

Caring for Textiles: Cleaning and Garment Hanging

Textiles play an integral role in our lives by symbolizing our relationship to society. This familiarity with textiles often creates an inverse reaction when working with historical pieces, causing us to inadvertently inflict more harm than good.



Reversible doll from private collection, image courtesy Kathleen Sligar.

How does caring for textiles in our collections differ from the care we show our personal and everyday textiles?

Museum professionals abide by a code of ethics to do no harm. Whatever they do must be reversible. The lack of proper storage and care will harm textiles. Examples of harmful storage include the use of wire hangers and overfilled archival textile boxes. Overlooking signs

of poor condition and maintaining the status quo of textile storage just because “this is how we store *all* of our dresses” is also harmful. It is very important to establish new patterns when caring for our historical textiles. Each piece is unique and should be treated as such.

The condition assessment

Condition is one of the most important factors to consider when planning storage solutions and methods of treatment. Textile Conservator Lucy Commoner developed a condition assessment guide to help streamline this evaluation. Her article, “[A Condition Assessment Rating System for Textiles](#),” provides a clear and concise guide to defining and clarifying a textile’s condition (see Recommended Readings and Links at the end of this Bulletin). Upon completion of the condition assessment, caregivers can determine appropriate treatment methods and proper storage.

Cleaning historic textiles

After determining the textile’s stability, the next step is to review cleaning methods. Do not undertake the washing of historical textiles or garments without proper training! This includes taking textiles to a dry

cleaner, who actually uses wet chemicals in place of water. Wet cleaning is irreversible and much more complex than simply putting a textile in a washing machine or washing something in the sink by hand.

So, what do you do? Vacuum it! Using a vacuum with variable speeds, a HEPA filter, micro-tools, and a nylon mesh screen, you can clean just about anything! The difference you will see is amazing. Carefully consider the condition of your textile before vacuuming. Very little, if anything at all, should be done to an object in poor condition. Leave that work for a professional conservator. What’s more, make sure the soiling on your textile is not historically significant. You wouldn’t want to remove the caked-on dirt found on a pair of boots known to cross the Oregon Trail. That dirt is important!

Before you begin, set your vacuum’s suction to the lowest possible setting. This is essential to protecting your textile during the cleaning process. The use of a screen will keep your textile from sucking up into the vacuum while allowing you to get



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very close to it without coming into direct contact. It is important that you avoid touching your textile with the hose.

Making a screen is inexpensive and easy. Buy an 18 inch square of nylon screening from your local hardware store. With a sewing machine, sew natural colored or white bias tape, twill tape, or other durable fabric around the cut edges to protect your textile from the screen's abrasive ends. Voila! You have a vacuuming screen.

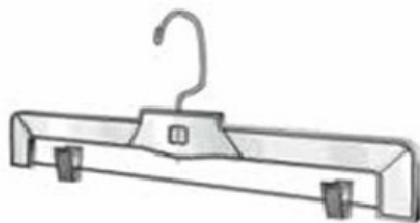


Vacuuming textiles using a screen is a safe way to clean them. Image courtesy Brigadier General James B. Thayer Oregon Military Museum.

An alternative to the screen method is to use pantyhose or cheese cloth rubber banded around the end of the hose. Then, using a fine bristle, brush the textile toward the vacuum's hose. This method works particularly well for 3D textile objects. A trick to use while vacuuming, is to work in a grid pattern, marking the edge of the completed section with insect pins. This method will keep you from overworking a particular area. When placing the pins in the textile, be sure to pin between the weave of the fabric, and not through the individual threads or yarns.

Storage considerations for textiles

Can a textile be hung or should it be stored flat? Ideally, *all* textiles should be stored flat. This is especially true for knit textiles! After condition, determine if the textile is woven or knit. Do not hang knits! They will stretch and sag, causing permanent (i.e., irreversible) damage. What can be hung? Anything else in good condition. When hanging pants and skirts, use trouser hangers instead of draping the garment over the cross-bar of a regular hanger. Place a piece of ethafoam or polyfelt along the waistline where the clamp comes in contact with the textile. This will distribute some of the pressure created by the clamps.



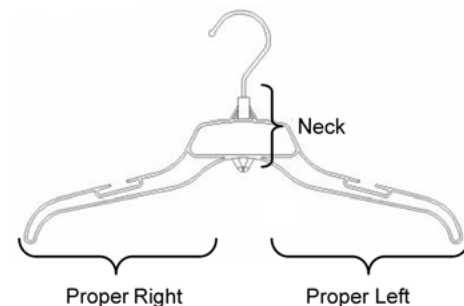
Otherwise, use padded hangers to hang textiles that are in good condition. They are super inexpensive and easy to make and many clothing stores will donate plastic hangers – perfect for this project!

Materials for padded hangers:

Hanger - Use plain white or clear plastic shirt hangers made from polystyrene, an inert plastic.

Do not use hangers that are badly yellowed, flimsy, warped, have damage, or have any protrusions.

For clarity of instruction, establish a left and right face, and a left and right reverse.



Batting - Use thin *needle-punched* polyester batting that is resin-free.

Stockinette Tubing - Use two-inch-wide, 100% knit cotton or poly/cotton stockinette tubing.

Thread - Use 100% white or natural cotton thread (non-mercerized).

