

Textiles

Part I: Basic Considerations

by Diane Day, CPF

Textiles displayed in the home or office are subject to a number of harmful environmental factors including light, dust, insects, extremes of temperature, and humidity. A critical factor in the proper preservation of textiles is control of these environmental conditions as well as correct mounting methods.

Light is one of the greatest threats. Sunlight and fluorescent light can cause the most damage over the shortest period of time. All light, however, will cause deterioration over time resulting in faded colors and weakened fibers. If fluorescent lighting can't be avoided, filtering sleeves should be placed over the bulbs. UV filtering films can also be placed on windows, and shades and curtains can be drawn to help block out harmful light rays.

High temperatures and humidity increase the rate of deterioration of textiles and also provide an environment favorable to insects, mold, and mildew. The ideal environment for most textiles is 50 percent relative humidity and 70°F. Try to maintain the most stable environment possible in the home or office; using a fan to keep the air circulating to reduce growth of mold or mildew if necessary. Try to avoid a dark, warm, and damp environment.

Check the condition of a textile when it comes into your shop. Dirt, dust, and greasy soils will cause a textile to deteriorate. Some fabrics are normally not bothered by insects, however, any fabric stained with food is subject to attack. Textiles are also adversely affected by air pollution, such as sulfur dioxide from cars and industry. Look for signs of wear, use, fading, previous repairs, or poor framing materials. If the textile is in poor or fragile condition, it may not be possible to mount or frame.

A conservator should treat any textile that is torn, deteriorated, distorted, or stained. A conservator should be contacted even if a textile seems to need only a bit of cleaning. Never recommend cleaning without first con-

sulting an expert. Sometimes cleaning can do more harm than good and proper cleaning of old or fragile textiles requires skill and experience.

Be sure to wash your hands to remove oils, acids, salts, and soil, which can cause stains, or wear gloves when working on a textile. Remove all jewelry which can get caught on loose threads, and work only on a clean surface. Obviously, don't eat, drink, or smoke near textiles.

Large pieces, regardless of age or condition, require special treatment to be safely displayed. Also, many textiles have added decorations such as beads, ribbons, sequins, padding, and pins, which make them complicated to display properly. In these instances you should contact a conservator before mounting.

Educate your customers. Often, the customer doesn't understand what is involved in mounting a textile. All they want is a way to get the piece on the wall. Explain to them how various methods will help or harm

the textile. Although it may involve collaborating with a conservator, always recommend the safest mounting method. In the long run, both the owner and the textile will benefit.

Remember, textiles are subject to decay from dust, dirt, handling, pollution, insects, and light. The way a textile is treated, framed or not framed, will help determine its lifespan. The display of textiles is an age-old tradition; with proper care and storage, these items can continue to be passed on to future generations.

To locate a conservator in your area, contact the American Institute for Conservation referral service in Washington, D.C. at 202-452-9545. ■

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