

Clothing Fact Sheet

Cleaning & Storing Wedding Gowns and Textile Heirlooms



Keepsakes from special occasions provide a sense of continuity and richness to our lives. Rites of passage, in particular, are often characterized by special clothing or textile items.

Wedding gowns or christening gowns, for example, may be worn by subsequent generations or members of the same generation. Proper care and storage of textile heirlooms can prolong their longevity in family traditions.

No special treatments or storage procedures guarantee against textile deterioration or damage. A few simple precautions can help limit deterioration and maintain the textile for future use. Whether the expected storage period is long or short term, consider the following recommendations. (Note: Examples refer to wedding or christenings gowns; however, recommendations generally apply to other clothing and textile items.)

Cleaning

After wearing for an event, the garment should be cleaned within several days or weeks at the most. The longer soil and stains remain, the more difficult they are to remove.

Many individuals quickly examine a garment and seeing no obvious stains, believe no soiling has occurred; therefore, cleaning is unnecessary.

Over time, colorless soil and stains can age and discolor, as well as damage fabric. Soil and grit cause abrasion and deteriorate textiles. Food stains can discolor fabrics and attract insects. Sugar stains, as might be found in soda or alcoholic beverages, dry clear but over time turn brown and are difficult to remove. Perspiration stains and body oils in fabric can oxidize, turn yellow, and cause permanent damage and deterioration.

Dry Cleaning

Most wedding gowns and some christening gowns require dry cleaning, especially garments made from silk, acetate, rayon or wool. Dry cleaning removes oil-based stains including greasy foods, body oils, make-up and general soil that might collect at the hem of wedding gowns.

Dry cleaning solvents alone do not remove water and sugar based stains. Be certain to tell dry cleaners about these stains, both type and location, so they can be pre-treated with appropriate solvents.

Tell the dry cleaner that you want a fresh or filtered solvent. Soil from dirty solvent can redeposit on garments, especially light-colored fabrics.

Some dry cleaners offer special treatments to kill fungi or bacteria. These treatments are not only unnecessary and more expensive, but may not be safe for humans wearing the garments in the future. Standard dry cleaning solvents generally kill fungi and most bacteria without harm to humans.

Occasionally, wedding gowns include recommendations to send the garment away for special cleaning. Before doing so, check with your local dry cleaner. The procedure may be both expensive and unnecessary. Some dry cleaners offer processing that does not involve tumbling the garment. This would be consideration for historic garments. Always work with a reputable dry cleaner to discuss the possible options.

Wet Cleaning

Some newer garments can be hand or machine washed satisfactorily at home. Christening gowns or country-style wedding gowns in cotton, linen or synthetic blend fabrics can often be laundered. Check the care label on garments and ask the salesperson at time of purchase.

If garments are hand-sewn, fabrics should be pre-washed before cutting out the garment pieces. Laundering can remove water-soluble, sugar-and oil-based stains.

Some pre-treatment may be necessary for specific types of stains. Be certain to rinse fabrics thoroughly and do not starch if the item will be stored. Chlorine bleach should be avoided. It can damage fabrics and, if not thoroughly rinsed out, can cause continued deterioration over time. If bleaching is necessary, oxygen type bleaches are recommended, followed by thorough rinsing.

When handling older garments to use for a wedding or a christening, or to clean after use, do so with special care. Take them to a reputable dry cleaner who has experience with historic textile fabrics.

Antique cotton or linen fabrics, such as christening gowns and some wedding gowns, can sometimes be hand-laundered at home. This can be done using special cleaning products for delicate fabrics and washing the garment(s) flat in the bathroom tub. Delicate garments should be supported by a fiberglass screen underneath. Use it to lift the wet fabric from the tub. Fiberglass screens are available from hardware stores. Wash the screen first in soap and water to remove oils, then bind edges with muslin fabric. Excessive heat and pressure can damage older textiles. Avoid ironing these items, if possible.

Packing wedding gowns or textile heirlooms for storage is an important part of their preservation. Proper storage of these items can prolong their longevity and keep them a part of family tradition for many years.

Please remember no special treatments or storage procedures guarantee against textile deterioration or damage. However, a few precautions can help limit deterioration and maintain the textile.

There are several things to consider before storing your heirloom. After the item has been properly cleaned, you will need to decide if commercial or at home packaging is appropriate. A decision about horizontal or vertical storage will also need to be made. All of these decisions will need to be made depending on the type of item you are preserving.

Commercial Packaging

Most dry cleaners offer a special package to clean and box wedding gowns. This could be requested for heirloom textiles.

The service usually involves a large box of acid-free cardboard in which the gown is packed with acid-free tissue between folds of the garment and as padding in the bodice and sleeves. Over time, the acid produced by standard tissue paper and cardboard can deteriorate textiles, especially cellulosic fibers such as cotton, linen, and rayon.