Hot Glue, Scissors, Sewing Needle

Preparation:

1. Cut two strips of batting approximately 11 inches by 23 inches.
2. Cut two pieces of stockinette approximately 12.5 inches in length.
3. Hand or machine sew one end of each stockinette tube closed to create a “sock”. Trim off any excess, if necessary. Turn the tubes inside out to hide the raw edges.

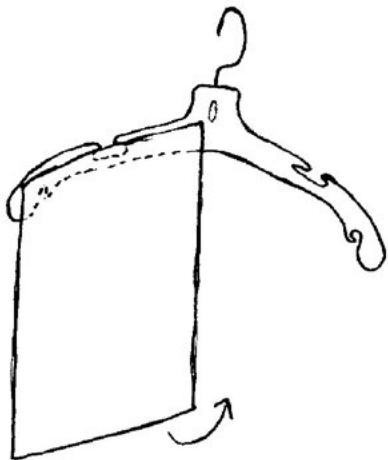


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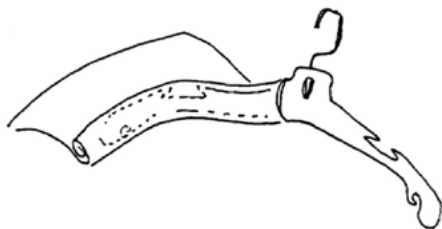
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Assembly:

1. Place one stripe of hot glue along the proper right **face** of the hanger.



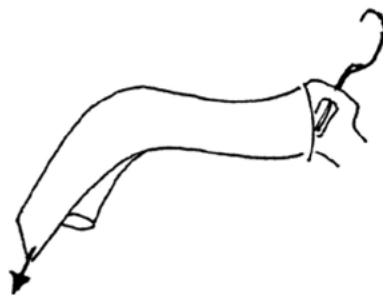
2. Affix the short end of the batting to the hanger, starting with one corner squared at the center neck of the hanger. CAUTION: The glue may be hot. Press carefully.
3. Firmly begin to wrap the batting around the arm. Pull firmly enough to create a tight wrapping, but not too firm as to tear the batting.



4. When wrapping is complete:
 - A. There should be some overhang off the end of the hanger, pointing downward. If there is too much excess or an end is uneven, trim a little off the ends. Do not trim *all* of the excess, as there should be some batting extending beyond the end of the plastic hanger.

B. The edge of the batting should rest on the face, reverse, or bottom of the arm, *not* along the top. If necessary, stretch or rotate the batting to adjust the edge's positioning. . NOTE: You may have to rewrap the arm a few times to create the desired tension.

C. The center of the hanger does not need to be covered as thoroughly as the arms.



5. Tack the edge of the batting into place using very large overcast stitches. This will help to keep the batting in place as the hanger is completed.
6. Repeat steps 1 through 5 on the proper left **reverse** of the hanger, wrapping in the opposite direction in which the right face was wrapped. In other words, the arms should be wrapped opposite of each other, as if you are wringing something out. (For example, if you are holding the completed hanger, and the right arm is wrapped toward you, then the left arm should be wrapped away from you.) Wrapping the batting in this manner helps keep the hanger from distorting or sagging over time, working with the garment to create even tension.

Covering the Hanger:

1. Once both arms are wrapped, and the batting has been tacked into place, slip a previously made stockinette "sock" over each arm.
2. Overlap the "socks" where they meet at the center of the hanger.
3. Fold under any exposed raw edges of the stockinette to create a finished seam.
4. Stitch the stockinette closed, and into place.



Recommended Readings and Resource Links:

Many resources are available online or by contacting a professional textiles conservator. Museum Textiles Service (MTS) has done an amazing job of creating PDF files on many textile related procedures available online: <http://www.museumtextiles.com/resources.html> including the following:

- *Vacuuming Textiles*, Museum Textiles Service, Andover, Massachusetts. http://www.museumtextiles.com/uploads/7/8/9/0/7890082/vacuuming_textiles_2.pdf

OTHER ONLINE RESOURCES

INCLUDE:

- Lucy A. Commoner, Lucy A., *A Condition Assessment Rating System for Textiles*, Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York State Conservation Consultancy, April 2003, 6. http://www.museumtextiles.com/uploads/7/8/9/0/7890082/a_condition_assessment_rating_system_for_textiles.pdf
- *Textile Care & Display* developed by the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C. <https://museum.gwu.edu/textile-care-display>
- The Minnesota Historical Society's website provides advice for framing textiles and caring for a wedding dress: <https://www.mnhs.org/preserve/conservation/connectingmn/CollectionCare.php>

- The Nebraska Historical Society's Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center offers resources for rolling textiles and ways to prepare and mount quilts for display. <https://history.nebraska.gov/conservation-center/resources/>
- The National Park Service offers several *Conserve O Grams* on textile care at its website <http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/publications/consveogram/cons.toc.html#collectionpreservation>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

INCLUDE:

- Commoner, Lucy A., *Warning Signs: When Textiles Need Conservation*, Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York State Conservation Consultancy, 1985, 10.



Souvenir scarf in the Brigadier General James B. Thayer Oregon Military Museum Collection.

Project supply vendors:

SCREEN PROJECT:

- **Screening** - Local hardware stores
- **Bias or Twill Tape and Cotton Thread** - Suppliers of archival materials or local fabric stores

PADDED HANGER PROJECT:

- **Hangers** - Department stores will sometimes donate these
- **Batting** - Suppliers of archival materials or local fabric stores (REMEMBER: The batting *must* be needle-punched and resin-free!)
- **Stockinette Tubing** - Suppliers of archival materials or medical supplies stores

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