

## LIVE Q&amp;A

## Julia Brennan of Caring for Textiles on preserving heirlooms

*Julia Brennan, founder of Caring for Textiles, joined staff writer Jura Koncius last week for our Home Front online chat. Here is an edited excerpt.*

**Q:** Is the delicate cycle on washing machines too rough for heirloom linens? Should you always hand wash, and do you have a favorite cleaner or soap to use?

**A:** All machines are too rigorous on heirlooms, delicate items, and special textiles or garments. Hand-washing can be controlled and treats textiles gently. Use a gentle detergent without brighteners, bleaches, enzymes, boosters, etc. Often a surfactant called Orvus is used in these detergents. It is pretty mild and works well.

**Q:** I have some very old lace table runners that have yellowed. Is there any method to safely whiten lace to its original color?

**A:** Cloth, lace and linens yellow and discolor with age. These stains and discolorations are sort of like "age spots." Some we just have to learn to live with. Any colored embroidery or other embellishment could bleed during cleaning. The discoloration may also indicate that the fabric/fibers are weakened, and therefore any cleaning needs to be done carefully. Don't use bleaches, harsh chemicals or washing machines. Try a simple flat wet cleaning with mild detergent, then dry the item flat in sunshine for no more than 30 to 40 minutes. Sun does weaken fibers, but a short exposure will help brighten the wet linen.

**Q:** Should you hand wash or dry-clean wool or cashmere knitwear?

**A:** They certainly can be hand washed in cool water with a mild detergent and laid flat, blocked out to the shape you want. It's an easy and good option. If a dye might bleed or there is a bad stain, consult an experienced dry-cleaner.

**Q:** How can I preserve my 1960s jeans?

**A:** Don't wash them. Keep them



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**Julia Brennan suggests hand-washing heirloom linens because it treats textiles gently.**

out of the light and safely wrapped, and only take them out occasionally. Love them and wear them gently.

**Q:** I have a very lightweight, sheer silk American flag with no hem. It was my father's and is probably from World War II. What's the best way to preserve or display it? It's currently rolled in a tube.

**A:** The flag could be mounted and framed and would look stunning. Or it can be safely stored in an archival cardboard flag storage box. If it is not too large, it can be rolled in a tube for long-term storage.

**Q:** I have several old family quilts made by my great-grandmother, probably in the late 1800s or early 1900s. They are in good to excellent condition, but I don't use them because I don't want them to get damaged, and honestly they don't fit into the style of my home. So they take up room in drawers, rolled inside acid-free paper. I struggle with what to do with them. Part of me wants to get rid of them. Is there a

responsible and respectful way to do that?

**A:** Why not contact the historical society or a local museum in her area of origin? You can provide family history and photos to accompany the quilts, and make a meaningful donation that will honor her. You can also invest in having them appraised and then decide if you want to consign them to a good antique or folk art gallery, or donate to a museum that collects and studies quilts of this period and type.

**Q:** I inherited some 1960s newspapers from my parents' house that contain coverage of the JFK assassination and the moon landing. I have them in a plastic bag in my closet. Do you have any suggestions for preserving them?

**A:** Consult a paper conservator. The American Institute for Conservation has an online referral for conservators by area. Plastic is generally not good, because moisture can build up inside sealed or closed plastic bags or containers and cause mold or mildew.

**Q:** I have three quilts made by my great-grandmother circa 1920 and 1930. How do I clean and store them?

**A:** Quilts are tricky because there are so many different materials and colors, stitching methods, and battings. I do not recommend trying to clean the quilts yourself. You can certainly vacuum them front and back carefully with a gentle-suction vacuum and/or shake them gently outside then air them in a shady location for a couple of hours. This is what our great-grandmothers and grandmothers did. For storage, try to place them in a clean, dry, cool location in your home. If you are using a trunk, chest or drawers, line it with cotton sheets to prevent wood acids from discoloring the quilts. Fold them gently and pad out the folds as best you can with acid-free tissue. Or store them in acid-free boxes, available from various archival and conservation supply companies such as University Products and Gaylord. Check the stored quilts once or twice a year, especially during seasonal changes, to see

whether there is any excessive moisture or insects.

**Q:** Do pheromone traps work to kill clothing moths? Are cedar or mothballs more useful to deter them?

**A:** Yes, pheromone traps work, but they attract insects. If you don't have an infestation, don't use them. Many things deter insects, but few eliminate them. In general, cedar chips, clove sachets and lemongrass are deterrents but will not prevent an invasion. Mothballs are unhealthy and again are only a deterrent, so I don't use them.

**Q:** Are you still stumped on occasion with a garment or fabric, or have you seen it all?

**A:** I've seen but a fraction. Often textiles come into my lab and pose a good challenge. This requires thoughtful consideration of different approaches to conservation treatment, testing, learning more about the piece or genre, and rethinking what is the most minimal and suitable method to apply. Often a perplexing textile takes weeks to mull over and may involve consulting with other conservators. That is what keeps the daily work alive, exciting and challenging. Knowing my professional limits is also key; I turn down projects that I do not feel I have the skills to address.

**Q:** What typically causes a dark rusty stain on old linens? Or is it just the age of any stain that turns dark?

**A:** Dark brown stains and a sort of "foxing" pattern of brown and dark yellow stains on fabrics are pretty common, and they happen when the cellulose breaks down and discolors. Wood or acidic paper or just the humid climate can also cause fabrics to splotch with brown stains. Rust stains are usually directly associated with a pin or metal component touching the fabric.

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