

# Preservation Begins at Home – How to Care for Your Textile Collections

**Julia M. Brennan**

Textile collections can vary from large carpets and tapestries to delicate lace, embroideries and personal clothing. We are bundled in them at birth, swathed in them in death, festooned in them for marriage and coming of age ceremonies; they are part of the very fabric of our lives, intimate and beloved. Because textiles are utilitarian and part of our everyday lives, antique textiles survive often only by chance. Moreover, textiles, being organic by nature, are among the most fragile of all artifacts.

It is important to properly care for the textiles in your home. Whether they are hanging on your walls or being stored in the attic, there are ways to ensure them a long life. Textiles are among the most sensitive types of artifacts and can be easily damaged by poor handling, storage or display. Take a look at the tips below; you'll be surprised at how many everyday factors such as sun exposure and insects can affect the longevity of textiles. Simple everyday care can go a long way.

First, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure! Using preventative measures can stop drastic and irreversible damage down the road. Being aware of proper handling, storage and display methods will protect your textile treasures. These are NOT museum standards but reasonable suggestions for home-based collections. At present, museum standards for Relative Humidity and Temperature are being revised. The below recommendations are based on observation and personal experience. If a textile is delicate, in poor condition or very rare, please consult a professional conservator.

## **The textiles you collect usually fall into three groups:**

### **1. Textiles you display**

### **2. Textiles you wear and use regularly**

### **3. Textiles you store long term**

Textiles can be damaged by many factors. The most common form of damage is just plain negligence and poor housekeeping. This may seem like common sense, but cleanliness will protect textiles from accumulated dirt, grime, and insects. Cleanliness will also prevent



Extreme example of fading – front and back of Rajasthani silk on cotton embroidery, after hanging in a home for 10 years.

staining, discoloration and deterioration.

To start, assess your textile collection and the types of storage spaces and furniture you have. This will help you organize your storage and decide on the sizes of boxes, tubes, rolled storage versus boxed, hanging closet space and available rooms to use. Set up a clean work space with a large table for packing, padding, labeling, vacuuming and rolling your textiles.

## **Here are the main agents of deterioration, short explanations, and a few handy tips:**

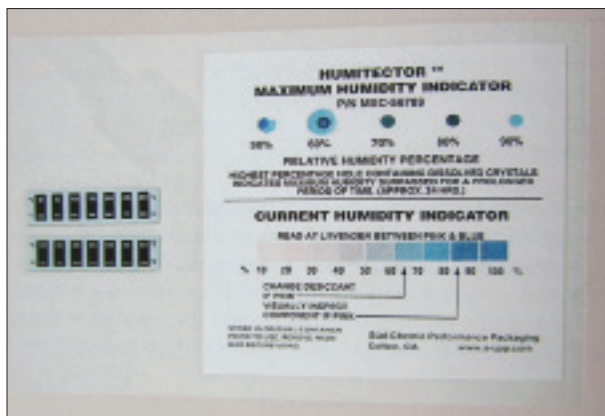
**1. Light** – Harsh sunlight and indoor lighting including incandescent, halogen and fluorescent can cause fading and rotting of textiles. Light damage is cumulative, so extended exposure will continually increase the damage to a textile. Fading cannot be reversed! We view many textiles as ghosts.

- Maintain light levels at 50 lux. Use your camera light meter to measure.

Use curtains and shades on windows.

Do not use strong spot lights, or minimize the exposure. Cover textiles on display with muslin dust and light cover while you are away.

- Rotate your collection, limiting display to 6-9 months.



Humidity indicators are inexpensive and an easy way to check humidity in storage locations in the home.

## 2. Temperature and humidity – cold is better than hot.

Hot temperatures and humidity accelerate deterioration and provide a happy home for insects, mold, mildew and corrosion. Humidity is worse for textiles than heat.

- Maintain a steady temperature of 50-80 F. Rapid temperature fluctuations are the worst for textiles, so steady temperatures are best.
- Maintain humidity 50-65% (not over 70%)
- Use a dehumidifier in storage rooms and damp areas.
- Use a simple fan to circulate air and prevent mold growth.
- Check stored textiles at least 2 times a year seasonally to look for mold, moisture, or other problems.
- If mold occurs, take the textile outside and place in a dry area with direct sunlight for 2-3 hours. Sun will fade the textile, but it will help kill the mold. (The fading is the lesser of the two evils at this point). Carefully brush or vacuum off the mold spores. Throw out vacuum bag with mold spores.
- Wet and dry cleaning will kill mold. BUT not all textiles can be safely cleaned.

