

CLEANING HEIRLOOM TEXTILES

Many people have in their possession historic garments or other textiles that have been saved for the future. Sometimes people wish to use or exhibit such items but hesitate to do so because the items either appear yellowed with age or may have yellow or brownish spots. They want to know if the spots or yellowing can be removed and, if so, how they should go about it.

These questions are difficult to answer because there are many considerations one needs to explore before a knowledgeable decision can be made. Information such as the age of the garment, the fiber content, whether the item will be preserved for future generations or just used for the present, whether the item is of any use unless it is restored, whether the owner will be dismayed if the item is damaged, and the amount of time and expense that may be involved in the restoration will need to be explored before a final decision can be made.

If you want to preserve the heirloom textile for future generations then you need to proceed with extreme caution. Cleaning, as well as improper storage, repair, use, or display may seriously damage an already fragile textile. Age of the item is also a factor. Is the item ten years old or one hundred? The older the item, the more fragile it will be. Fiber content will also be a factor. Silk, for example, should not be wet cleaned. Often airing and vacuuming are the only truly safe treatments for very fragile items.

Airing textiles will remove musty stale odors; air outdoors on dry days for 1 to 2 hours in a shaded location. Never bend or shake the textile as undue stress can damage the fabric. Vacuuming will remove dust, dirt, and soil, which are abrasive, attract insects, stain the fabric surface, and damage the fibers. Vacuuming should always be done through a piece of fiberglass window screening (available at local hardware stores). Use the round brush attachment and set on the lowest suction. Vacuum the inside and outside of the item.

If stains are present, it may be wise to leave them alone. You might consider the stain a part of the heritage associated with that textile heirloom. Any discoloration may be permanent and if it has been present a long time the stain has probably already weakened the fibers. Removing the stain may create a hole. Never attempt to wash an heirloom textile in a washing machine, even on a gentle cycle, as it may be destroyed.

If you wish to have a textile restored, there are several options available. You might begin by taking it to a dry cleaner. Most dry cleaners will be able to successfully restore many textile items. Dry cleaners who are members of the International Fabricare Institute (IFI) and unable to restore the garment to your satisfaction, can send it to IFI's Garment Analysis Lab for further restoration for an additional fee. Some dry cleaners specialize in cleaning, restoring, and preserving wedding gowns and historical items,

including quilts, and will even do this by mail. You could also contact the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. Their referral system provides users with an informational brochure and a computer-generated list of professional conservators listed by geographic location, specialization, materials utilized, and services provided. There is a charge for all of these services.

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works
1717 K Street, N.W. Suite 200
Washington, DC 20036

Telephone: (202) 452-9545
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If you have old white cottons or linens that have yellowed with age that are of no value to you in their present condition and would not be a loss to you if they were damaged, you might want to try either to launder the item, whiten the item with a commercial product designed for that purpose, or use a home remedy. Always read and follow care labels (if present) and product labels carefully. Heed product warnings.

Most fabrics naturally tend to yellow with age and often this can be overcome by washing them in the hottest water and bleach suitable for the fabric. Chlorine bleach could probably be safely used on older white cottons and linens. However, in more recent years, many white textile items have had either resin finishes or optical brighteners added to them. Exposure to sodium hypochlorite bleach (chlorine), sodium perborate bleach (nonchlorine, all-fabric bleach), or sunlight should be avoided during the laundry process as any of these may cause decomposition of the optical brighteners which could cause extreme yellowing or other colorations to appear. Wash older items by hand. Remember, never attempt to wash older textiles in a washing machine, even on a gentle cycle. The agitation may be destructive to the fabric.

Fabric rust removers are designed to remove rust and to whiten fabrics. Some rust removers can only be used on white fabrics. One rust remover product is RoVer®, a granular rust remover for use on colored and white fabrics recommended by the Maytag Co. It is available in 16-ounce containers from authorized Maytag dealers and parts distributors. Specify Maytag Part Number 057961.

RIT® Whitener & Brightener is a product that is designed to whiten whites and brighten colors without the use of bleach and even without detergent. It is safe for washable colorfast fabrics including nylon, cotton, rayon, acetate, linen, wool, polyester, and silk.

RIT® Color Remover also helps remove brown iron rust stains on white fabric and removes transferred dye stains from whites washed by mistake with colored items. Please note that dye transfer stains are difficult to remove. It is best to treat them as soon as possible and before the garment is dried in the dryer; heat will set the stains.

For additional information on these RIT® products visit www.ritdye.com or email consumerservice@phoenixbrandsllc.com

Products designed to whiten fabrics may also be found where medical uniforms are purchased.

A popular “home remedy” that Heloise (“Hints by Heloise”) calls her “last-ditch solution” is used to remove baby food or formula stains and to whiten yellowed washable clothing. Although many people have used this “recipe” with success, even on older textiles, it is possible that it could damage some items. Her directions are as follows: Use a large container (not aluminum) or your kitchen sink. Use one gallon hot water; add ½ cup dishwasher detergent, plus ¼ cup chlorine bleach. Stir until the detergent is dissolved, then add the clothes and let them soak for about 15 minutes --- a few minutes longer if they’re still stained. (Do not use on Spandex.) Please note that Proctor & Gamble often receives inquiries regarding the question of whether their automatic dishwashing detergent can be used for the laundry. They do not recommend the use of their product for anything but automatic dishwashing, as it contains a small amount of chlorine bleach which could adversely affect non-colorfast dyes if used for laundering fabrics. Also, never use automatic dishwashing detergent in the washing machine.

Brand names and products are used as examples only. Endorsement of these brands or products is not intended or implied. Nor is any discrimination against those not mentioned intended or implied.

For more information, see the Publication FCS2-707, ***Caring for Textile Heirlooms***

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