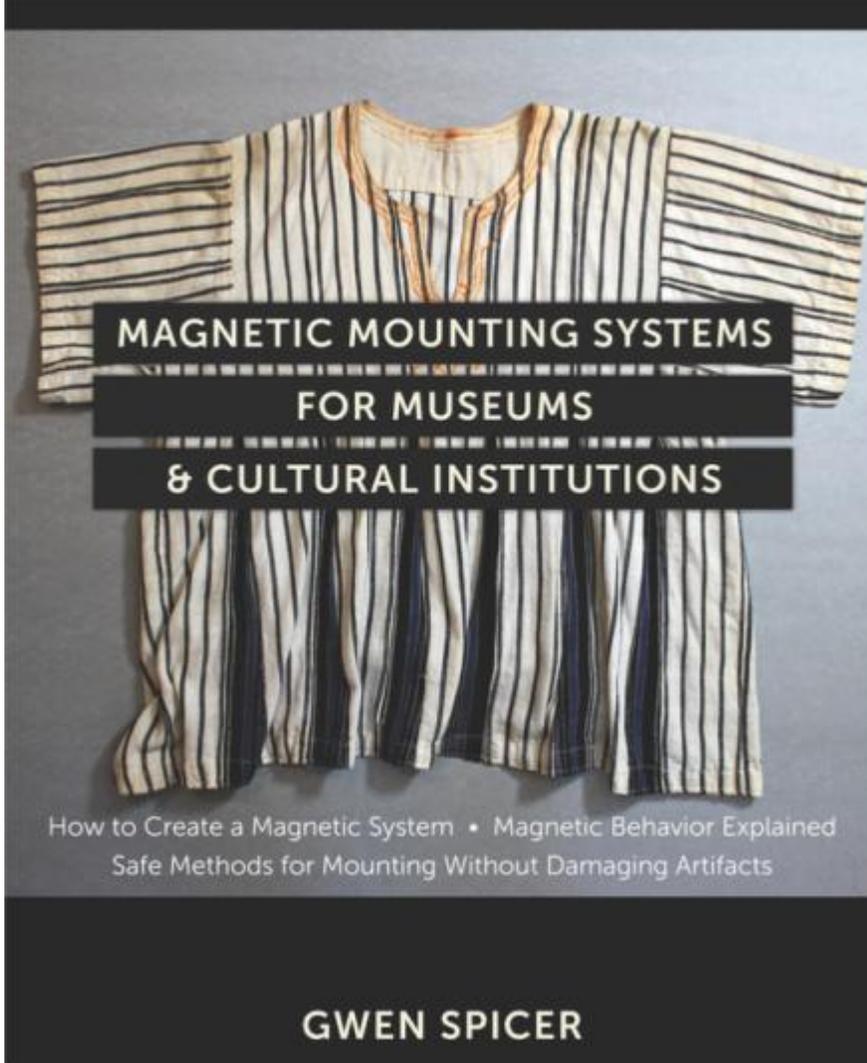


Book Review: Magnetic Mounting Systems for Museums and Cultural Institutions



Review by Kloe Rumsey

Magnetic Mounting Systems for Museums and Cultural Institutions

By Gwen Spicer

Spicer Art Books, Delaware, USA (2019)

402 pages / Softcover / \$120 (USD)

ISBN: 978-0-578-46017-8

A book dedicated to the use of magnets for the mounting and display of museum objects has been eagerly awaited by the global conservation community for years. Until now we have relied on the many informative (but scattered) paper publications, chats with colleagues and a good deal of courage. There has been significant buzz in the profession since we began to hear news of a book, and as we cross our collective fingers that it's as good as we want it to be, I'm happy to say that I think it is.

The first four chapters cover information on magnets themselves, and the level of scientific detail will take many of us by surprise. Personally, I like a book of this sort to be practical and to the point, which this volume certainly is.