## 3. Dust, dirt and pollutants

Dirt digs into fibers and structures and causes breakage. Pollution can badly discolor and damage textiles. Once soiled, some textiles cannot be cleaned.

- Simple, rigorous housekeeping.
- Vacuum textiles on display using a piece of protective nylon mesh (window screening) so that fibers, fragile threads, or embellishments are not pulled.

## 4. Insects and rodents

While impossible to eliminate entirely, it is pos-



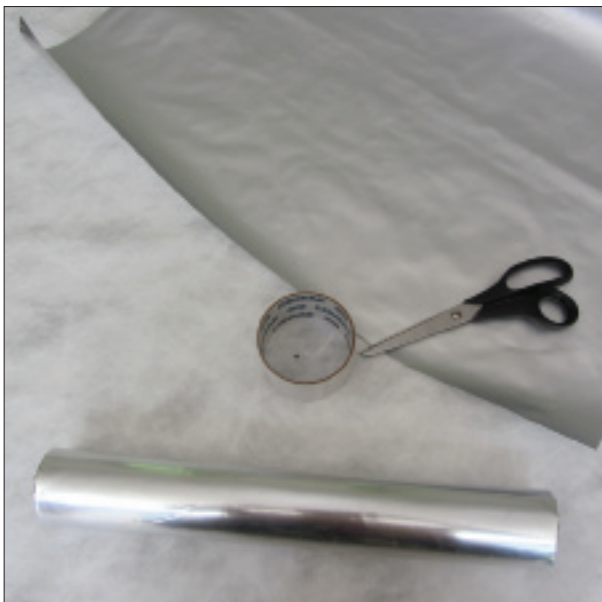
Flat shelf storage for textiles. Textiles are covered with pre-washed muslin to protect from dust and light.



Label your collections for easy ID.

sible to reduce and keep tabs on them. Insects such as silverfish, moths, carpet beetles, roaches and termites eat protein/animal (silk, wool, fur, skins) and cellulose/plant (cotton, jute, linen). Mice and rats are voracious eaters of all textiles and organic storage containers. Silk painted textiles and frames are susceptible, as well as upholstery. Basically, the animal kingdom wants to live with us.

- Good housekeeping. Cleanliness.



Ikat textile being rolled: covering the cardboard tube with foil or saran wrap, rolling the textile with acid free paper interleaved, and finally wrapping it with muslin.



Rolled textile storage. Textiles are wrapped in acid free tissue or mulberry paper, with outer wrapping of pre-washed muslin.

- Use insect sticky traps in each room, in corners and near windows and doors to track what is coming and going each season. If you see certain species in abundance (infestation), then take action.
- Action is complicated and long term. A pest eradication company will spray repeatedly for certain species. Some chemicals are very harmful to humans.
- Clean all the spaces with strong detergent cleaner: floor boards, corners of rooms and closets and storage chests.
- If a textile has a live infestation, it can be frozen to eradicate the whole life cycle of the insect. Wrap textile securely in plastic, tape up all seams with duct tape to seal package. Freeze at -10 C for two weeks. Remove from freezer and let "defrost" to reach room temperature before opening the plastic.





Sequence of making padded hanger for garment storage: cover plastic hanger with high loft "quilting" batting to pad out and create desired shape; baste batting in place; machine stitch muslin cover leaving bottom seam open; slide over hanger and hand baste bottom seam.



Woman's dress with padded hanger inserted. Some antique garments are better stored in acid free boxes or cupboards, padded out.

## 5. Storage

We all have boxes, trunks and cupboards full of textiles we love. If left undisturbed, mold, insect and other damage can occur. Many textiles reside most of their lives in storage, so proper storage is very important, and periodic checks are essential.

- Do not store textiles near a bathroom or damp basement.
- Keep in a cool and dry location.
- Wrap them in clean sheets or muslin. Pre-wash the muslin or sheets in a neutral detergent.
- Layer clean cloth on wooden shelves to separate the textiles from the acid of wood (wood will discolor textiles brown and cause deterioration).
- Try to use acid free materials for storage.
- In lieu of acid free materials, buffer tubes, boxes and drawers with muslin or mylar, or even aluminum foil.
- Roll long, flat textiles. Folding can cause permanent creases and cracks. Use pvc pipes and acid free tissue or muslin.

- Store smaller textiles or costumes in boxes or trunks. Buffer containers with foil and clean muslin.
- Costumes and clothing can be stored on padded hangers and covered with muslin dust covers.
- For heavy beaded or embroidered costumes, store flat in boxes or shelves.
- Hats, baskets and shoes can be padded out with acid free tissue to support the three dimensional areas and minimize any collapse or crushing.
- Do not use the plastic wrap from drycleaners, it deteriorates and lets off gasses.
- Label the outside of boxes with a description of the contents.

