

QUILT CARE

Tips on Storing and Caring for Your Quilt

Have you ever wondered whether or not you should wash your Great Grandmother's silk and velvet quilt? Does that antique quilt you've stored in the attic worry you? Have you ever wanted to display your quilt on the wall in your living room? Caring for and displaying old textiles can be difficult and expensive, but following a few simple rules and guidelines can add years to the lives of your antique textiles. Here are a few of the practices which can help:

Handling Your Quilt

1. Wash hands frequently or wear cotton gloves. Remove sharp jewelry and tie back long hair before handling textiles.
2. Do not smoke, eat or drink around textiles.
3. Use only pencils for taking notes or for sketching quilts.
4. Do not place any objects such as tools, light fixtures, books and other personal items on quilts or quilt storage units.
5. Keep quilts on clean, dry surfaces. Do not place textiles directly on, in or next to cardboard, unsealed wood or non-rag (acidic) paper.

Storing Your Quilt

1. Store textiles in a dark, dry place. Attics should be avoided because generally they have poor ventilation and basements are poor because they are usually too humid. Note: ideal temperature is 65-75°F and ideal relative humidity is 45-55%.
2. KEEP QUILTS OUT OF DIRECT SUNLIGHT. The ultraviolet rays in daylight and fluorescent light break down fabric dyes and speed up the oxidation of fibers. Brown and black dyes, silks and other delicate fabrics are particularly sensitive to light.
3. Keep textiles away from insects, mice and other vermin. (Do not use moth crystals when there is insect infestation -- they are hazardous to your health!)
4. Quilts can be stored folded in acid-free boxes or storage units or rolled around cardboard tubing. If you choose the rolled method of storage, it's best to purchase acid-free cardboard tubes from an archival supply vendor (see attached list). If an acid-free tube is not used, cover the tube with a protective barrier layer of tin foil, then muslin or acid free tissue. If quilts are stored folded, folds should be padded with acid-free tissue paper in the folds.
5. If space is at a premium or if your quilts contain thick stuffed work or embellishments, the folded method of storage is preferable.
6. Don't stack too many folded quilts on top of each other or else the weight of all of the quilts will create creases that are hard to get out. For the same reason, unfold and refold your quilts every 3-6 months to avoid severe creasing.

7. Acid-free boxes or papers are usually best for storing quilts, but if unavailable, quilts can be wrapped in clean cotton sheets or washed, unbleached muslin.

8. Plastics should generally NOT BE USED for storage. They contain harmful vapors which contribute to the deterioration of the fabrics. Plastics which are particularly harmful: dry cleaner's bags, heavy duty garbage bags, garment bags and Styrofoam.

9. Wooden storage containers should be sealed with a protective coating of polyurethane varnish, then lined with unbleached, washed muslin or acid-free paper. Metal containers should also be lined with this muslin or paper.

10. Newspapers and cardboard boxes are NOT OKAY because they are full of harmful decaying agents -- just remember how your newspaper looks after being out in the sun for only a few minutes. Think of what contact with your quilt can mean!

Labeling Your Quilt

Part of maintaining good care of your quilt involves keeping with it any information you have (such as maker's name, date, pattern name, MQP#, etc.). This information could be typed onto either a piece of washed cotton or acid-free paper, then loosely basted onto the quilt.

Cleaning Your Quilt

There are two accepted ways of cleaning your quilt, but generally speaking only one should be used: vacuuming. Lay the quilt out on a large, clean surface. (If the quilt is very delicate first place a fiberglass or nylon screen over it.) Then gently pass a low-suction, handheld vacuum with small brush attachment over the quilt.

Washing (the wet-cleaning method) a quilt can be done but only with great caution. It is not recommended unless done by a qualified textile conservator. DON'T WASH YOUR QUILT if it contains any of the following: inked signatures, a dye that appears unstable, fabrics that are seriously deteriorated, the use of glazed or silk fabrics, the use of woolen yarns with questionable dyes or if it has never been washed. Remember that textile fibers are much more fragile when wet.

