

## THE CARE AND STORAGE OF QUILTS

Quilts are admired for their beauty and provide a function in the home as well. They are valued for many reasons including age, design, and sentiment. With proper care and a certain amount of caution, we can preserve a treasured heirloom or insure the life span of a well-used quilt. It is important to know that there is a distinction between the preservation care given by a museum staff and general care that can be handled in the home. However, both the museum staff and the homeowner share similar concerns. To prevent undue damage from cleaning, storage, and display both must develop a system of protective housekeeping.

The way you clean a quilt depends on its age, condition and fiber content. If you have a quilt that is more than 50 years old or one that is showing signs of wear, it is best to have a trained conservator clean or mend the quilt. Generally, wool, rayon, and silk quilts should be dry cleaned; cotton and linen quilts should be wet cleaned or washed, provided that the dyes are fast and the filling or padding is also washable. Dry cleaning and wet cleaning should always be handled by a reputable cleaner who has experience with perishable materials. If you have a combination of fibers, a glazed fabric, or a specialty fabric such as velvet or brocade, consult your cleaner to determine the best cleaning method.

A very sturdy, newer quilt might be able to withstand laundering in the washer and dryer but this laundering method is seldom recommended. However, for sturdy quilts that receive everyday wear the following steps are advisable:

1. Make sure your dyes are fast by putting a few drops of water on a small area and blotting with a white blotter. You may have to test more than one spot, depending on your design and any repairs that have been made.
2. If the dyes are fast, use a neutral detergent in a large tub of warm water. A bathtub allows you to gently agitate the quilt, let the cleaning solution drain, and then let in new rinse water without straining the fibers. Make sure the detergent is thoroughly rinsed out. Squeeze out all excess water and gently lift the quilt out.
3. It is best to dry the quilt outside on a clean sheet or towel. If this is not possible use a grid of clothesline under the quilt that will evenly distribute the weight to avoid stress on the stitching and fabric. Do not expose it to sunlight directly.

If the quilt needs mending it should be done by a good seamstress. A hand-sewn quilt should always be repaired by hand, and if fabrics are worn away, or torn, they should be strengthened by re-weaving or darning. If replacement is necessary, be sure that the contemporary replacement fabric resembles the original. Bindings often become worn first and it spruces up your quilt to re-cover frayed edges with hand stitching. Keep the original edge for documentation.

Many quilts look handsome when hung on a wall. One of the most important considerations in hanging is to distribute the weight evenly so that the quilt does not tear or weaken. It is recommended that a sleeve be made along the top back of the quilt to house a wooden or metal rod. The quilt can then be hung on prepared wall supports.

Velcro tape can also be fastened to the back of the sleeve and pressed to the wall. Old and delicate quilts would need to be handled a little differently. Another backing can be sewn to an older quilt and basted thru the front, thereby giving it overall support. In general it isn't a good idea to hang these older and more fragile quilts.

Lighting must be considered when displaying your quilts since light can cause textiles to dry out or fade. Do not hang your quilt in the path of direct sunlight. Blinds can be drawn to cut down on the amount of light. Both sunlight and fluorescent lighting can be filtered by the use of ultra violet shields. Incandescent lighting is less damaging, but should be used at low levels and at a distance away from the quilt to prevent damage (drying out) from heat radiation.

You should also position your quilt so air quality, temperature, and humidity are somewhat controlled. Avoid displaying your quilt on a damp wall or near kitchen cooking areas. Since both humidity and pollution cause deterioration, it is a good idea to limit display time, especially if the quilt is old or worn.

You might choose to store your quilt and this must be done correctly to avoid unnecessary deterioration. To effectively preserve textile fibers, one must consider the environment in which they are stored. A combination of common sense and knowledge of the most common methods available for preventing or minimizing the degradation of fibers is necessary. First make sure your quilt is clean before you store it. Then choose a place where temperature, light, and humidity can be regulated. Never use a plastic bag for storage since textiles need to breathe and an excess of humidity may accumulate.

Ideally a bed quilt should be hung over a wooden or aluminum rod or in the case of single layered, finely quilted pieces rolled on a tube. Both the rods and the tube should be covered with an acid free barrier. Then cover the quilt with clean 100 percent cotton sheeting and store it out of direct sunlight. The quilt should not be in direct contact with wood. If you plan to use a cedar chest for storage, line it with acid free paper.

Since many people do not have the space to roll or hang large quilts and they are too large to store flat, they must fold them. These folds must be loose and padded with acid-free paper so that the fibers are not strained. Some experts recommend refolding every few months to prevent permanent creases. However, be sure to clean your hands thoroughly before handling since your fingers contain natural oils that can leave unsightly stains.

With the proper care you can continue to use and enjoy your quilt. In the process of caring for it, you will probably also develop a greater appreciation of quilt making and its history.

### **SUMMARY TIPS:**

- The way you clean a quilt depends on its age, condition, and fiber content.
- A hand-sewn quilt should always be repaired by hand, and if fabrics are worn away or torn they should be strengthened by reweaving or darning.
- If you fold a quilt for storage, make sure the folds are loose and pad them with acid free paper.

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