



Care for Textiles

Introduction

Textiles are constructed from a wide variety of materials, from natural fibers such as cotton, silk, flax, and wool to regenerated or manufactured fibers such as rayon, nylon, and polyester, and employing various techniques such as weaving, looping, knotting and felting. The deterioration of textiles is often due to a combination of physical, biological, and/or chemical factors working together to cause damage. The following factors contribute to textile damage:

- › incorrect handling
- › improper temperature and relative humidity levels
- › insects
- › mold and mildew
- › inappropriate lighting
- › excessive dust, dirt, and other pollutants

Handling

Use freshly washed hands or nitrile gloves when handling textiles, as human skin contains oils and perspiration could cause stains. Avoid cotton gloves, as they can sometimes catch on loose or brittle threads or fibers. Remove jewelry or anything that may snag the textile.

Support a textile in a manner that distributes its weight evenly. A delicate silk embroidery may be supported by sliding a piece of paper or cardboard underneath, while a heavier textile such as a carpet or tapestry is best rolled on a large tube or carried in a fabric sling.

Storage Conditions and Environment

Large textiles, such as quilts, can be safely folded for storage by inserting acid free tissue rolled "sausages" to create gentle folds and avoid creasing. Another option for large textiles, such as a carpet, is to roll it on a large diameter tube. Store seasonal clothing in cotton dust covers, rather than dry cleaning bags, which allow for air circulation and reduce light exposure.

Most wood, packing cardboards, and some plastics are unsuitable for storing textiles. Choose acid-free boxes and acid-free tissue. If non-archival boxes are the only option, line boxes with clean cotton sheets or pillowcases that can be washed occasionally, to act as a barrier between the interior of the box and the textile.

- › Indications of active deterioration: increase in textile discoloration, tarnishing of metal components, presence of a sweet or musty odor.
- › Signs of pest infestation: irregularly shaped holes, the presence of insect casings, debris that looks like brown grains of sand (insect droppings)

Avoid using commercially available insect repellent which may stain textiles or discolor dyes. Textiles are best preserved when displayed and stored in clean, well-ventilated areas that are routinely maintained.



Water exposure can result in dye bleed and transfer that may often be irreversible.

Light

Light is one of the most damaging threats to textiles. If displaying a textile, choose an area that receives minimal light, without exposure to direct sunlight. Consider installing UV filtering film on windows or using UV filtering glazing for framed textiles. When you can, keep textiles away from light sources, which can help avoid damage to dyes and fibers.



Light exposure over a ten-year period has dramatically faded the once strong dye colors in this hooked rug.



This christening gown was damaged by mice when boxed in an attic storage space.

Display

Small textiles, like samplers or handkerchiefs, can be stitched to a fabric covered board and framed. If you are framing a textile or working with a professional framer, avoid using adhesives to mount your textile. Use spacers to prevent the glazing from coming into contact with your textile.

Larger textiles, like woven rugs, can be hung by hand sewing a sleeve of cotton fabric at the reverse at the top and inserting a dowel as a hanging mechanism. Avoid using thumb tacks as the weight will not be evenly distributed and the metal tacks might rust and damage.

Safe Use

If you choose to use or wear your heirloom textiles, they will be at increased risk of damage and will need increased levels of care and repair over time. Avoid displaying heirloom quilts on a bed where children and pets have access. If possible, wear heirloom garments, such as christening gowns, wedding dresses and veils for photographs, then change to a different outfit to enjoy the festivities. Avoid applying hairspray, makeup and perfume while wearing these textiles. Be mindful of jewelry that might catch or snag the textile.

Cleaning and Maintenance

Controlled vacuuming can be an effective means of reducing dust and other particulate soiling, though not all textiles can be safely vacuumed. Specially-modified equipment allowing for low suction is often necessary for vacuuming to be accomplished safely. For large or sturdy textiles, vacuuming over a protective sheet of flexible plastic screening may be recommended.

- › For fragile three-dimensional textiles, dusting lightly with a soft brush into a low-suction vacuum nozzle may be preferable.
- › Not all textiles are meant to be laundered. Washing a fragile, historic textile can cause fiber damage, dye loss or dye migration. For treasured textiles, contact a conservator who can determine if it is safe to clean.

Emergency Response and Disasters

In the case of a water disaster, remember that most textiles become weaker when wet and will need support for safe handling and transport. If handling is possible, separate colored textiles from others to reduce the risk of dye transfer. Rinse any silt or debris off with clean water, then blot the textiles carefully with absorbent toweling to remove as much moisture as possible. Lay the textiles flat to dry in a room with good air circulation.

Fire, soot, and smoke damage pose special problems for textiles. It is always advisable to contact a conservator before handling a soot-damaged textile. Handling can irreversibly drive sooty soiling deep into the fibers of a textile. The use of ozone to remove smoky and/or mold and mildew odors will accelerate degradation in many textiles.

When and How to Contact a Conservator

If you notice possible pest infestation or a change in the appearance of your textile, or are interested in preparing it for display, contact a conservator who specializes in textiles. Use AIC's "Find a Professional" tool to locate a conservator in your area, using the specialty "Textiles" to identify the right conservator for the job. Read our Guide to Hiring a Conservator to learn more.

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Remember

- › Wash your hands with soap and water before and after handling.
- › Remove rings and other jewelry prior to handling.
- › Regularly inspect objects to ensure that they are in stable condition. Catching problems early can prevent major damage.



Sturdy fabrics can be cleaned by vacuuming on low suction with the brush attachment.

All images courtesy Textile Conservation Workshop, South Salem, NY