



SAVING YOUR Treasures

A Website about what you can do to protect and preserve the things of importance in your life



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CARING FOR YOUR WEDDING DRESS

For many people textiles such as christening gowns, veils, and wedding dresses are passed down through the generations and viewed as treasured heirlooms. Even today new wedding dresses or baby clothes are saved for future generations. It is important to understand the proper procedures to promote the long-term preservation of your wedding dress. The following recommendations will be helpful when deciding how to keep your wedding gown in the best possible condition long into the future.

Cleaning

The first and most important step in the long-term preservation of your wedding dress is to clean it prior to storage. Cleaning will help to reduce the chances of mold, pests, and deterioration, but you must be careful in determining the best method of cleaning. It is generally agreed, the best way to clean a present day formal gown of silk and lace or a vintage garment is to take it to a professional. Wedding gowns are notorious for their very complex designs and construction with multiple layers of lace, silk, boning, and cotton stiffeners. If, at any point, you are not absolutely sure about the condition of the dress or if the fabric is safe for washing consult a textile conservator before you begin. The conservator will be able to recommend the best solutions for long-term preservation.

Once you have determined the condition of your dress is sturdy enough and the materials are suitable to withstand dry cleaning methods, the next step is to locate a dry cleaner that is willing and able to meet your requirements. Not every dry cleaner is going to have the experience or facilities necessary to meet the special needs for dry cleaning special textiles. Gather recommendations from local museums, bridal shops, and individuals about your local dry cleaners. Look for a dry cleaner that has on-site cleaning facilities and older equipment. The new machines are highly automated and it may be difficult for the operator have a great deal of control over the cleaning process, as is needed with special objects. During the process of talking with dry cleaners, provide them with a copy of "General Guidelines for the Dry Cleaning of Prepared Historic Textiles."

Once you have located a dry-cleaner that is willing and able to meet your needs, arrange a meeting to examine the dress. Note any stains, threadbare areas, loose buttons, and soiling. The dry-cleaning process involves harsh chemicals and mechanical tumbling action similar to machine washing and drying, so it is important

you ask the dry-cleaner if he or she will test sequins, beads and buttons to make sure they will not melt or breakdown. If the dry-cleaner is unable to clean your dress, a textile conservator may be able to help.

After the wedding gown has been examined, **arrange for the cleaning to be completed on the day the dry cleaner replaces the solvents and sole runs can be made.** Prepare your gown for dry-cleaning at home using the following procedure:

1. Purchase white tulle from a local fabric store.
2. Lay your wedding dress out on a flat surface.
3. Pad the arms and all folds or creases with tulle to prevent damage from sharp creases.
4. Fold the dress onto itself with tulle in the fold area making a loose bundle.
5. Wrap the bundle with more tulle.
6. Sew the ends of the tulle together around the bundle creating a bag.
7. Repeat Steps 5 and 6 three more times.
8. Take the prepared bundle to the dry cleaner on the agreed upon day.

Refer to the Center's "Guideline for the Dry Cleaning of Prepared Historic Textiles" for detailed instructions for dry cleaners when dry cleaning historic textiles.

Storage

After picking up the dress from the dry cleaner's, unwrap the bundle and lay the dress flat. Allow the dress to air dry for 24 hours so the solvents used in cleaning can completely evaporate. Examine the dress closely for any stains that need further treatment and any other damage incurred during cleaning. Remove all pins and dry cleaning staples and cover any metal fasteners or decorations with acid-free tissue paper or clean cotton to prevent corrosion from damaging the dress. Before placing the dress in a storage box, pad any creases and folds with acid-free tissue paper. Choose an appropriate sized box for your dress and limit the amount of folding to prevent damaging creases from forming. (See and read "Folding a Textile for Storage.")

When deciding where to store your wedding dress, remember the first line of defense in proper storage is keeping your treasures in a good environment. The rule of thumb is that if **you** would be comfortable in the storage location, your objects will be "comfortable" there also. Flat storage is ideal for most textiles because it provides support for the entire dress. A dress can be hung on a padded hanger if it is not too heavy, but hanging places stress on the shoulders and the seams leading to long-term damage such as distortion. Long-term storage in cedar trunks, while traditional, is not safe. The wood is highly acidic and will off-gas acting as a catalyst in deteriorating the dress. Enclosing the dress in an acid free lignin free box will help to prevent damage from acids, insects, dust, water, and light. When storing in a box, be sure the box and tissue are made of acid-free and lignin-free materials.

Storage spaces with extreme environmental fluctuations such as an attic or basement should be avoided. Light can cause serious damage to textiles so it is important to limit

the dress's exposure to light so it does not become faded and brittle. Temperature and relative humidity are also important factors to consider when deciding where to keep your dress. Humidity that is too high will promote mold growth and insect infestation and too low humidity will weaken the materials and the textile will become extremely fragile over time. The best place for storing your wedding dress is in the living space of the home—either under the bed or in a closet. This will keep the environmental fluctuations at a minimum.

The recommendations for cleaning and storing your wedding dress are not strict guidelines. Each dress is unique and the suggestions do not always apply. If you have any questions or reservations as to whether or not your dress should be dry cleaned, please consult with a textile conservator. Remember, whether or not a dry-cleaner or conservator cannot help you the most important thing is the longevity of your wedding dress.

References:

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