

## STORAGE

Carpets and rugs should not be folded, as folds create weak areas which will eventually wear. It is preferable to roll each item right (top) side out in the direction of the pile on an acid-free tube of wide diameter. The carpet should be rolled in a layer of acid-free tissue paper and wrapped in a washed, white cotton dust-sheet. Rolling a large carpet is not easy as it tends to corkscrew; several people and attempts may be required.

**A textile conservator can advise on using acid-free materials to protect the carpet whilst in store and on suitable storage conditions.**

## CONSULTING A CONSERVATOR

The owner can undertake measures to prevent damage to carpets and rugs; however there are instances when a textile conservator can provide invaluable help.

- **Each rug or carpet has individual characteristics and a treatment which has successfully been applied to one piece will not necessarily be suitable for another; a conservator can assess the condition of each item.**
- **A conservator can carry out safe treatment to stabilise a rug which is worn or damaged. It is inadvisable for the owner to use adhesives or adhesive tape, even for temporary repairs.**
- **If a rug is to be hung, a conservator can recommend the best method of hanging. Lining the rug will give it additional protection.**
- **If a carpet is in very poor condition it is best to store it until remedial work can be undertaken; a conservator can advise on both storage and possible treatments.**

## 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 and its partners accept no liability for any loss or damage which may arise if this guidance is followed.

Front cover image © NTPL/Geoffrey Frosh

**Icon**  
**THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION**  
**3rd Floor, Downstream Building**  
**1 London Bridge**  
**London**  
**SE1 9BG**  
[www.icon.org.uk](http://www.icon.org.uk)  
[admin@icon.org.uk](mailto:admin@icon.org.uk)  
**+44(0)20 7785 3805**

The Institute of Conservation is grateful for the support of The Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851 in the production of this guidance information. Further information on The Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851 and its work is available at [www.royalcommission1851.org.uk](http://www.royalcommission1851.org.uk).



© Icon, the Institute of Conservation 2006.

# Care and conservation of carpets and rugs



**Icon**

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

Like all textiles, carpets and rugs are prone to environmental damage. Their function makes them susceptible to wear and they are often difficult to handle because of their size and weight. In order to care for a rug properly, it is beneficial to understand what fibres it is composed of and how it is constructed. This informs how the rug should be looked after or displayed, and the type of damage that is likely to occur.

Carpets in use as floor coverings are likely to have a knotted pile of wool; the warp and weft of the foundation can also be wool or may be cotton or linen. They will generally withstand more wear than carpets containing silk which tend to be more fragile. All rugs on display will deteriorate over time; however, a rug in use will deteriorate even more quickly. Kilims, a flat-woven type of rug, are often displayed as hangings, a method which introduces its own problems of care. Fortunately, it is possible to use simple methods to reduce the impact of environmental hazards. A little care can mean the difference between a worn and damaged object and owning an heirloom to hand down to future generations.

## MINIMISING WEAR AND TEAR

Carpets are susceptible to wear if in use; edges and fringes are particularly vulnerable. The use of a rug pad or carpet underlay cushions the carpet and allows it to lie flat and evenly. Underlay made from rubber, synthetic foam or anything containing adhesive is undesirable, and you should be aware that natural fibres such as wool and hair attract insect pests – polyester is safer. In addition, consider removing outdoor shoes before walking on a valued carpet and placing castor cups under the legs or castors of furniture to protect the pile. The rug or carpet can be turned round every year or two so that it wears evenly. Large carpets should not be pulled when doing this, but carefully rolled in the direction of the pile on a wide diameter tube longer than the width of the carpet – two or three people will be required to do this safely.

**If a carpet shows signs of wear, a conservator can assess its condition and recommend treatment.**

## LIGHT

It is generally known that light causes dyes to fade but, less obviously, light also damages fibres, causing them to lose strength. Silk is the most vulnerable fibre. A carpet can be checked for signs of fading by comparing the colours on the front to those on the reverse. If appreciable fading has occurred it is likely that the fibres will also be weakened. If possible a rug should not be placed where sunlight will shine directly on to it, though blinds can be used to minimise the damaging effects of day-light. Smaller rugs can be situated in an area where light levels are low and can therefore be more easily protected than large floor coverings.

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

## TEMPERATURE AND HUMIDITY

Textiles absorb moisture from the air so that a dry atmosphere, which often occurs in winter when a room is heated, causes fibres to shrink and a damp atmosphere causes them to swell. In general, the older the carpet, the less well it will be able to cope with extremes of humidity. Hanging a rug above a radiator or fire will cause the fibres to become dry and brittle. It is difficult to avoid placing a large carpet near a radiator but questions should certainly be raised about an open fire. In order to avoid dampness, try not to hang rugs directly against the interior of the outside wall of a building, nor place them directly onto a stone floor. Relative humidity of over 65% encourages mould growth which can cause irreversible staining and is detrimental to health.

**If mould is present or suspected, a conservator should be contacted as soon as possible.**

## INSECT DAMAGE

Wool carpets are particularly susceptible to damage from moth or carpet beetle. This often occurs in store so it is essential to check on stored items annually, preferably in spring or early summer. Pests tend to thrive in dusty areas, so it is important to clean beneath furniture and to check under carpets where undetected larvae can cause considerable damage. When a carpet has just been acquired

it should be checked carefully for signs of insect damage such as irregular holes in the wool fibre, cocoons and gritty deposits.

**If there is any indication of a pest problem the item should be wrapped in polythene to isolate it from other textiles, and a conservator contacted.**

## DUST AND DIRT

Everyday dust and dirt is unavoidable but can be problematic if it becomes embedded in the carpet pile. It is attractive to insects and can become 'cemented' to the carpet if left too long. However, cleaning can also cause damage and must be undertaken with care. For older, more fragile rugs, a small hand-held vacuum cleaner is preferable as it is more easily controlled. The rug should be vacuumed in the direction of the pile, using an attachment without brushes and avoiding vulnerable areas such as fringes. Worn areas and fringes can be vacuumed if net is tied over the nozzle of the cleaner and low suction is used.

**If the carpet is in poor condition it is sensible to contact a conservator for advice as vacuuming may exacerbate the problem.**

## STAINS AND WET-CLEANING

No matter how careful the owner, accidental spillage often occurs and stains are not only visually disfiguring but may also damage the carpet fibre. The longer a stain is left the more difficult it is to remove. However stain removal is a complex business depending not only on the content of the stain but also on the composition of the carpet. As much of the spilled liquid as possible should be soaked up immediately using absorbent white cloth or blotting paper. Do not be tempted to 'rub' the affected area. A conservator should be contacted as soon as possible.

Cleaning methods for modern machine-made carpets such as steam cleaning and carpet shampoos are not appropriate for hand-made rugs. Whether or not an individual rug is a suitable candidate for washing depends on its condition and composition and if the dyes are likely to run.

**Wet-cleaning is an irreversible process. Suitability for wet-cleaning is best determined by a conservator. Advice on stain removal can also be sought from a conservator.**