

Caring for Textiles

Textiles have been produced over the centuries using a wide variety of materials and techniques. Natural fibres such as cotton, silk, flax, and wool and manufactured fibers such as rayon, nylon, and polyester and elastane (Lycra™).

Textiles can be simple in structure and composition or can be part of composite objects that incorporate other materials like paper, leather, glass, metals, paint, stone, horn, bone, shell and feathers.

Textiles, such as quilts, tapestries, embroideries, flags, uniforms and gowns may be treasured for many reasons and most textiles have served as functional objects. This history of use, along with the environment and handling will affect the condition of a textile. Making informed decisions regarding the handling, display, and storage of a textile can make the difference between a short life and preservation for future generations.

Environment

The deterioration of textiles is often due to a combination of physical, biological, and/or chemical factors working together to cause damage. Inappropriate lighting; inappropriate temperature and relative humidity levels; excessive dust and dirt; insects; mould and incorrect handling all contribute to damage. High temperatures cause damage to textiles by accelerating chemical changes within the textile and can contribute to changes in relative humidity. The fluctuations in relative humidity can cause damage by expansion and contraction of the fibres and the larger textile object, which over time will affect the integrity of the fibre structure. High relative humidity will encourage mould growth.

Light

Both natural and artificial light can fade colour and contribute to the degradation and permanent damage of many textile fibres. The rate at which damage occurs is determined by the brightness of the light and the duration of exposure. As with paper objects, light damage is cumulative and irreversible. If long-term preservation is a concern, protecting textiles from light exposure is the single most effective preservation measure you can take.

Temperature and Relative Humidity

Textiles should be stored and displayed as far away from heat sources (fireplaces, spotlights, windows, etc.) as possible. Basements or roof spaces are not suitable for storage of textiles due to the potential for extreme fluctuations of temperature and relative humidity.

Pollution and Particulate Soiling

Dust, dirt and car exhaust, are common pollutants that can cause physical and chemical damage. Textiles are particularly susceptible to abrasion and physical damage caused by dust and other surface soiling. Eliminating exposure to these problems is an important aspect of preventive conservation. The use of particulate air filters and protective display and storage enclosures is recommended when planning for the long-term preservation of textiles in a museum environment.

Storage



Textiles are best preserved when stored in clean, well-ventilated and well maintained areas. Controlling dust and keeping storage areas clean will reduce the likelihood of damage caused by pests, mould and fungi. Inspect your textiles at six-monthly intervals to identify problems early. Problems may be indicated by an increase in textile discoloration, tarnishing of metal components, and the presence of a sweet or musty odor. Signs of insect infestation include small, irregular holes and/or the presence of insect casings and excrement.

In a domestic situation, storage of textiles in boxes and padded with acid free tissue paper or hung on padded hangers, covered with a breathable cloth cover will be the most effective option.

The materials used in frames and storage enclosures must be carefully selected to ensure a protective and stable environment. Use archival materials such as barrier films, acid-free unbuffered mount boards, tubes, and storage boxes that are available through conservation suppliers

Handling

Proper handling is vital. Before attempting to handle or move a textile, examine it carefully to see if there is any damage. Support a textile so that the weight is distributed evenly. A delicate textile may be supported by sliding a piece of cardboard underneath, while a heavier textile may be rolled on a large tube.

Clean hands are important when handling textiles, as your skin contains oils and salts. Wash your hands frequently or wear white cotton gloves. Remove jewellery or anything that may catch and do not rub or drag your hands across the textile. Be aware that thread and fibers can be easily pulled, frayed, and weakened depending upon the condition of the textile.

For further information

If your textile object requires special attention you may contact a textiles conservator at the email address below. They can advise about the safest means by which to stabilise, conserve and restore your object.

conservation@anmm.gov.au