

# Family Heirlooms

## Conserving Old Clothing Treasures

As you discover historic clothing items among your family's personal collections, you may find some that appear to need repair or cleaning. It is generally not recommended to wash and clean historic pieces, since cleaning may destroy them.

First, examine the garment to see if pins, paper clips, safety pins, etc. were used to attach a label, loose button, hold seams together or attach loose trim. If any are present, remove them to avoid damaging the garment.

Since these old treasures may be quite fragile, examine the fabric and the garment carefully to determine if the piece is strong enough to withstand even these gentle care procedures.

### For The Most Gentle Care

Airing the garment may give it the freshness it needs.

- Hang the garment on a well padded hanger or lay it flat on clean, white towels or sheets.
- Air it out by placing it in slow moving air. (You do not want the item to billow in the breeze.)
- Avoid direct sunlight.

If the fabric is of fairly sturdy construction, this museum method of vacuuming may help freshen it.

- Cover the fabric with a clean nylon or fiberglass screen (available from hardware or home supply stores) that has been soaked in a water and detergent solution, rinsed and dried. The raw edges of the screen should be encased in twill tape to avoid snagging the fabric.
- Use a low suction hand vacuum cleaner. For further protection, cover the nozzle with cheesecloth or nylon net, and open any slots on the vacuum hose.
- Vacuum all areas from both sides. You may want to do the front and back, and inside and outside several times.

This is the only recommended home cleaning method.

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### Directions For Wet Cleaning White Garments

Wet cleaning is not recommended for dyed, printed, or embroidered garments where the embroidery is colored. Wet clean only white garments that are in good, sturdy condition.

Use a mild detergent and softened water: two teaspoons detergent per gallon of water. Orvus™ is a mild detergent. It is available in quilting stores and may be available in animal care centers. Many contemporary household laundry detergents contain an anti-pilling compound that is too harsh for historic items and should not be used to clean them.

Do not wet clean garments with a lining or interfacings, metal buttons, or metallic trim.

Fabric will become heavy when wet and could be damaged, therefore:

- Support the garment to be cleaned with a screen (nylon or fiberglass). Prepare the screen as indicated under vacuuming.
- Use a tray large enough to lay the garment flat or make a tray with 2-by-4 studs and plastic sheeting.
- Fill the tray with enough distilled or softened water to immerse the object. The water should be approximately room temperature for rinses and 90-105 degrees Fahrenheit for the wash. Soak the object in water only for approximately 1/2 hour. Never add water while the object is in the tray.
- Remove the object, drain the water, rinse the tray, and add sufficient water/detergent solution to immerse the object.
- Add the object and let soak for approximately 1/2 hour.
- Sponge, in a gentle up and down motion, on top of the garment to allow for penetration of the wash solution and cleaning.
- Remove the object, drain the water/detergent solution, rinse the tray, and begin the rinses.
- Rinse thoroughly (may require 5 or more rinses).
- Lift the screen out of the water to drain off the garment. Pat the garment dry with a clean white towel and place it on a clean white sheet.
- A fan on low speed may quicken the drying process. Do not allow the garment to billow.
- Do not iron the garment.

## Bleaching Yellowed Garments

Remember, yellowing is a natural process and may accurately reflect the original color of the garment. A stark bleached white garment may look artificial.

Bleaching of any type weakens the fibers and should not be attempted.

Wet cleaning may remove some yellowing. Wet cleaning will remove by-products of degradation, but you may not see a noticeable change in appearance.

## Repair of Old Garments

The only repair that is recommended is reattaching loose buttons or trim or hand-stitched seams that have broken. Other repairs alter the value of the garment and require knowledge of conservation and stitching skills.

## Storage Hints

- Store garments clean and free of soil.
- If storing for preservation, it is best to store them unironed.
- Avoid storage in any plastic bags; textiles need airing.
- Fragile garments should be stored flat.
- A clean white cotton sheet that has not been bleached will make a good protective lining in a storage container of wood or cardboard. Dust covers of cotton sheeting are recommended for boxes, drawers, cupboards, and closets to protect items from dust, abrasion, and light.
- Store garments with as few folds as possible. Folds should be loose and arranged near the outside of the container where there will be less weight to damage the fibers. Use pieces of clean white sheets or acid-free tissue paper to pad out and support folds.

- Pieces of clean, white sheets or acid-free tissue paper can be used to support three-dimensional garment parts, like leg-o-mutton sleeves, bows, hats, and shoes.
- If the garment is sturdy enough to be hung, hang on a well-padded hanger.
- Do not crowd or compress garments.
- Store garments in an environment of about 50% relative humidity and at room temperature.
- Changes in temperature and humidity should be kept at a minimum; therefore, attics and basements do not make good storage areas for clothing.
- Wooden storage cabinets change less rapidly than do metal cabinets when external temperature or humidity changes. Ideally, wooden cabinets should be lined with washed muslin, tacked in place with smooth-headed, rust-free nails.
- Avoid excessive use of mothballs. Position the mothballs above the garments in a muslin bag. The fumes are heavier than air and will flow around the garment as they sink.

## Reference:

Landi, S. The Textile Conservator's Manual, London: Butterworths, 1992.

No endorsement of companies or their products mentioned is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar companies or their products not mentioned.

Prepared by Sara Kadolph, associate professor, and Janis Stone, extension professor, Textiles and Clothing, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011-1120.

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