Dinah D. Eastop and Mary M. Brooks

To Clean or Not to Clean: The Value of Soils and Creases (1996)

Introduction

Cleaning is a widely used treatment in textile conservation, but there are circumstances when it may not be appropriate. Initial analysis suggests there are two circumstances when a decision may be made not to clean: firstly, when cleaning may damage the textile and, secondly, when cleaning may impair the evidential value of a historically, culturally or technologically significant textile.

This paper focuses on those circumstances where cleaning is technically possible but is not considered an appropriate treatment, because of the value given to the soils and creases. Ethical issues are considered with respect to the evidential value of soils and creases, and are illustrated by case examples.

This paper does not analyse those circumstances where cleaning is not possible for technical reasons. Such circumstances include the presence of water-soluble or solvent-soluble materials or very weak textiles too vulnerable for the mechanical action/suction involved in some cleaning techniques. Examples include: very degraded archaeological textiles,1,2 moiré silks where wet cleaning can result in loss of both the “watered” finish and technologically significant fold lines,3 glazed chintzes and linens with an embossed design; and textiles with water-soluble materials or components, such as gelatin sequins or weak regenerated protein fibres.4

Issues and Ethics

Reversibility

Reversibility is a key criterion of conservation treatments. Although cleaning is an irreversible process, it is common practice because the benefits of cleaning are usually considered to outweigh any drawbacks. As stated by Flury-Lemberg “cleaning is an important method of conservation, even if it often greatly alters the appearance of fabrics and as a treatment is, in this sense, irreversible.” Cleaning can be very effective in revealing textiles disfigured by soiling and creasing; it can enhance the long-term preservation of textiles by removing soiling that results in mechanical and/or chemical damage; and it may also be necessary to remove soiling which is hazardous to health, particularly in the case of textiles excavated from graves.6

The ethos of minimal intervention appears to be replacing reversibility as a key criterion in conservation.7 This change is reflected in the growing importance of preventive conservation.8 Concern has been expressed by both paintings and textiles conservators that too many artefacts have been irreversibly altered by conservation treatments9,10 and that more caution should be shown before artefacts are subjected to treatment; Beltinger argues that “the less done the better.”11 Möller argued that “untouched objects have special value” and soiled and/or creased textiles should be left untreated, as this will leave them for treatment and/or interpretation in the future.12

Cases where cleaning is regretted because of loss of evidence have also been influential. Finch describes her regret at having cleaned two pairs of sailor’s trousers, from which tar stains were removed.13,14 The presence of the tar confirmed the naval context of the trousers and has a special significance in Britain where sailors were known as “Jolly Tars,” because of their association with tar.

Preserving the “True Nature” of Artefacts

The UKIC Guidance for Practice defines conservation as “the means by which the true nature of an object is preserved.”15 There is no objective way of identifying “true nature” and thus there is always an element of the subjective in conservation, in that some interpretation of “true nature” is inevitable. Such interpretation is of necessity context dependent and is influenced by the role determined for a particular textile artefact.16,17 As Orlofsky and Trupin state, “in textile conservation, there is no interpretatively neutral treatment.”18 This applies equally to all cleaning treatments. The significance of folds, soiling, stains and creases, which could be removed in some cleaning treatments, needs to be evaluated before cleaning to determine whether they constitute part of the textile’s “true nature,” which is to be preserved.
A well known example of staining being interpreted as part of the history of an object is the blood on the coat in which Nelson was dressed when he was killed.\textsuperscript{19} The treatment of a heavily soiled World War I uniform in the collection of the Australian War Memorial illustrates the value that can be attributed to soiling.\textsuperscript{20} The mud-caked uniform was collected from a soldier returning from the Somme and the mud was considered historically significant. The mud was loose and cracked and it was therefore treated with a consolidant to prevent further loss, and to prevent transfer of loose mud particles onto other exhibits.

*Retaining Soiling of Evidential Value Despite its Potentially Damaging Effect*

A problem arises when soiling is both damaging and of evidential value.\textsuperscript{21} Blood stains are a good example of such soiling: they may be of particular historical significance and yet their presence may result in fibre damage. Cleaning treatments may remove the stain and thereby enhance the long-term preservation of the textile. However, the cleaned (stainless) textile may be of less value as a historic document.\textsuperscript{22} In such cases, a decision has to be made about the relative importance of the artefact and the evidence/information “contained” by the stain. Contextual research, materials investigation and documentation can facilitate decision making and the choice of appropriate compromises.

A survey of object treatment decisions reveals that cleaning is sometimes not carried out, or is limited, because it might remove or alter soiling and/or creasing which is considered to have value as a primary source of historical, cultural and/or technological evidence. For the sake of clarity the following case examples are divided into three groups: those where soiling or creasing are retained as (a) sources of evidence of wear, (b) sources of evidence of use/context, and (c) sources of potential evidence.