If however, you have determined that it is desirable to attempt washing your quilt, first test wash a small section to make sure that the dyes are stable and won't run. Once you have decided that it is safe to wash your quilt, keep in mind the following suggestions:

- Use a very mild detergent such as Ivory Liquid or Orvus (sold at quilt shops as Quilt Soap) in a solution of 1/2 ounce of detergent to 1 gallon of distilled, filtered or softened water.
- Use a container large enough to accommodate the entire quilt at one time (some people recommend using the bathtub).
- Do not agitate the quilt in the water.
- Rinse by pressing down on the quilt with the palm of your hand or with a cellulose sponge.
- Remove excess water by pressing gently with clean white toweling or mattress padding.
- Lift quilt with a towel sling or with both arms so that the weight is evenly distributed. DO NOT lift by one edge or corner.
- Lay flat to dry on a clean non-porous surface.

NOTE: Historic textiles should NEVER BE PRESSED with a hot iron.

Dry cleaning is NOT RECOMMENDED because the dry cleaning method involves rough agitation of the quilt inside the dry cleaning machine and the dry cleaning solvents may harm some fabrics.

Displaying Your Quilt

One of the most logical places to display your quilt is on your bed, but even there it is wise to take a few precautions. Make sure that the quilt is not in direct sunlight, is away from sources of heat and water, and will not be accessible to pets.

If you want to hang your quilt, there are several accepted safe methods, three of which are described below:

1. **Sleeve Method:** Sew a 4" wide unbleached muslin sleeve along the whole width of the top edge of the quilt. Use stitches which go through all three layers of the quilt. Insert a 3/4 inch or 1 inch wooden dowel (sealed with polyurethane varnish) throughout the sleeve and hang the dowel on the wall or from the ceiling.
2. **Velcro Method:** Attach a 2" wide strip of the hook side of Velcro tape onto a wooden board which is slightly shorter than the width of the quilt. Then machine stitch the remaining portion of Velcro tape onto a 3" wide washed cotton strip. This strip is in turn sewn onto the quilt using stitches that go through all three layers of the quilt. The Velcro/cotton strip is then attached to the Velcro strip fastened to the board.
3. **Mounting Method:** The most protective way is to mount the quilt on a fabric-covered wooden framework. First stretch a piece of washed cotton cloth to a sealed wooden framework (similar to a support for an artist's canvas). Both the cloth and the framework should be larger than the quilt itself. Secure the cotton cloth to the back of the frame with rust-free staples. Then attach the quilt to the cotton cloth by hand-sewing in zigzag patterns which run parallel to each other throughout the body of the quilt. A piece of Plexiglass could be used to cover the quilt as long as the Plexiglass does not rest against the quilt surface. The Plexiglass and frame should not be airtight. Ventilation in the frame system will prevent mold and mildew from forming.

NEVER hang a quilt in direct sunlight.

NEVER hang a quilt with clip-on metal curtain hangers. The weight of the quilt gradually creates small tears where it is clipped.

NEVER hang a quilt by directly tacking or nailing it to the wall.

Quilts that are hung should be rested periodically, because of the stress that occurs over extended lengths of time.

Quilts that are hung in the open should be periodically vacuumed to keep dust from damaging the fibers.

Bibliographic References

American Quilter's Society, *Protecting Your Quilts: A Guide for Quilt Owners*, Paducah, KY: American Quilter's Society, 1996.

Gunn, Virginia, "The Care and Conservation of Quilts," *American Quilt Study Group Technical Guide*, American Quilt Study Group, NB, 1988.

Mailand, Harold, F., *Consideration for the Care of Textiles and Costumes: A Handbook for the Non-Specialist*, Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1980. An inexpensive basic guide to the cleaning, storage and exhibition of historic textiles, it is available from the Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1200 West 38th Street, Indianapolis, Indiana 46208.

Orlofsky, Patsy, "The Collector's Guide for the Care of Quilts in the Home." *The Quilt Digest 2*, San Francisco: Kiracofe and Kile, 1984, pp. 58-69.

Puentes, Nancy O'Bryant, *First Aid for Family Quilts*, Moon Over the Mountain Publishing Co., Wheatridge, CO, 1986.

Find a Conservator

American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works

<http://www.conservation-us.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.viewPage&pageId=495&parentID=472>

The Henry Ford-preservation services

<http://www.hfmgv.org/about/conservation.aspx>

Information copied from website of the Great Lakes Quilt Center in East Lansing, MI

<http://museum.msu.edu/glqc/quiltcare.html>