

has heavy decoration (like a 'flapper' dress), or a costume which has been cut on the bias (many 1930's dresses) is best stored flat. Pack these items into a clean sturdy acid-free box with plenty of white acid-free tissue paper underneath and between any folds; use as big a box as possible to avoid making a lot of folds. Box up or cover as much as possible; this protects objects from light, dust and excess handling. Boxes should also be labelled to make it easier to find objects later.

**Ask a conservator to demonstrate techniques for packing and storage and to recommend the best materials - you can then usefully use this knowledge yourself.**

## CLEANING HISTORIC COSTUME AND TEXTILES

Do not attempt to wash anything with proprietary brands of detergent or bleach. Remember that until quite recently, white was not the optically bright white we now expect. Bleaching will weaken the textile and modern detergents are designed for modern fabrics; they contain optical brighteners and enzymes which remain in the textile and can damage fragile objects. Even soapflakes may be too alkaline for a textile and cause problems. Commercial dry-cleaners now have a much-reduced range of solvents available to use, due to more stringent health and safety legislation. This means that after cleaning, clothes are now put into a heated chamber to drive off excess solvent which is then filtered and re-used many times.

**If you are considering dry cleaning a special or historical item seek advice from a conservator first.**

## CONSULTING A CONSERVATOR

- A conservator can provide advice if your costume has stains, old adhesive or tape repairs, dyes which have bled into the surrounding textile, splits in the fabric, or when the fastenings need replacing or reinforcing,
- Textile conservators are skilled in cleaning, repairing and stabilising costume and uniform. Their approach is one of 'minimum intervention', preserving and respecting as much of the original object as possible and retaining any related historical information.
- You can expect a conservator to document their work carefully and give you full estimates and a list of options before carrying out treatment.
- If you have a larger or valuable collection, it is cost-effective to ask a conservator to carry out an item-by-item survey, prioritising work and informing you of particular problems and needs.

## Find a conservator by using the Conservation Register.

The Register is free to use; it provides detailed information on conservation-restoration businesses based in the UK and Ireland including contact details, referenced examples of previous work and the qualifications of members of staff. It is searchable by specialist skill and geographical location and each business has been required to meet rigorous criteria which include professional accreditation; the information is regularly updated.

[www.conservationregister.com](http://www.conservationregister.com)

[info@conservationregister.com](mailto:info@conservationregister.com)

+44(0)20 7785 3804

This article offers general guidance and is not intended to be a substitute for the professional advice of an accredited conservator. The views expressed are those of the author or authors, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Institute of Conservation. The Institute of Conservation would like to acknowledge use of the MGC publication 'Ours for Keeps' and the UKIC leaflet 'Caring for Historic Textiles' in the preparation of this text. The Institute of Conservation and its partners accept no liability for any loss or damage which may arise if this guidance is followed.

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# Care and conservation of costume and textiles



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Textiles are prized and collected for many reasons. Wedding dresses, veils and christening robes are often handed down in families and treasured as heirlooms; similarly, many people want to preserve new dresses or baby clothes for future generations. Although historic costume, samplers and other textiles are increasingly sold at auction, prices are only rarely similar to those achieved by paintings or sculpture. The value of textiles is found in their association with a person or place, or an interest in the objects themselves and their construction.

Most costumes encountered in the UK date from the mid 18th century to the present day; articles of clothing pre-dating this period are very rare. Because there was once a strong market for used clothing, only those objects of special or sentimental value were kept; this accounts for the large numbers of wedding dresses, evening gowns and christening robes in many museum collections.

## **COSTUME: VALUABLE OR EXPENDABLE?**

Before you donate a piece to the dressing-up box, or decide that it is going to be part of your everyday wardrobe, be sure you know exactly what it is. Textiles are more likely to be damaged during use than at any other time. If you decide to treat your costume items as valuable historical objects, keep them very separate from other items and do not wear them at all. Here are some reasons why:

- Costume was usually made for and tailored to a specific person, often determined by fashionable corsetry of the time and by expectations of body shape, use and posture. We cannot reproduce these factors today and you could distort and damage the costume permanently in the attempt.
- Perspiration and cosmetics leave stains which are difficult, if not impossible to remove. Babies are liable to stain a christening robe, and such stains are also difficult to remove safely.
- The costume may be much more fragile than you realise. The sewing threads may have become weak or strained and the seams may split without warning. The textile itself may be inherently weak and fastenings, trimmings, lace or embroidery may look deceptively robust.
- If you are intending to give your costume to a museum, it might be considered unacceptable if it has been recently worn or altered.

