



## We Can Has More Micro Tools!!

A tip presented by Catherine E. (Cat) Stephens at the 53rd Annual Meeting of the American Institute for Conservation, held in Minneapolis, MN (May 30th, 2025).

Like porcupine quills, cat whiskers are made of keratin; they're simply big hairs that naturally fall out of a cat's face every few months, like any other type of hair. If you live with a cat, you may already be collecting these fallen whiskers, and telling yourself that you'll find a use for them someday. Well that day is TODAY, because you can use them as MICRO TOOLS!

Porcupine quills, like the one shown at the right (#2) are also essentially big hairs that a lot of conservators are already using for various tasks. In my biased opinion, cat whiskers are superior to porcupine quills for poking things under the microscope, for the following reasons: cat whiskers are much finer than porcupine quills, they're generally much easier to find in the wild, and they're free, if you or someone you know is already owned by a cat. That said, to turn a whisker into a micro tool, you first have to locate one. If you live with a cat, they can be found on the floor, on your sofa, or anywhere else that is soft and covered in cat hair. It's a good idea to wash the whisker with a little soap and water, in case it has dust, residual oils, or bits of food on it, and then you simply insert it into a pin vise with the follicle end sticking out, as you see at the right (#1). The follicle end should already have a soft point on it, but you can easily make your whisker EXTRA POINTY like this one, by shaping it with a scalpel. As soon as you're happy with the shape, you are ready to poke things with greater precision. Cat whiskers are about the same diameter as a sewing needle, and because they are keratin, they have a nice rigidity with a little springiness, allowing them to hold a shape very nicely. If the point happens to bend or wear down as you use it, just reshape it with your scalpel and get back to work.

Cat whiskers are useful for doing very fine repairs on paper or photographs, they're great for removing fly specks or other types of small accretions, and they're excellent for removing corrosion products from

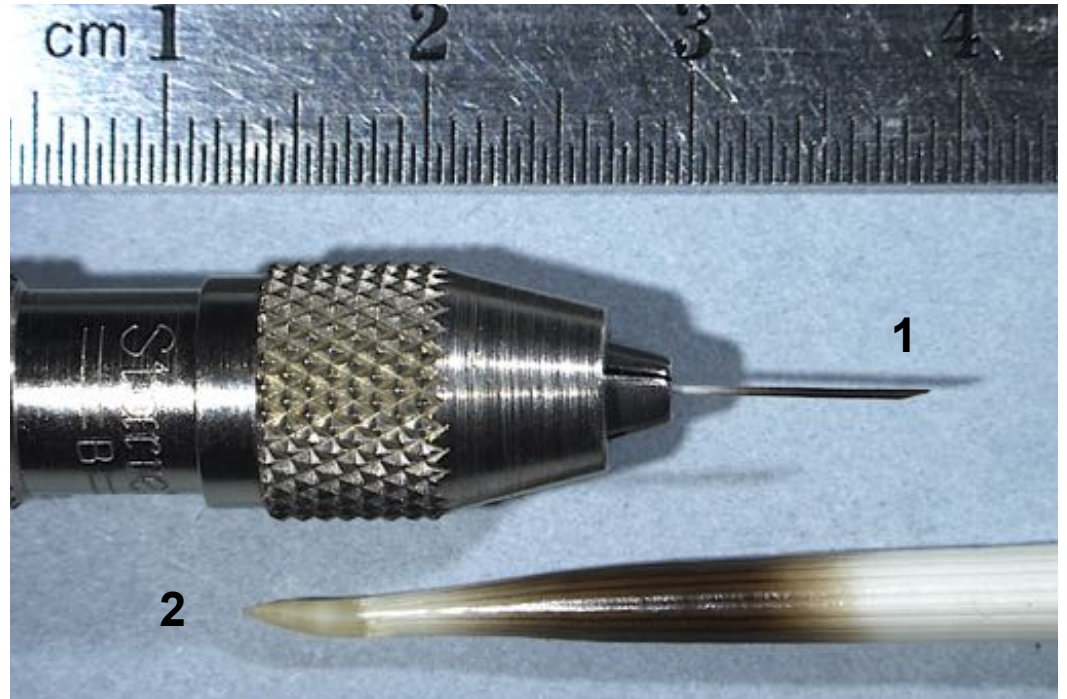


Photo credit: Catherine E (Cat) Stephens, author.

1: The follicle end of a cat whisker, inserted into a pin vise and shaped to a sharp point with a scalpel. This is a bicolored whisker with a black follicle that gradually fades to white. Whisker kindly provided by my cat Opus (aka Poopert).

2: the follicle-end of a porcupine quill (not shaped).

metal surfaces, because the keratin won't leave scratches. Not long ago, I was removing copper corrosion products from the brass mat of a Daguerreotype, and cat whiskers worked SO MUCH BETTER than porcupine quills, bamboo skewers, or metal micro tools. Cat whiskers are available in white and sometimes black, allowing you to select one that you can easily see against a light or dark background. If you don't have an at-home source of cat whiskers, don't worry! Lots of people sell them online, and your friends may be willing to give them away for free.

Happy poking!