The initial box is usually placed in a larger protective box. Sometimes slits are present in the box to allow air circulation.

Some dry cleaners offer an optional vacuum seal. However, the International Fabricate Institute (IFI) indicates that this process isn't necessary. No seal is permanent. Also, heirloom textiles should be checked yearly for general condition, at which time the seal would be broken.

IFI also suggests that clear plastic or cellophane "windows" on boxes be removed or punctured to allow air movement. Moisture could condense on the clear window and support growth of mildew.

At Home Packaging

Packaging heirloom garments can be done at home. Before doing so, check garments carefully in sunlight for soils and stains, even if they have been professionally cleaned.

Look for soil, stains, or the presence of wrinkles that have been pressed in. Both stains and wrinkles may be impossible to remove at a later date.

To package garments at home, use a large, deep box to avoid excessive folds. If possible, the box and tissue should be acid-free. Cardboard boxes should be avoided since they produce an acidic environment which weakens textiles over time.

White tissue is recommended. Blue or other colors can bleed onto fabric if they become wet. Use of non-acid-free tissue is acceptable if it is replaced yearly. Washed and thoroughly rinsed white cotton sheets can also be used to line the box. Acid builds up over time in cellulosic materials such as cotton, linen, and rayon.

Wash and thoroughly rinse storage materials made from these fibers every year or two to remove acid build-up and limit potential for deterioration.

To pack a large garment, such as a wedding gown, line the box with tissue or cotton sheeting. Place the garment in the box so as to limit folds. Place crumpled tissue at folds and in the bodice and sleeves for shaping.

If possible, remove fabric-covered metal buttons, rubberized dress shields, or foam padding. These items can oxidize, rust, or deteriorate and result in damage to fabric over time. If not possible, use crumples tissue as a buffer between these items and the garment.

Place tissue over the garment and add the lid. Do not seal. In fact, slits to allow air circulation could be added.

Avoid wrapping in plastic unless water damage is possible. Plastic bags are unstable. Plastic bags can give off damaging fumes, trap moisture, and provide an environment for mildew to grow.

Horizontal versus Vertical Storage

Horizontal storage has been discussed above. This is desirable for heavy garments with beading or wedding gowns with heavy trains or sheer bodices. Knitted garments should be stored flat to avoid stretching over time. Also, small garments such as christening gowns are easily stored flat.

In some instances, vertical or storage on a hanger is acceptable. Vertical storage reduces wrinkling, but can weaken shoulders or bodice since the full weight of the garment hangs from these areas. If vertical storage is possible without undue damage to the garment, generously pad and wrap a sturdy hanger with cotton batting and cotton sheeting.

Sew cotton twill straps or a bodice shell slightly shorter than the bodice to the waistline. The weight of the garment will fall primarily on the twill straps or shell, and distribute the stress on the fabric. Stuff the bodice and sleeve with crumpled tissue or cotton sheeting.

Make a clean cotton sheeting cover. Avoid synthetic materials, as they develop static and attract dust. Wash the cotton cover and other cotton storage supplies yearly. Also, do not use plastic bags for long term storage.

Occasionally, small textile or accessory items can be stored flat or rolled on tubes. When using tubes, they should be acid-free or wrapped in clean cotton sheeting.

If the textile is subject to dye fading, contains metallic threads, or is unusually fragile, interleaf acid-free tissue as you roll the item. Roll without tension and be careful to prevent wrinkles or folds from forming. Wrap the tube in cotton sheeting and tie loosely with cotton twill tape for storage. If possible, avoid rolling textiles that are painted, as cracking may occur over time.

Storage

Store heirloom textiles, either hanging or boxed, in cool, dry areas, free from drastic temperature changes. Basements, attics or exterior wall closets are generally unsatisfactory. High attic temperatures cause oxidation of stains, finishes or trims. Basement areas are subject to moisture, mildew and flooding. Exterior closets have less stable temperatures.

Select an area with adequate air circulation, but away from light. Each year, remove the item to check its condition. This is especially important the first year. If stains are noticeable, the potential for removal is greater than if left for longer periods.

Replace non-acid-free tissue or wash cotton sheeting wrappings. Repack the textile so folds are in different locations.

If garments are kept in drawers rather than boxes, do not place heavy items on top of them which may cause crushing and folds. Also, certain fibers, such as cotton, linen or rayon, should not be stored in cedar chests. The acid given off by the wood in the cedar chest can weaken the textile over time.

Caring for textiles and garments worn for special occasions can prolong their beauty and reduce deterioration over time. With proper treatment, items bought or made new today can be the family heirlooms of future generations. A little extra effort now can enrich the lives of family members to come.

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