

HISTORIC QUILT CARE 101: CLEANING

What are your options for cleaning historic quilts?

- Non-Wash Approach
- Vacuum/Screen
- Professional Help
- Wet Clean

Remember:

- The fiber content, dyes, and construction make each quilt special
- Clean quilts on a “case by case” basis
- The best approach is to leave it as is...

Ask yourself beforehand:

- ❖ *What is the fiber content?*
- ❖ *How is the quilt constructed?*
- ❖ *Can it withstand movement or agitation?*
- ❖ *Will the colors bleed or fade?*
- ❖ *How valuable is it to you?*
- ❖ *Do you have the necessary equipment & space?*
- ❖ *How will you feel if it is damaged by your choice of cleaning method?*

Historic Materials

Pre-1910 quilts were generally made from:

Cotton, Linen, Wool, & Silk

Interior batting usually is cotton, wool, or polyester

Preventative Measures

Avoid locations that see extreme temperatures and dampness such as attics, garages, and basements

Controlling the home environment:

- Temperature (50 to 60 degrees is ideal)
- Humidity (50 percent)
- Avoid pests
- Low light

REMEMBER

- Do not** pick a quilt up by one end
- Do not** hang a quilt on a clothesline
- Do not** put a quilt in direct sunlight
- Do not** put a quilt in a dryer

Option #1 Non-Wash

Air quilts outside and away from direct sunlight

Process

- Place a large plastic sheet on the ground
- Cover it with a clean white sheet
- Lay the quilt on top of the sheet for airing
- Never hang

Do not wash your quilt if it contains:

- Inked signatures
- Dyes that appear unstable
- Fabrics that are deteriorating
- Glazed or silk fabrics
- Woolen yarns with questionable dyes
- Or if it has never been washed

Spot cleaning at home is **not recommended**

Avoid wet cleaning a quilt unless it is necessary

Never use a washing machine!

Option #2 All-Over Clean

The vacuum/screen method

Process

- Place a nylon screen (with taped edges) over the top of your quilt
- Set your vacuum at the lowest suction setting
- Use the hose and an upholstery attachment tool to carefully vacuum your quilt over the screen
- Do not rub or apply too much pressure
- Clean the quilt in sections
- Do not slide the screen; lift it up and place it in the next position instead

Do this on a **yearly basis...**

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Option #3 Professional Help

- ❖ Sometimes cleaning historic quilts at home is not always the best option
- ❖ Contact a qualified textile conservator
- ❖ Very old, fragile, or valuable quilts should be cleaned by a professional textile conservator

Option #4 Wet Cleaning

A) Water soak only...

Remember: always do a colorfastness check!

Process

- Use a fiberglass screen under the quilt to support its weight and prevent strain
- Ideally, a quilt should be spread out in a single layer (however, that is not always possible)
- Bathtubs work well, or you can build a frame of boards (e.g. 2x4 lumber) outdoors and line it with plastic
- Be sure the tub or container is clean
- Submerge the quilt in plain water at room temperature or no more than 90°F to 100°F
- Use soft water, preferably deionized water or distilled water
- Do not use hard water
- Use just enough water to cover the quilt
- Water alone will remove a considerable amount of soil
- Check the quilt frequently
- It may take an hour for the water to saturate the quilt
- If the water becomes soiled or discolored, change it
- Drain and refill the container with fresh soft, distilled, or deionized water
- If you are pleased with the results, dry the quilt
- If not, you may want to try a mild detergent/water solution

Remember to pretest colored fabrics and threads for wash fastness!

Option #4 Wet Cleaning

B) Detergent soak...

Do not use laundry detergents!

