

Caring For Vintage & Collectible Textiles



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“Never forget the material you are working with, and try always to use it for doing what it can do best: if you feel yourself hampered by the material in which you are working, instead of being helped by it, you have so far not learned your business.”

-William Morris



Introduction

Laundry was one of the first household tasks that the modern woman jettisoned. It involved lifting heavy baskets and sweating or a hot iron. The earliest household machines were invented to make the job easier, but women (and it was usually women) tried as soon as they could afford it to send out their laundry. In fact, one of the reliable ways to make a little extra money was to do other people's laundry for them. When laundry was done at home, it was not only time consuming, it took up a lot of space. My 1908 house had a large laundry room with a triple sink, a large built-in table for folding & sorting and 30 feet of clothes line for indoor drying. My grandmother's house, built in the early 1920's was similarly equipped. Today even in a large house, there may be no more than a closet for the washer and dryer and no ironing board! Nevertheless, it is still possible to take care of your fine textiles yourself and, in fact, it is better for them than commercial cleaning.

Time & Fabric Saving Equipment for home laundry

1) The largest ironing board you can comfortably store

The more ironing space you have the better. On the other hand, if your board is too awkward to set up, you will never use it.

2) The best iron you can afford

Cheap irons do not get hot enough to get a good press on natural fibers. Very light weight irons do not press as well as heavy irons. In my opinion, the in-iron steam function is often a waste of time. The element that heats the iron head also makes the steam which means that when you need it most - with wool for example - the iron will not be hot enough to make steam for you. More on this later. You may also prefer an iron that does NOT have an automatic shut off. It is extremely annoying to be blocking an antique linen only to have the iron shut off just as you are ready to press. If you are worried about forgetting to turn the iron off, put a timer on the electrical outlet.

3) 2 or 3 clean white bath towels.

Keep these separate and do not use them for anything else. Do not use colored towels.

4) At least one small (2 gal.) tub or basin.

Do not use this for anything but laundry. Eventually, if you have space, you may acquire a second tub- one for washing & one for rinsing.

5) A spray bottle and a SMALL collection of laundry soaps and stain removal products including an enzyme stain remover, bleach, detergent or laundry soap in flake or powder form (If you prefer liquid for your basic household laundry, get a small box of powder or flakes to have on hand). I list some products I like at the end of the booklet.

6) A white washed muslin or light weight linen pressing cloth

(NOT a terry cloth towel and NOT a synthetic fabric like poly-cotton). Do not use this for anything else.

7) Optional: spray starch, heavy duty stain remover (like Goo Gone)

8) Unnecessary: fabric softener, non-bleach fabric brightener, scented rinses and dryer sachets

Tip: towels, pressing clothes, ironing surfaces or other fabrics that will touch your linens should be white. Even a color fast towel will react to spot removers and will bleed

Tip: keep laundry equipment separate from other household items. A towel or basin used for another project will often have an invisible residue that will stain fabric

Display Linens - throw pillows, table runners & curtains

The decorative fabrics that are on display in your home can accumulate quite a bit of dust. In the past, these textiles were changed at spring cleaning. Velvets and wools were cleaned and stored and replaced with chintz and linen. This was particularly necessary after dusty heating with coal and wood. Even if you don't use coal or wood, it's good idea to rotate your textiles.

United States law requires that all textiles be sold with instructions for their care. Unfortunately, since few people today have the skill or equipment to properly launder, most manufacturers simply recommend dry cleaning, even if it is not the best method. If your textile is embroidered linen, then it is probably washable. Your main concern will be the color stability of the embroidery. Reds, blues and black are the least colorfast. Test by pressing the embroidery between two moistened (not soaked) cotton balls. An unstable dye will bleed slightly onto the cotton. If the embroidery is only slightly non-colorfast, you may wash it anyway if you are careful. Use cold water and mild soap (like Ivory Snow™). Do not use detergents or chemical spot removers. Their stain-removal properties will actually accelerate bleed. Use a plastic basin or sink that allows plenty of room for the fabric. If you can spread it out in a bathtub, that's even better. The idea is to make sure the unstable areas have no opportunity to transfer their color. Keep the fabric moving gently. Do not leave it to soak. A small embroidered red leaf left soaking pressed up against clean white linen will surely leave an imprint. Two or three minutes of washing should suffice. Rinse thoroughly, again in cold water. Roll in a towel and squeeze gently to remove water. Do not crush or crumble. If possible, let it dry flat or partially flat on a clothes rack. Do not put it in dryer, even on a delicate cycle.

Most important, don't let these instructions intimidate you. Linen is very strong and dyes are more stable than ever. The only problems I have had with bleeding have been when I have, in desperation, used a powerful enzyme cleaner. By all means, test your textile the first time you wash it, but don't let the fear of laundry keep you from preserving your handiwork by keeping it clean.

If you are able to dry your textile on a flat surface, it will need only a light pressing. Today's irons do not get as hot as in the past which makes them safer and less likely to scorch fabric. On the other hand, linen requires high heat for a good press. I find this very frustrating so I search out old irons at garage sales, but these have their own problems. They can heat erratically and give you a nasty burn.

