

# *Traditions Continue: The Care and Use of Heritage Textiles*

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*Don't just collect heritage textiles and put them away in drawers, use them and enjoy them!*

Old bed linens, quilts, tablecloths, dresser scarves, clothing, and similar items are very desirable to collectors. Wedding gowns, christening gowns, and other antique family clothing are textiles that many of us would like to preserve and pass on to future generations. Proper care of these items will help preserve them and retain their value.

The primary enemies of textiles are light, high temperatures, and dampness. A combination of high relative humidity and warm temperatures makes a favorable climate for the growth of mold and mildew and for infestation by insects.



Good housekeeping and keeping a moderate temperature and humidity in your home are the best deterrents.

Proper storage is important. Coming in contact with wood or most paper products may cause textiles to stain, darken, and become brittle because of the acid content. A cool, dark, dry room is the best place to store textiles. Wrap textiles in muslin or acid-free tissue paper and store in acid-free boxes if possible.

Have good air circulation in the storage area to discourage the growth of mold and insects. Take items out of storage several times a year to let them air.

All textiles should be cleaned before storing. Stains from food and perspiration will cause textiles to discolor and deteriorate. Insects are drawn to food stains. Examine your stored textiles periodically to check for insects and other problems. Isolate new items for at least three weeks and check for hatching larvae.

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Padded hangers should be used if the garment is to be hung. Wooden hangers wrapped with polyester quilt batting and covered with muslin are good. Garments and other items are best stored lying flat and wrapped in archival tissue or rolled on an archival tube. Whether items are folded for display or for storage, refold them periodically to prevent fold lines and fading.

Antique clothes can be used for drafting patterns to make reproductions, but they should never be worn. They are very fragile and modern-day chemicals such as deodorants, perfumes, makeup, etc., will damage the fabrics. Wearing cotton gloves when handling them is a good practice.



**Cleaning:** Valuable textiles and tapestries need to be cleaned by a professional cleaner or restorer of antique textiles. Most other cottons and linens may be washed by hand or dry-cleaned. Always check for color-fastness before washing. Use a cotton ball or a cotton swab dampened in warm, soapy water on small areas that cannot be easily seen. Wait five minutes and blot the area with white paper. If no color appears, you probably can wash the fabric safely. If color shows on the paper, dry-clean the item if possible OR do nothing. Test each color before washing. Use your own judgment about whether to try to clean the item. Take care in drying and ironing antique linens; high heat can be damaging. Drying flat or line drying is best for most cotton and linen items. Turning items inside out if you are drying outdoors will help prevent fading. A dry method of cleaning would be to use a low-powered vacuum. Put a sheet of nylon filament over the fabric or nylon netting over the hose and vacuum gently.

**Washing:** Use soap or detergent designed for hand washing or for washing vintage textiles. For larger items such as quilts, consult several

references and decide which technique is appropriate for your item. Always be careful not to cause strain on the fabric. The weight of the water can damage fragile fabric. Dry flat on clean toweling or muslin sheets.

**Documentation:** Document what you know about your treasures. Include photographs of the item in use, if available, as well as dates of origin, maker, and any other information or oral history related to the item. Documentation increases the value to your family and others.

**Hints for Using Vintage Textiles:** Before disassembling old textiles to use for other purposes, you may want to check with a reputable dealer, appraiser, or other experts to determine their value. Unless they are very fragile and valuable, don't be afraid to use your linens. They can give you great joy in your home.

## Sources of Additional Information:

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