



Preserving Your Treasures-Care and Storage Methods for Clothing and Textiles

We are often asked the best way to store textiles in the interest of preserving them for the future. How and where you store your items are very important. Properly packing and storing your wedding dress or other treasured textile will help to protect it for the future. By controlling exposure to light, dust, insects, humidity, temperature extremes, mildew, molds, acids, rust and stress--the major causes of damage to stored textiles--the natural aging process will be minimized. After having investigated various methods for improving textile storage, the following museum techniques are suggested for home use.

Basic rules of storage:

1. Items should be clean. A contemporary item, such as a new christening gown, should be cleaned by the manufacturer's recommended method before storage. An aging textile should be cleaned with great caution. A reputable cleaner who uses appropriate wet or dry hand cleaning methods with clean cleaning fluids, minimal agitations and minimal heat is best. Starch and finishing agents may attract pests and should be avoided when preparing a garment for long term storage. (It is advisable to request that these finishes not be used). The older the item, the greater the risk involved in cleaning. Because a textile appears yellowed, dingy or stained does not mean it necessarily requires cleaning as such damage may not be reversible. Sometimes the best approach is to mechanically remove surface dirt by vacuuming the piece gently under a cloth bound fiberglass screen with an up and down motion --never drag the vacuum brush across the piece. If the item appears fragile with fiber breakage, avoid cleaning unless done by a textile conservator. There are instances when cleaning does more harm than good.
2. Maintain temperature and humidity control. Attics and basements are poor storage areas for textiles. The temperature and humidity swings cause fibers to expand and contract which in turn causes abrasion, wear, and breakage; especially at folds and creases.
3. Avoid direct light exposure. Depending on the type of fiber and dyes used on textiles, light damage can occur in a very short period of time. This damage is irreversible. Avoid lighting that produces excessive heat or has high ultraviolet radiation, such as direct sunlight.
4. Examine once a year. A yearly examination is an opportunity to check for insects, mildew or mold and is a good time to refold and repad the creases.

5. Do not store items in airtight containers. An item sealed in a box or plastic bag creates its own atmosphere which encourages mold growth. The plastic bags used by drycleaners and plastic zippered garment storage bags are made of unstable plastics which can accelerate deterioration.
6. All wood and wood products contain oils and acids which can cause fabric deterioration. This includes cedar chests and non-acid free tissue paper. Lining boxes, drawers and chests with mylar (a stable plastic available at art supply stores) or polyethylene sheeting creates a suitable barrier. Use only non-buffered acid free and lignin free tissue, or washed, unbleached muslin, or 100% white cotton sheets to pad or cover stored textiles.
7. Ideal textile storage is flat with as few folds as possible. Space limitations do not always allow storage without folds. Pad all folds, puff out bodices, sleeves, and ruffles with rolled non-buffered acid and lignin free tissue paper. Fibers tend to break on fold lines or creases-so padding these areas and yearly refolding helps to prolong the integrity of the textile. Knits, bias cut, and beaded garments will not survive long term hanging storage. For large, flat items such as quilts and table linens, a sturdy cardboard tube wrapped with mylar and covered with non-buffered acid and lignin free tissue or washed muslin can be used to roll the item, being careful to smooth the items as it is rolled. Never fold items before rolling. An outer protective dust cover can be made of washed, unbleached muslin.
8. Although flat storage is preferred, some items are too bulky to store flat. If an item must be stored on a hanger, cover the hanger with polyester batting and cover that with washed, unbleached muslin. Use muslin or non-buffered acid and lignin free tissue to pad sleeves and folds. To relieve shoulder stress, make cotton twill tape suspenders tacked to the inner waist seam to evenly distribute the weight of a heavy skirt on the hanger. Cover with a loose fitting bag made of washed, unbleached muslin to shield the item from dust and light. Do not use metal wire, satin, or foam covered hangers. The satin and foam are unstable and will degrade fibers. The metal does not provide sufficient support, it might rust, and can sometimes initiate deterioration in wool or silk items.
9. Always use acid and lignin free materials. Washed, unbleached muslin, white 100% cotton sheets, non-buffered acid and lignin free tissue and acid free boxes are good materials to use when storing textiles. Acid free materials are available through many archival supply companies (see supply source list). Just because a company uses the term "archival" does not mean the products are safe. Always check for acid and lignin free materials. Do not use colored tissue paper. The dyes from the tissue may migrate into fabric and may be impossible to remove. Moreover, the acids in the tissue paper (even ordinary white tissue) are very damaging to fibers.

10. Embroideries, samplers and other types of needlework offer special challenges for long term storage or exhibit. Recommended storage is flat without folds. For valuable needlework it is best to consult with a textile conservator for the most appropriate method to use for storage or display of a specific item.
11. Be sure to label all stored items with an identification of the item, history of the item, and the date the item was packed for storage.

Photograph items before storage. Not only for insurance purposes, but for future reference to document the family treasure.

No storage method is perfect. Even with all of the research that has been done on textile storage there are some problems inherent in garment and fabrics that may prevent ideal preservation of the item during long term storage. Some fabrics are processed with chemicals that cause deterioration over time. Wooden or metal buttons and various trims may cause stains. If these items are easily removable it is best to store them with the items wrapped in non-buffered acid and lignin free tissue or polyethylene ziplock bags. Zippers or safety pins may rust. Some dyes dissolve fibers. There is no long term history of storing synthetic fabrics, so their reactions to long term storage are unknown. The methods described here are current accepted standards, but no method is guaranteed.

For more information regarding the care and storage of clothing and textiles contact the Museum Collections Department at (314)746-4441.

***BECAUSE NO STORAGE TECHNIQUE IS PERFECT THE MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY CANNOT BE RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY DAMAGE OR DETERIORATION WHICH MAY TAKE PLACE DURING STORAGE.**

Sources For Archival Materials

The Missouri Historical Society does not endorse the products of any of the companies listed below that provide archival storage materials for sale.

Gaylord Bros.

<http://www.gaylord.com/>

Metal Edge, Inc.

<http://www.metaledgeinc.com/>

Light Impressions Corp.

<http://www.lightimpressionsdirect.com/>

Archival Products

<http://www.archivalsuppliers.com/>

Archivart

<http://www.archivart.com/>

The Hollinger Corporation

<http://www.hollingercorp.com/>

University Products

<http://www.universityproducts.com/>