In the case of mounting an object for display, the information presented in Chapter 1 is consistently presented and practically relevant. That's not to say there isn't a good amount of theory and history here, but it's neatly presented in (drumroll please) a single table and separate from the text. Overleaf you will find a "historical note" page about the development of compasses, separated from the text for the focused reader but provided for additional intellectual richness and a relaxed, engaging nature that characterizes the whole book.

In Chapter 2 the science kicks in, and I am particularly grateful for the frequent yellow definition boxes. I love a separate glossary-of-terms section, but for the immediate understanding of a hurried reader, having them present on the relevant page really increases the book's usability. And amidst the science, we still have figure image examples of mounting systems with provisions to practical reality such as length of display time and structural diagrams.

There is some more in-depth and well-illustrated science in Chapter 3 "Components of a magnetic system", but if you're not interested, you don't need to be as it is soon joined by discussions of materials and their uses.

We lean gradually towards practical concerns as we move through Chapter 4 "Types of magnetic systems", and the case studies begin in earnest. This chapter is full of helpful tips, hacks and things to bear in mind while developing our own systems. In a book focused on magnets, I've really appreciated Chapter 6 "The behavior of gap materials" or, in other words, the non-magnetic mounting materials in a magnetic system. You won't be surprised to hear that it covers a lot of detail, and I would find the summary of options—such as friction, static charge, slope, etc.—useful even without magnets.

We're in deep with practical discussions now, from the visitor experience to considerations regarding potential additions to objects and with what adhesives. I have a big fondness for publications that include questions and open up discussion.

Passing more case studies, system diagrams and discussions on materials, we come to Chapter 8 "Useful tools when working with magnets", which includes tips on how to assess the properties of a magnet as well as considerations of the tools that allow maximum flexibility. Some of these things may seem obvious, such as avoiding magnetic workspaces and removing jewellery, but it's these things that allow us to feel we can overcome factors that seem irritating or time-consuming.

The frequent recaps are another thing I appreciate about this book, and it's clear that the author accepts that people will often not read it cover to cover. We rarely have time for research and experimentation, and this is probably how some will feel about Chapter 9 "Testing a magnetic system", but with the case studies at the end, and the references to previous publications, many conservators will be able to create something safe and elegant in the time that they have, however limited.

Chapter 11 "travelling with magnets" really exemplifies the practical and considerate breadth of the book. It covers different methods of shipping magnets and the different reasons for each, such as an object on loan, or for the purpose of securing an object in transit.

Although reading about all the objects one can mount with magnets is inspiring, almost more interesting to me is Chapter 13 "The effect of magnets on collections that are ferromagnetic". Or, in other words, "stuff you can't use magnets with". There are no exciting diagrams here, but by discussing each collection and related limitations with magnets, it shows us the things that can be allowed as well as those that can be avoided.

And now for the case studies. Some of us will already have turned to this section, whereas others will work up to it from the beginning. Either way I feel the reader will find this useful, as a huge variety of object types and display solutions have been covered in the 80+ examples. Each one is laid out in the same way, presenting the same information with materials and a diagram included: everything one needs to copy and develop ideas. As you'd expect this is a great addition to the book and a great way to finish the main body. Following this, we have appendices, a healthy glossary of terms and a long bibliography.

In reading this book I've discovered that I massively underestimated the depth and complexity of magnetic mounting, as well as its huge capacity for careful adaptation and nuance. By producing this book, Gwen Spicer has introduced the wider community to these methods in an accessible format, and we can now develop and grow in what we can achieve with it.

This isn't an instruction manual for a quick glance; it's worth spending time with this book to really be able to make creative decisions. While doing so might take longer than reading a set of instructions, we all know the benefits of working in this way for a varied collection. Some might say there's too much science, but this book provides all the information, and it's up to the readers to decide what they need to take away from it to achieve their own goals.

AUTHOR BYLINE

An alumni of Cardiff University, Kloe Rumsey now works at the People's History Museum in Manchester and is a proud host of the C Word Podcast. She also maintains her claim as the UK's only belly dancing conservator.