

How to Handle Antique Textiles and Costumes

Smithsonian Institution

- **Fragility**

Always presume that the textile is unique, irreplaceable, and fragile. A large textile is not necessarily stronger than a small one, but it is often more cumbersome!

- **Plan Ahead**

Don't touch the textile until you know precisely what you are going to do and how you are going to do it. Get all equipment ready and prepared beforehand. Be sure you have as many people as are needed -- no more and no less.

- **Clean Hands**

... are important. After coffee or combing your hair, wash your hands. The natural secretions from your skin attach themselves to the fabric and dust will collect on this base. The textile will become more soiled more quickly and cleaning will be required. Cleaning a fragile or antique textile is expensive and difficult. Washing one's hands takes only a minute; use soap and water, avoid "handwipes" or hand lotion.

- **Roll Up Sleeves**

... and do not wear bulky or loose clothing that can catch a textile. Remove bracelets, necklaces, rings, tags, or anything that could catch or cling to a textile or its surface. Butcher's aprons that cover the front buttons on one's shirt or a turtleneck top is recommended.

- **Clean, Flat Surfaces**

... should be used when examining or storing a textile. Dust clothes or acid free tissue paper should be laid down before starting. Cards, pencils and examination paraphernalia should be placed elsewhere, on a separate table. The bed in a guestroom may be clean and quiet, but a low height may be uncomfortable. The 5'4" standing individual, a 36" table height and good lighting provides an ergonomic workplace.

- **No Drinks, Food, Pens or Felt-Tips**

... should be brought into rooms housing textiles. **No Smoking.** No candy, gum, or lozenges should be chewed while working. Even a glass of water is dangerous: a water stain can disfigure a textile.

- **Preventive Care**

Direct contact with brass pins, iron, wood, newsprint, newsprint paper, note cards, non-

rag cardboard, unwashed cloths, plastic films, acidic tissue papers (including anti-tarnish tissue papers with a pinkish cast), labels, scotch tape, or double-face tape will all have detrimental effects. Identification and brief notes in pencil should be written on bond (cotton content) or acid free paper. Nothing should be stored with a textile but the requisite interlayers of acid-free paper (if recommended), size free cotton sheeting, or polyester batting.

- **Insects and Mold**

Textiles containing or suspected of harboring insects should be set aside and isolated from the rest of the collection - without exposing or contaminating the rest of the collection. The affected textile should be treated with an appropriate procedure promptly.* Objects showing signs of discoloration because of mold should be treated by improvement in climate controls.*

- **Impromptu Textile Conservation**

Don't try it yourself. Antique or fragile textiles will not react the way modern textiles will: the fiber processing, dyestuffs, and finishing are different; the physical and chemical properties of the fibers have been altered by time and by various agents. Instead, put your doubts and concerns to paper, take photographs, and contact a textile conservator.* Don't imagine you are inconveniencing the conservator: he/she will be glad to answer your well defined questions, and view your concern in the proper light: as respect for the textile and its past.

- **Incidental Visitors**

... are distracting. Friends and relatives are fine but not for the textiles: do not bring them into storage or examination areas, do not invite them to "watch" a delicate treatment. Friends and relatives usually carry coats, pocketbooks, briefcases, leaky pens; they will not know how to handle -- or not to handle -- a textile. The process of having them wash their hands and of denuding them of ties, cuff-links, jackets, make-up, hand cream, and jewelry is rather tedious. It is much more pleasant to invite them to visit after the final installation.

* Please refer to the specific brochure on this topic and/or contact a professional textile conservator.