



*Caring for Family Quilts  
in the Home*

International Quilt Study Center & Museum

**PROTECT &  
PRESERVE**

Quilts and other textile heirlooms and keepsakes are fragile pieces of history that link generations, inspiring and educating us about our shared past. Because textiles are subject to deterioration from environmental conditions, they require special care. There is little we can do to make them last forever, but taking simple preventive measures such as controlling the home environment (temperature, humidity, pests, and light) is the most important way to ensure that family quilts and other heirloom textiles last for generations.



**BEFORE:** This quilt in the IQSC collection had serious damage in some of its silks.

**AFTER:** The quilt was sent to a professional textile conservator who inserted replacement silk to conceal the damage and stabilized those areas with fine crepe fabric. By definition, conservation work can always be reversed.

IQSC 2005.020.0001



## DETER PESTS!

Deter pests by keeping storage areas clean with frequent vacuuming, by making sure items are clean when placed in storage, and by maintaining proper temperature and humidity. Then inspect the storage area regularly, so that evidence of pests is discovered early and corrective action can be taken. The major insects that attack textiles are webbing clothes moths and carpet beetles. These insects are especially attracted to wool, silk, hair and feathers.

Cedar chests and closets may have almost no value as moth or carpet beetle repellents. The value of a cedar chest is that the chest is tightly closed, thus preventing entry of moths or beetles. Furthermore, woods of any type release volatile, acidic oils that yellow and weaken textiles if items are placed in direct contact with them. Therefore, line wooden shelves and cedar chests with a barrier of washed cotton sheeting or muslin or acid-free tissue paper. The active ingredient in mothballs is harmful to humans and should be avoided.

Insect damage often occurs on textiles made from protein fibers—wool and silk—like in this crazy quilt where moth larvae consumed parts of the red fabric, exposing the plaid foundation fabric underneath. IQSC 2001.005.0002



The upper portion of this quilt has faded, probably due to direct sunlight exposure. IQSC 2008.040.0029

All light fades and weakens textiles. Sunlight and fluorescent light are especially damaging because they emit high levels of ultraviolet radiation. Damage caused by light is cumulative and irreversible. Therefore, store textiles in darkness and dim the lights in areas where quilts and textile keepsakes are displayed. Keep the shades drawn on windows, reduce the number of lights and/or reduce the wattage of light bulbs, and turn off any artificial lights when not in a room.

**DIM the LIGHTS!**

Spot-cleaned with bleach at some time in its past, this quilt's white fabric is disintegrating.  
IQSC 1997.007.0306



## To CLEAN or NOT to CLEAN?

Generally the answer to this question is a resounding “no!” Washing a quilt has too many risks involved to recommend it. Colors can bleed and the agitation and abrasion of washing—even a gentle hand washing—can damage fragile textiles. It is best to consult a textile conservator before washing a quilt or heirloom textile.

A musty smelling quilt can be aired by placing it outside on a sunny day (sandwiched between two sheets) and monitoring it closely. If it appears dusty, the quilt may be vacuumed by putting a piece of tulle (a soft, sheer netting) over the nozzle, setting the vacuum cleaner at its lowest suction level, and gently passing the nozzle over the surface.

## PROPER STORAGE



Quilts are stored in acid-free boxes at the International Quilt Study Center & Museum. Acid-free products are commercially available from many different sources.

When storing folded textiles in ordinary cardboard boxes, wooden drawers or on closet shelves, protect them from direct contact with the cardboard or wood by lining the shelves, drawers or boxes with layers of archival (acid-free) tissue or washed unbleached cotton muslin or sheeting. Why? Ordinary cardboard and wood emit volatile acids that deteriorate and yellow textiles over time. Archival boxes and tissue are available from museum suppliers, as well as some local dry cleaners.

Plastic containers made of new (not recycled) High Density Polyethylene (HDPE) or Polypropylene (PP) may be used for storage of textiles if they are lined with layers of archival tissue or washed cotton muslin or sheeting. To identify containers made of new plastic, select clear or milky white translucent (not colored) containers, then check for these symbols on the bottom:



Why do you need to line the container? Because this will protect your quilts and keepsakes from coming in direct contact with the plastic, where damaging volatile gases may be present in higher concentrations and where moisture may condense, possibly leading to mold and mildew growth.

STOP the ROT!



Damage like this—caused by corrosive ink inscriptions original to the quilt—can be accelerated by extremes in temperature and humidity. IQSC 1997.007.0859

A stable environment is essential for the long-term preservation of heirloom textiles. Avoid attics and basements where fluctuations in temperature and humidity levels may be extreme. The recommended temperature is 62°F to 72°F and the humidity should be 45 to 55 percent RH (relative humidity). It is best to store quilts and family keepsakes in areas of the home that are cool and dry year round—generally the areas where the family lives. Warm and moist air coupled with a lack of air circulation encourage mold and mildew growth that can stain fibers and cause deterioration.



At the International Quilt Study Center & Museum, some quilts are stored in large flat-storage units. These quilts either have severe damage or would be damaged by folding, for instance pieces with painted or highly embellished surfaces. IQSC 1997.007.1082

## DOING your PART

Store quilts and family keepsakes in areas of the home where the environment is most stable. Avoid attics, basements, kitchens, laundry rooms and unheated spaces.

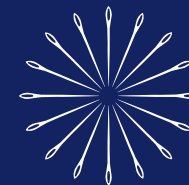
Store textile items flat if possible, such as on a spare bed that is rarely used. If items must be folded, use acid-free tissue or muslin to cushion folds. Refold periodically to minimize the chance of permanent creases and fold lines.

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