

Textiles

Part III: Cleaning

by Diane Day, CPF

While cleaning a textile will do much to improve its appearance, this must be done with care. Regular surface cleaning is recommended for all hanging textiles that are not protected by a frame and glazing.

The easiest and least harmful method to remove dust from a textile is to clean the surface with a small, hand-held vacuum cleaner. In order to prevent the fabric or threads from being sucked into the vacuum cleaner, cover the textile with a piece of fiberglass window screening. Then vacuum the textile through the screen. To make it more rigid, you should cover the sharp, raw edges of the screening with tape, or staple it to a strainer frame.

Tell your customers that brushing a textile is not the most efficient cleaning method because it tends to push the dust around, rather than remove it. Also let customers know that using a liquid cleaner of any kind to spot clean a textile is not recommended. Liquids, even water, can chemically combine with the content of dust, dirt, or pollution on a textile, resulting in damage that may not be immediately noticeable.

In addition, dry cleaning fluids may react with the fibers or finishes of a textile, causing unfortunate results. If a textile has historical, monetary, or sentimental value, tell your customer to contact a textile conservator before deciding to have the piece dry cleaned.

Customers may want their needleart pieces washed before framing. Be advised that washing is an irreversible procedure and should not be done without due consideration of the possible consequences. When washing a textile, care must be taken. It cannot be thrown into the washing machine with a little bleach like a pair of grimy socks.

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Before going down that irreversible road, some thought must be given and tests need to be done. We are so used to washing our everyday textiles, such as clothes, towels, and linens, that we often do not stop to consider that textile art needs to be treated differently. We cannot take it for granted that textiles will wash well. It is usually not a disaster if color runs when doing household laundry, but it would be if it happened to a needleart that someone spent 100 hours to make.

Before washing an old textile, you should advise your customer to consult a textile conservator. A conservator will be able to identify the fibers and/or fabric, the method used to make the textile, the dyes and finishes used, as well as the type of dirt or soil present. In addition, a conservator will assess the condition of the textile. Some fibers, even when new, are vulnerable to damage when heavy with water.

Flags and banners that have been exposed to atmospheric pollution over time can be very acidic. Putting them in water would possibly create an acid bath, resulting in the disintegration of the textile. Silks that had dressings applied at the time they were made may never be the same if they are washed.

Finally, it cannot be assumed that all the dirt and pollution has been removed just because a textile has been washed. You need to have the right equipment and use the right cleaning agents and water for that particular textile. In addition, rinsing is a critical step. Cleaning agents can lift soil from a textile, but they cannot hold the particles in suspension. It is necessary to continually rinse away these particles during the washing process. Otherwise, the particles will fall back onto the textile.

Cleaning textiles can be a very risky procedure. It may be relatively simple to vacuum a textile, but quite another to wash one. To locate a conservator in your area, contact the American Institute for Conservation referral service in Washington, DC, at (202) 452-9545.

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