The old-fashioned way to press linen is to start with damp fabric and iron with high heat on the wrong side until dry. The dampness provides some protection against scorching and the press will be very smooth and crisp. However, this is time consuming, and you can get almost as nice a result just moistening the fabric with a plant sprayer. Some newer linens may water mark. To remove water marks, simply dampen the entire textile. I am not a big fan of spray starch, but it can add a bit of body to your fabric. It seems mainly to sit on the fabric surface and gum up the iron. I prefer liquid starch. Add about 1 cup to a gallon of water, immerse the fabric (do not rinse) and iron damp. Do not use starch if you are storing your fabric - over a long period of time, starch will attract insects, creates mildew and damages fibers.

Linen actually gets more wrinkle-resistant with repeated washings as fibers soften. However, all linen will actually improve with careful laundering... this is part of the pleasure of owning and caring for fine textiles.

Store your linens rolled rather than folded if you can. Fibers can break or stains develop along creases. If you must fold them, refold your linens with different crease lines from time to time.



Curtains

Elaborately constructed drapery with lining, pleating and trim should be dry cleaned by a professional. Simple curtains without lining and made from natural fibers may often be washed. If the fabric was washed before the curtains were made and they are simple and informal, they may even be machine washed. The main difficulty with curtains is pressing them. Because they are large one part seems to become creased as you are ironing another part. People used to dry their curtains on adjustable curtain frames so that they needed little or no ironing. In addition, the frame prevented shrinkage and dried the curtain to the exact window measurement. Unless fabric is tightly woven, it is quite malleable and can be distorted several inches in width or length, depending on the direction you iron. Professional workrooms use large ironing tables to minimize distortion.

Since no one today has this kind of elaborate laundry set up at home, it may be best to send your curtains to the dry cleaner. Use a reputable dry cleaner, preferably one with cleaning facilities onsite. If your curtains are simple, you may try bulk dry cleaning. The curtains will be run through a dry-cleaning machine but not pressed. They will not be as creased as if they had been washed.





Table linens

Table linens get the most abuse. After all, their main function is to protect more fragile surfaces like wood from moisture and the sun. Food may be spilled, vases overflow and dust settles. Fortunately, most vintage household linens are usually actually linen or cotton/linen blends, which are easy to care for. If your collectible pillow or runner is on display, try to clean it once a year, especially if you live in a city or have a lot of dusty renovation going on. Remember that the dust you wipe off the wooden furniture is also settling on the fabric. An accumulation of dust will permanently damage fibers and hasten rot.

Table linens also get the most exotic stains. The best stain-removal technique is to take care of the problem with speed. The sooner you treat a stain, the easier it will be to remove. Don't set it aside for later laundering; immediately flush the fabric repeatedly with cold water. Add mild soap. If necessary, scrub gently with an old soft tooth brush. If none of this works, you may try an enzyme cleaner. Test it on a seam to see if it fades the fabric. Leave it on as briefly as possible and do not use it directly on embroidery.

Vintage Textiles

If you have a fine, valuable piece, have it cleaned or repaired by an expert in textile conservation. A local museum or university arts program may be able to recommend someone. The care of museum quality textiles is a very special art, not for the untrained.

On the other hand, many charming but less precious vintage textiles are available for considerably less money. However, they may be slightly damaged or stained. Linens and cotton can be improved considerably with washing and pressing. Remember to test the embroidery for colorfastness. Silk is very, very fragile. Old silk splits like parchment and may actually disintegrate if washed or cleaned. Luckily, it was not often used for home textiles, but silk embroidery thread is also fragile. Silk thread is dyed in acid colors that are soluble in warm or hot water. If colors are pale, silk may be successfully washed in cold water, but DRY dry cleaning is recommended. If silk embroidery is frayed and split, it will continue to deteriorate and cannot be saved.

Many early drapery and upholstery fabrics were made of wool and have usually been damaged by moths. Hold the piece up to the light and look for weakness in the weave. It may be worth it to reweave or darn a few small holes. If you really object to a stain, don't purchase the textile, since it probably won't come out. Remember, the most important factor in removal is speed, and that stain has probably been there for decades. Linen is particularly susceptible to rust spotting. These small brown spots come from mineral deposits in the original rinse water (the only way to avoid them is to rinse with distilled water). They really cannot be removed without damaging the fabric.

Yellow streaks in white linen can be bleached out with lemon juice or peroxide. To bleach a make a paste of lemon juice or peroxide and soap flakes and brush gently onto stain. Leave on for about one minute and rinse.

Never use bleaches (including lemon juice) on linen that has silk embroidery. Bleach lightens cellulose fibers (linen & cotton, made from plant products) but is damaging to protein fibers (silk & wool, made from animal products).

Warning: Many vintage women's magazines and old household references contain recipes for removing stains. Do not use these formulas. Many recommend using very strong chemicals like oxalic acid or carbon tetrachloride (no longer even available) or salt, which actually sets stains. Furthermore, the chemical make-up of dyes in inks, paints and oil-based products has changed considerably over the years.

Ann Wallace is a textile designer specializing in original designs reminiscent of the Arts & Crafts Movement. Specializing in embellishing bedspreads, duvet covers & other bedding, as well as inglenook & bench cushions. Made to order curtains and shades. Large stock of appliqué & stencil designs as well as design service. Hand embroidered pillows & table runners. Period appropriate drapery hardware. Also yardage & patterns. Please visit www.annwallace.com to see more.