Process

- Use a mild dishwashing liquid detergent with a minimum of coloring agents and perfumes
- Use about 1 tablespoon of liquid detergent to 4 gallons of water
- Soak in the detergent and water for at least 30 minutes
- Repeat the process if the water still shows discoloration due to soil
- DO NOT scrub, squeeze, or beat the quilt
- Gently tamp it up and down with your fingers if necessary
- A sponge can work better than the flat hand
- Follow the soak in a detergent solution with a series of rinses
- Each of the five to seven rinses should take at least 15 minutes
- The final rinse water should be clear of detergent residue
- Remember to use distilled water for rinsing

Drying Procedures

- Rinse and gently lift the quilt out of the tub
- Select a dry place with good air circulation
- Cover the area with a plastic sheet & a clean white sheet
- Lay clean towels or a mattress pad over the sheet, and then lay the quilt on top
- Support it as evenly with the screen
- Use other towels or pads to press more moisture from the quilt
- A fan (3 to 4 ft. away) can aid air circulation

HISTORIC QUILT CARE 101: STORAGE

COMMANDMENTS OF STORAGE

- ❑ DO NOT STORE A QUILT IN A PLASTIC CONTAINER OR BAG
- ❑ DO NOT NOT STORE YOUR QUILTS WITH MOTHBALLS
- ❑ DO NOT STORE QUILTS IN DIRECT SUNLIGHT
- ❑ DO NOT STORE QUILTS IN CEDAR OR HOPE CHESTS
- ❑ DO NOT STORE YOUR QUILT IN A BASEMENT OR ATTIC
- ❑ DO NOT STORE TOO MANY FOLDED QUILTS ON TOP OF ONE ANOTHER
- ❑ DO NOT KEEP THE SAME QUILTS HANGING FOR LONG PERIODS OF TIME
- ❑ DO NOT STORE QUILTS WITH NEWSPAPER OR IN CARDBOARD BOXES
- ❑ DO NOT USE COLORED TISSUE PAPER WHEN FOLDING YOUR QUILTS TO PREVENT CREASING

Option #1 Rolled Storage

This is a space-saving way to store historic quilts

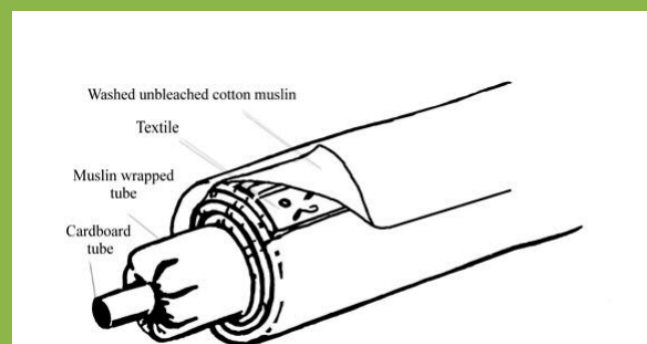


Figure 1. Quilts may be stored by *loosely* rolling them onto large cardboard tubes which have been covered with cotton or non-resin treated polyester batting and unbleached muslin. The rolled quilt is then covered with acid-free tissue or washed cotton muslin. Use this method for flat quilts. Do *not* fold a quilt in half and then roll it.

Option # 2 Flat Storage

This is the ideal way to store historic quilts

- ❖ If the quilts must be folded, fold them as few times as possible
- ❖ Periodically refold them to redistribute the strain that develops along fold lines
- ❖ Quilts that remain folded for long periods may develop permanent creases and eventually the fibers are likely to break under the strain along these creases
- ❖ Avoid stacking heavy quilts or other items on top to prevent creasing the quilts and crushing the batting

Option # 3 Folded Storage

This is perhaps the most common way to store historic quilts

- ❖ Fold over one-third of the quilt on top of itself, and then fold the remaining third over on top of the section you just folded
- ❖ Use acid-free white tissue paper crumpled inside the folded areas to prevent creases
- ❖ Next, you will fold one-third of the folded quilt over again, and fold the remaining third on top of the area you just completed
- ❖ Tissue paper may be used again
- ❖ When finished you will turn the quilt over and place it in a muslin sack or pillowcase

General Reminders:

- When storing quilts, avoid direct contact with wood, paper or cardboard
- If they are stored in regular cardboard or wooden boxes or on wooden shelves, line them with acid-free or unbleached cotton muslin first
- Use acid-free tissue crumpled into tubes to cushion the folds of the quilt as well