*Case Examples*

*Soils and Creases as Evidence of Use/Wear*

Textiles have the potential to “absorb” evidence of use by retaining patterns of wear, food, residues, soiling from work and body fluids, human and animal, as well as human and animal hairs and insect parasites.\textsuperscript{23}

The presence of hairs and human lice on a strip of linen decorated with carnelian beads and dated to the Fourth Dynasty, enabled it to be identified as a regularly worn garment, probably a head band.\textsuperscript{24}

Soiling can have particular significance when present on protective clothing held in museum collections devoted to social history. For example,
specialist curatorial advice was sought when a mud-soiled patten was brought for treatment. Swann describes the wearing of pattens as protective overshoes which raised the wearer’s shoes above muddy paths and confirmed that the presence of the soiling provided valuable historical evidence about the footwear and its wearer. Consequently no cleaning was carried out on the patten.

A 1950's biker's jacket (i.e. a leather jacket worn by a teenage motor cyclist) was displayed in “Putting on the Style,” an exhibition on teenage fashion at York Castle Museum. The jacket was heavily soiled: the dirt and staining were part of its fashionable, “macho” appeal. Removing these accretions would have “sanitised” the jacket and distanced it from its “street” roots, where the jacket served as a symbol of the wearer’s rebelliousness.

Soiling as Evidence of Context/Use

A very rare Fifth Dynasty (c. 2494–2345 BC) linen funerary dress, excavated at Deshasheh in Egypt by Flinders Petrie in 1897, underwent conservation in 1981. Tiny particles of soiling were detected on the garment and were carefully studied in order to identify them and to determine their significance. Some appeared to be of bitumen and resin, and it was considered they were likely to be traces of substances used by the Ancient Egyptians in burial rituals.

Despite the “potential continuing degrading effect of the soilings” the decision was made not to wash the dress, even though to do so may have improved the condition of the linen and allowed the conservator and curator to assess the possible technology of “natural pleating.”

Stauffer described other examples of archaeological textiles which provide invaluable information which can be easily lost by cleaning. For the same reasons, a tapestry woven, pre-Hispanic Andean tunic was not cleaned despite the presence of extensive creasing and soiling. It was thought the soiling could provide evidence not only of burial customs but also of the archaeological context, as the provenance of the tunic is unrecorded.

Despite the rarity of working dress, or perhaps because of it, a decision was made not to wash three pairs of early nineteenth century breeches, which are part of a local history museum. The breeches were very worn, extensively patched and heavily soiled. The distribution and colour of the soiling (which included wheat seeds and husks) was consistent with heavy agricultural use and the presence of urine and sweat was deduced. Such evidence of use added to the “value” of the breeches as rare items of working dress. Similarly, urea was detected in the staining on the legs and seat of a pair of breeches from a young boy’s suit of c. 1770–80, and led to the supposition that the wearer had been breeched prematurely.
Understanding the cut and construction of 18th century dresses has been facilitated by the evidence of creases, fold lines and stitch holes.\textsuperscript{32} Similarly, it was possible to trace the history of some 18th century brocade, which survives in the form of a chasuble but which bears the creases of its former “life” as an 18th century sack back dress.\textsuperscript{33}

The detection and documentation of fragments of a peacock feather, caught in the folds of a very faded, soiled and severely crushed silk skirt, helped to confirm the date and attribution of the skirt and its matching bodice.\textsuperscript{34} The feather debris linked the dress to that depicted in a painting by A.R. Chewett. The picture depicts a young girl, wearing a striped dress and holding a peacock feather.

\textit{Soils and Creases as Potential Sources of Information}

Some soiling preserved on historic textiles may have the potential to reveal medical, genetic, or technological information. Newly developed analytical techniques mean that even extremely small samples can now reveal quantitative, as well as qualitative, results. For example, “genetic finger printing” and other forensic techniques could be used to reveal more about historic textiles.

These possibilities were considered when the decision was made not to wet clean a veil worn by Joseph Merrick, more widely known as “The Elephant Man.” Mr. Merrick suffered from a disfiguring disease, which led him to wear a large, custom-made hat, fitted with an opaque veil to cover his face. The diagnosis of the disease is still debated and the soiling has been retained on the inside of the veil to enable it to be subjected to forensic tests, when resources and technology allow.\textsuperscript{35}

Similarly, a very rare linen doublet of c. 1600 has been left largely untreated despite its extensive soiling and creasing. The evidential value of the creasing and soiling has been assessed and shown to vary with the institutional context and role determined for the doublet.\textsuperscript{36} A similarly conservative, non-interventionist approach was adopted for a recently discovered wool garment found in a coal mine.\textsuperscript{37} The cut of the garment is very unusual and comparison was made with dress of 1350–1550; however, its function and dating are still a matter of debate. Therefore the soils and creases have been left unaltered by wet cleaning so as not to impede future research and analysis.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The cleaning of historic textiles is an irreversible process, which is nevertheless justifiable in some circumstances. However, the benefits of cleaning need to be weighed against its drawbacks, including loss of evidence. The current
and potential value of soils, stains and creases in some contexts should be assessed before cleaning is undertaken. The necessity of carefully examining and sampling textiles before treatment is evident, as is curatorial advice about a textile and its later accretions. The importance of documenting all evidence, whether from the object, its accretions or from other sources, is highlighted.

References


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