Textiles need special care if they are to be preserved for the future. The basic textile components of a costume usually belong to one of three categories: protein (silk and wool), cellulose (cotton, linen, ramie) and synthetic (viscose rayon, nylon, polyester, etc). Non-textile materials commonly found

on costume include glass, plastics, ceramics, metal, gelatine, wood, straw, leather, rubber, and whalebone.

## **RECOGNISING POTENTIAL PROBLEMS**

- All textiles are easily damaged by exposure to light. Silk is the most vulnerable, but prolonged exposure will cause changes and damage to all fibres such as fading, yellowing and becoming brittle.
- Dresses made in the period 1890-1915 often have silk linings (tin salts were used to increase fabric weight). These are prone to severe splitting and degradation of the fabric.
- Associated materials may stain a costume item. For example, metals will corrode, tarnish and dull over time. If the corrosion products are 'active' they may start to stain the surrounding fabric. Some plastics have an inherent tendency to degrade and again, the breakdown products can stain surrounding material.
- Bacteria, moulds and insects may cause damage to all textiles such as holes, grazed areas and staining. Damp conditions and the presence of protein-rich materials such as starch and food stains increase the risk of this type of damage.
- Stains, colour-changes and weak areas from wear are particular problems for costume items and can be expected around the neck, cuffs, under the sleeves, at the hem of long garments, and down the front where things are often spilled.
- Crushing, creasing, tears and loose fittings occur because of the way a costume or other item has been stored and packed, or as a result of wearing, alteration or other physical damage.

**Consulting a conservator is a good idea if you are at all unsure about the materials in a costume or textile. He or she will give you advice on identification, storage, cleaning, packing, insect problems and how best to display your collection.**

## **HANDLING AND MOVING TEXTILES**

Textiles are particularly at risk when handled or moved. In general, costume should be handled as little as possible, especially any metal elements, as touching these with bare hands can mark the surface easily. When you do have to handle costume, the potential for damage can be minimised by laying it out in a clean space with plenty of room. Wear fine cotton or thin vinyl gloves when handling or touching the textile and remove jewellery that may snag. Keep food and drink away and avoid using pens or markers around this area. Use pencil to write labels.

When thinking about moving costume and other textiles, plan the task and weigh up the risks. Support the textile when lifting it (small textiles can be moved on boards or sheets of paper; larger textiles may be rolled round tubes) and make sure that you have a clean and safe space to take the item to. Keep any pieces or decoration which come loose with the item in acid free tissue paper or a small bag, and consult a conservator as soon as possible.

## **CONTROLLING THE ENVIRONMENT**

Light, dirt, fluctuating humidity and pests all cause damage. Keep exposure to light, especially daylight (which contains ultraviolet radiation), to a minimum. Limit the length of time your costume pieces are displayed or otherwise exposed to normal domestic conditions. Colour comparison between the front and reverse of a textile or between concealed and exposed areas will indicate whether light damage has occurred. The fading of dyes is irreversible and may also be an indication of damage to the textile fibres.

**A conservator can explain the cumulative effects of exposure to light and how to protect items from light damage.**

Try to keep humidity levels stable (for example, away from extremes of central heating). Damp conditions (over 65% relative humidity) promote mould growth and heat can make textiles brittle. Poor environmental conditions can also encourage pest activity. Check items on a monthly basis for insects and other problems. The larvae of clothes moth and carpet beetles (also known as woolly bears) are particularly damaging to textiles.

**If you find signs of insect damage or see adult insects near your costume or textile collection, seek the advice of a conservator. He or she will be able to tell you how to prevent damage, improve the environment and monitor future insect activity.**

## **PACKING AND STORAGE**

The best way to keep costume and textiles safe is to ensure they are properly stored when not in use. Store items in a clean, dry, dark place and make sure they are accessible for regular inspection. Package and cover as much as possible to protect from dust which is often acidic and attracts moisture and insects into the textile.

Garments in good condition can be hung on padded-to-shape hangers. Make padding from polyester wadding (not a flameproofed type), and cover with another fabric, preferably unbleached, washed pure cotton. Sometimes hanging is not suitable and will cause distortion; anything fragile, or which