BASIC HOME TEXTILE CARE

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Caring for your personal textile collection should be a pleasure, not a burden. We all find our own balances between our textiles’ preservation needs on the one hand and our desire to display (and possibly use) our pieces, as well as our available time and budget for collection care. You can be a good steward of your collection without spending a fortune, giving up your day job, or locking them away in a dark vault. It is perfectly legitimate to establish a hierarchy of care in which you treat your finest pieces as museum treasures and your lesser holdings as everyday workhorses in your home.

Handling

Do: Always wash your hands well using simple soap with as few additives as possible, and wash them repeatedly as necessary, even if you are using gloves; this is especially necessary for people whose hands tend to sweat. If you choose to wear gloves, these can be either clean white cotton (available through archival-supply companies) or powderless nitrile disposable gloves (available at drugstores). Take the gloves off before touching other things so the gloves stay clean. Remove long scarves or necklaces, bracelets, wristwatches, and rings before handling textiles and keep your hair out of the way. Work on a clean, flat, uncluttered surface. Focus your attention, find your rhythm.

Don’t: Wear hand lotion or perfume or chew gum while handling textiles. Don’t work near food or beverages. Don’t let pets or small children into your work area.

Cleaning

Do: Vacuum textiles carefully through a fine-gauge plastic-mesh screen on very low suction as needed. Test for color-fastness by rubbing an inconspicuous area gently with a damp Q-Tip to check for color transfer. To remove stains from color-fast pieces, spot-clean or soak them using a dilute solution of hydrogen peroxide (available at drugstores) in filtered or distilled water; begin with a 1:6 ratio and increase the concentration of hydrogen peroxide to a maximum of 1:3 as needed. Ivory bar soap in lukewarm water may be used to clean less valuable textiles.

Don’t: Never have pieces in your collection dry-cleaned. Never put your pieces in the washing machine. Don’t wet-clean your textiles without checking for color-fastness first. Never use hot water or harsh detergent to clean your pieces. Avoid using Woolite.
Storage

Do: Store your textiles in a dark, smoke-free environment. A stable temperature between 62 and 72 degrees with relative humidity between 45 and 55 percent is ideal. Store textiles away from exterior walls and heat sources to minimize temperature fluctuations that cause expansion and contraction friction. Use well-washed all-cotton fabric (such as old sheets and unbleached muslin) and/or polyethylene (such as basic black trash bags) to wrap textiles if you can’t afford archival materials. Ideally textiles should be able to “breathe” a little to prevent moisture build-up. Allowing some spiders in your home helps control other insects that may damage textiles. Use pyrethrum, a moth repellent made from chrysanthemums if you need to (unless you’re allergic to it).

Store textiles as flat as possible and evenly supported on clean, smooth, nonreactive surfaces. Repack your collection at least once a year, folding each piece in different places than it was folded before so its fibers can relax. If you layer multiple textiles within a container, put the heaviest pieces on the bottom, the lightest and/or most fragile on top. Interleave tissue, well-washed all-cotton fabric, or polyethylene between layers of textiles. Pad the folds of delicate or heavy pieces with scrunched twists of tissue to minimize creasing. Pad the folds of metallic-fiber textiles to prevent splitting along creases.

Large textiles may be rolled on archival tubes or regular cardboard tubes sheathed in polyethylene that is covered with a layer of well-washed, all-cotton cloth. Place archival tissue on top of the textile as you roll it onto the tube to prevent the textile from rubbing against itself. Cloth or Tyvek wrappers may be used to protect rolled textiles. Tubes should be a couple inches longer than the width of the textile at each end. If possible, suspend tubes by threading dowels through them and attaching the ends of the dowels to supports so that no weight rests on the rolled textiles.

If you do invest in archival boxes, tubes, and tissue paper, replace them at least every 7 years as they become acidic. Use alkaline-buffered tissue for plant-based (cellulosic) fibers such as cotton and linen, unbuffered tissue for animal-based (protein) fibers such as wool and silk. Abaca fiber is

Don’t: Never use mothballs in your home: they are carcinogenic. Do not use cedar chests to store textiles due to off-gassing that contaminates fibers. Textiles should not be stored in contact with unsealed wood or nonarchival paper due to the high acid content of these materials. Never use clear plastic bags, whose chemicals can eat through fiber. Do not store textiles near plumbing. Don’t forget to examine your stored textiles thoroughly at least once a year to assess their condition.
Display

Do: Remember that light damage is cumulative and irreversible: some of it is visible as fading, but it also causes deterioration that you can’t see. Always display textiles away from direct sunlight unless you have UV-filtering window glass (which reduces but does not eliminate sun damage). Make a habit of closing blinds or curtains to protect textiles. Display your best pieces in the dimmer, less heavily used places in your home to prolong their lives. Choose display methods carefully and customize them for each textile. Rotate your pieces as much as is feasible to “rest” them in storage for a while after you’ve had them out, allowing fibers to relax and reducing cumulative light exposure. Use UV-filtered glass or Plexiglas on framed pieces and allow air to circulate. Rugs should be turned periodically so they wear evenly. Support a heavy textile that you want to hang evenly along its entire upper edge to balance the stress on its fibers; a muslin casing hand-sewn to the back of the piece with heavy-duty all-cotton thread works well for most pieces.

Don’t: Don’t display pieces near forced-air heating ducts or fireplaces. Don’t shine spotlights on your textiles. Don’t expose silk to high light levels. Don’t frame textiles so they touch the glass or Plexiglas, which can trap moisture that can grow mold. Don’t use polyester thread or a sewing machine when mounting textiles. Don’t do anything irreversible (such as trimming textiles, gluing them, or making hanging holes in them) unless there’s really no alternative.

Resources

The Textile Museum in Washington, D.C. has excellent online resources for home textile care: http://www.textilemuseum.org/care/care.htm

The University of Nebraska has a good, accessible online guide: http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/pages/publicationD.jsp?publicationId=680

The Midwest Art Conservation Center is a reputable conservation service based in Minneapolis: www.preserveart.org/

Gaylord is a leading archival-supply company with an extensive mail-order business: www.gaylord.com