## 6. Display

Thumb tacks, nails, tape and glue are not good ways to hang or display textiles. Metal rusts and often the glues can never be removed. Work with a skilled framer and conservator who can guide the display process. Framing and mounting materials should be inert and acid free. Textiles that are in poor condition should not be displayed. Only strong textiles should be free hung, because the accumulated weight will cause damage over time. Delicate or fragile textiles need to be supported on a rigid backing or board with hand stitching or tabs. The use of UV protective glazing, such as glass or Plexiglas, will protect textiles from dust, dirt and light damage.

### Display Techniques:

- Velcro system or sleeve and slat to free hang textiles that are sturdy.
- Rigid mount for small or delicate textiles. Inert, acid free board or support is padded, covered with a backing fabric, and the textile is then hand stitched or pinned to this support. It can then be framed or placed in a case.

## 7. Handling and care

Clean hands and space, and always exercise caution, patience and respect. Improper handling is the greatest cause of damage to collections. Work with clean hands. The oils and dirt on our hands easily transfer to textiles. Try not to fold or crease textiles, as this weakens the fibers and can cause splits.

## 8. Collection catalogue or documentation

Do you have records of your collection? An inventory? This is one of the most important tasks to undertake, even if for the benefit of your children. It is also essential for fire, flood and theft purposes.



Velcro loop machine sewn to cotton strip or twill tape, then hand sewn to back hanging edge of textile. Hook Velcro is stapled to sanded wood slat. Apply the two together and voila!

Take the time to label and write a list of your textiles.

- Use good quality acid free paper tags to label textiles.
- Attach to textile with loops of thread. Pins and staples rust!
- Write descriptions of each textile, with dimensions, colors, details of damage or unusual features, value or purchase price, place of purchase. This is the provenance and a very important part of the textile history. This can be hand written or entered into a computer database.
- Photographs are essential for long term records keeping, scholarship, sharing of knowledge and retrieval of

damages. Label and keep in a safe place.

- Keep one set of records off site, such as in a bank or office.

### 9. Flood and fire

There is no way to recover fully from a disaster but good record keeping will supplement insurance claims and provide history for future generations.

- For floods, try to remove textiles immediately and gently rinse out polluted river or sewage water.
- Dry flat, outside.
- Call a conservator to assess the textiles.
- For fire, soot stains are difficult to remove. If wet, do as stated above. Call a conservator. Smoke odor can be removed in an ozone chamber.

### Bibliography

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*Julia M. Brennan has worked in textile conservation for over 25 years. She lectures to historical societies and collector groups on the care and display of textiles and is passionately committed to conservation outreach. From 2000-2008 she led multiple textile training workshops in Bhutan, conducted a conservation seminar and mounted an exhibit of historic textiles in Madagascar, and taught the first textile conservation workshop at the National Bardo Museum in Algiers. From 2008 to present, she has been consulting with the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles in Bangkok and facilitating preservation workshops for SPAFA SEAMEO. Julia is a Professional Associate of the AIC, Director of the Washington Conservation Guild, founder of the Collection Care Network, and a member of ICOM CC. Her company, Caring For Textiles, founded in 1996, is based in Washington, D.C. [www.caringfortextiles.com](http://www.caringfortextiles.com)*

*Photography by Julia M. Brennan.*

## Appeal – Please Help Return This Item to its Rightful Owner



**The reverse panel of a rare Eucharist cover of embroidered yellow silk velvet.** The panel features a front facing golden dragon encircled by clouds and surrounded on each side by scrolling lilies and peonies; further auspicious flowers decorate the border. The front panel is decorated with a golden Eucharist. The complete Eucharist cover was probably the only one of its kind in existence and is of great historical interest. 21 x 19 inches (54x 49 cm), including matting: 30 x 27 inches (77x 69 cm). Macao, circa 1700.

The panel, shown above, was stolen from the wall of Teresa Coleman's booth at the International Antiques Fair at the Hong Kong Convention Centre between 12:15 am and 9am on Thursday night 23/24 May, 2013.

Previously reported in the *Sing Tao Daily* on Sunday, May 26th but the picture then published was not of the correct piece. The correct image is shown above.

If you have any information, please contact the Hong Kong police: case number 1302-4559. The investigating officer is George Chan, Telephone: +852-3660 7559.

Or, contact Teresa Coleman by telephone: 852-2526-2450, or email: [tc@teresacoleman.com](mailto:tc@teresacoleman.com).

A reward will be given for information that leads to the recovery of this valuable piece.