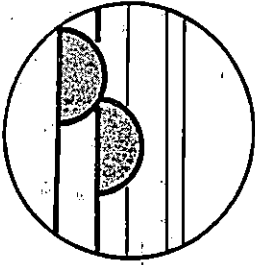


## QUILT CONSERVATION

### The Care and Cleaning of Old Quilts



No two quilts are alike. What is best for one quilt is not automatically best for another. Sometimes it is advisable to clean a quilt, while other times it is best to leave it alone.

Old quilts should always be handled to avoid causing stress to the fabric and fibers. Support their weight evenly while moving them. Hold them gently. Pack quilts loosely in storage. Use clean hands, free of oils and hand creams.

Silk quilts, especially crazy quilts, are difficult to clean. Many of the pieces are weighted with mineral salts to make them heavier and give a stiffer texture. Dyes used on silks often are not colorfast. Wet-cleaning may redeposit the salts and dyes onto adjoining sections, causing further damage. Dry-cleaning further dries out fibers that may already be too dry and brittle. The only completely safe method of cleaning a silk quilt is vacuuming, which will be described further on.

Cotton and linen quilts have more options for cleaning, again depending on condition. Wet-cleaning is often possible unless the fabric is too fragile, not colorfast, or glazed. Glazed finishes are usually removed by wet-cleaning. Dry cleaning again can damage the quilt.

**DRY-CLEANING** This method is usually not recommended for any type of antique textile. The cleaning solution usually has many batches of clothing put through it before being changed. Dirt and chemicals from other items may be deposited on your quilt, hastening its deterioration. The tumbling action causes physical stress and damage to the fibers. Moisture, natural and vital to the fibers of your quilt, is drawn out, causing brittleness and breakage.

**VACUUMING** Sometimes this is the only cleaning process recommended and it is always the first step in caring for your quilt. Any loose dirt and dust will be removed. Bind the edges of a piece of fiberglass window screen with bias tape to prevent snagging. Place the quilt on a clean, flat, smooth surface. Lay the screen on it to prevent the quilt from being sucked up into the vacuum. Using the lowest suction possible, go over the entire quilt, moving the screen as necessary. Do the same for the back of the quilt.

**REPAIR** Check the quilt for fragile areas. Match netting, organza, chiffon, or other sheer fabric by color, texture, and invisibility to the piece to be repaired. Cover the fragile area or sandwich it with the chosen fabric. Do not tie knots or wet the thread with saliva. Either will cause damage. Using the finest needle and thread possible, stitch around the area with large stitches, no smaller than  $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Try to follow the grain of the fabric. Beading needles and ravelings from the repair fabric are often used. If wet cleaning is to be done, use any lightweight fabric and white cotton thread for temporary stabilizing. Synthetic or silk thread may be too strong and cause further damage. After cleaning, choose a matching fabric and use the above method. All repair work should be able to be taken off without causing stress in case more damage is happening or a better method becomes known.

**WET-CLEANING** Test for colorfastness first by putting a drop of water in an inconspicuous place. Press a white blotter on the damp area. If there is color on the blotter, the dye will run. Test all colors on the quilt. If a cleaning solution is to be used, test a drop of it for color fastness also.

Locate a container ideally large enough to hold the quilt without folding it. One may be made by nailing four boards into a square and lining it with plastic. By carefully

folding the quilt in accordion pleats, a bathtub may be used. Lay the quilt on a piece of fiberglass window screen or well washed porous fabric. Grasp the screen or fabric to lower and remove the quilt from the water. Fibers become very fragile and tear easily when wet and subjected to strain.

Fill the container with enough 70° water to cover the quilt. Distilled, soft, or deionized water are best to use, but tap water can be used. Try to use distilled or deionized water on the last rinse if possible, to remove any minerals deposited by the hard tap water. Soak ½ hour to 4 hours, depending on the amount of soil and the color of the water. Gently agitate by pumping up and down. Do not rub the quilt. When the water becomes colored, remove the quilt, drain, and replace the water. If the quilt is really soiled, on the second bath, add enough pure, mild, natural, neutral SOAP to the water to make it feel silky. Be sure it is completely dissolved. Do not use detergents or bleaches as they are too strong. Return the quilt to the bath and repeat the soaking and pumping process. Rinse the quilt several times by the same method until all soap residue is removed.

Lift the quilt onto a large, flat, smooth surface covered with clean plastic sheeting. Gently unfold the quilt. Blot excess water with clean cloth towels or mattress pad. Keep the quilt flat to dry it. Do not put it in a clothes dryer or on a clothesline. A fan placed several feet away may help the process. Turn the quilt occasionally onto clean, dry plastic so both sides can dry evenly. Outdoor drying is usually not recommended, but it may be used if the quilt is kept in the shade and away from trees and plants that might drip sap or pollen dust.

**STORAGE** Quilts should not be in direct contact with wood. Wood is acidic, and acid destroys cotton and linen. Cover closets, drawers, and chests with muslin that may be removed and washed every year. Cardboard boxes are also acidic and should also be lined with muslin. Some sources advise using acid-free paper for lining storage containers. This paper is expensive, difficult for the layman to obtain, and also needs replacing every year or two. Muslin is expensive at first, but its reuseability makes it cheaper in the long run.

Fold the quilts in thirds to store them, placing crumpled tissue or muslin in the folds to prevent sharp creases. Large cardboard (carpet) tubes can also be covered with muslin. Roll the quilt on with the face side out. Cover any storage unit with muslin to block out light and dust. Refold and reroll the quilts twice a year to prevent permanent fold lines from developing into breakage lines.

Plastic should never be used in storage as it condenses moisture to cause mildew, does not allow the fibers to breathe, attracts dust by static electricity, and exudes fumes and chemicals that cause damage. If plastic must be used to prevent water damage, make sure open spaces are left for air to enter.

Ideally, the humidity should remain at 50% and the temperature about 65° - 70° F in the storage area. Extreme fluctuation of either factor causes the fibers to swell and shrink, causing irreparable damage. Thus attics and basements should be avoided.

Light is also very damaging and should be blocked out. Sunlight and fluorescent lights contain ultraviolet rays which fade colors and deteriorate fabrics. Incandescent lights cause heat and drying damage.

When in doubt about your antique quilt, contact a professional textile conservator for advice. Treated with the proper, gentle care and little strain, today's antique quilts will last many more years for our descendants to cherish.

#### REFERENCES

Smithsonian Institution, Division of Textiles, "The Care and Cleaning of Antique Cotton and Linen Quilts" and "Care of Victorian Silk Quilts and Slumberthrows"

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