these objects, so we want to preserve that cleanliness and that nice clean finish as long as possible.

Now there are some types of objects with which I wouldn’t wear gloves as I handled them. A good example is this glass milk bottle. The glass is a very slippery surface and when I put the gloves on, obviously, my grip is even looser. So, I’d rather have a few fingerprints on the bottle than have a broken bottle for dropping it. I also tend to not use gloves when I’m handling very small or delicate objects, things like jewelry or maybe pocket watches, which have a lot of small pieces and require a greater deal of dexterity.
There’s one other advantage to wearing the white cotton gloves that is really more of a mental advantage. When I slip them on, it puts me into a different mindset. I realize I am dealing with historic objects here things that are very fragile and irreplaceable in many cases so when I have the gloves on it’s a reminder that I need to slow down, handle things with care, and move at a caution pace.

My name is Pat Coleman, I’m the Acquisitions Librarian here at the Minnesota Historical Society and I’m in charge of the book collection and the rare book collection. And just two weeks ago I was giving a little tour of the Library and I pulled this book out and passed it around and asked everybody what was the oldest book they’d ever held in their hands had been and pointed out that this book was published in 1492. And the particular person who had the book in their hand at that first set the book down quite fast and said to me in an accusatory tone “How is my handling this in bare hands not wrecking this book?” And I could just tell that that is one of the questions that people are concerned about all the time is with a book, especially an older book or a rare book or an expensive book how are your hands not ruining the book.

Well this book had held up pretty well over a few hundred years and the way and the way we treat books here and keep them in the best shape possible is that we recommend that people instead of wearing gloves that people treat a book with clean hands. The thought behind this is that books were made to have their pages turned and the pages are pretty fragile. What we worry about with gloves is that if you’ve got gloves on you’re actually quite a bit clumsier than you are with bare hands. The problem with that is that the pages as I said are fragile and it’s hard to grab the very next page.

This is a book which is popularly known as the Bodmer atlas and one of the rarest books in our collection. Because it’s rare, because it’s an expensive book and irreplaceable for many years we would ask patrons to look at this with gloves on their hands. I won’t do it, but you can see a little bit the result of this. There’s a tear here, a bent page here, there’s a corner missing here, and I’m pretty sure the reason that happened is because somebody with gloves was just trying to get a hold of the page and turn the page. And you can see it’s much easier to do if you’re doing this with bare hands.

Now that’s just for books with pages that need to be turned. When there are individual items like a map for example or another example would be our photograph collection you don’t have to turn pages it is kind of easier and cleaner and better for the object if we use gloves on those things. So it’s really just the turning of the pages we’re concerned about. We think we’ve come up with the best compromise position on that. Thank you very much.