

# Textiles

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## Historic Housekeeping: Caring for Your Textiles

Do you need some advice on caring for and cleaning your museum's priceless objects? Historic housekeeping is aimed at preventing deterioration from occurring, and differs from normal housekeeping where the goal is for squeaky clean surfaces. We always recommend taking a very conservative approach to cleaning objects in our collection. Cleaning an object too often can be just as damaging as not cleaning at all. In this article, we will be giving general advice on how to care for your historic textiles.

The textile category covers a wide range of objects – from floor coverings to dresses to handkerchiefs to military uniforms. Remember that textiles are inherently weak – these are objects that have been made, used, mended, and repaired in the past before being displayed in your museum. With proper care, these objects and their rich history can be enjoyed by your visitors for years to come!

It is important to avoid laundering or commercially dry cleaning your historic textiles. The harsh chemicals used in our modern detergents and machines can lead to rapid deterioration of fragile, older, fibers. Believe it or not, vacuuming and

dusting makes up a majority of how we care for our textile collections at the Ohio History Center!

Begin by using a natural bristle brush to gently sweep dust and dirt from the surface of your textile. These brushes come in a variety of sizes and are easily found at local craft or art supply stores. Use caution if your brush has metal around the bristles, which might snag on loose threads as you dust. You can also cover this metal piece with muslin or cotton to prevent damaging your textile. Once you have gently dusted, the ideal method of cleaning an historic textile object is by using a canister vacuum equipped with a HEPA filter and an adjustable suction level to remove surface dust and particles. Using the lowest suction setting, vacuum using a brush attachment that has been covered with a fine mesh or fiberglass screen over the opening. This prevents small, loose threads or pieces from being pulled into the vacuum. For larger pieces, a small amount of fiberglass screen can be placed on the object. Covering the brush with a piece of clean muslin or 100% cotton is also an option in place of the screen technique. An embroidery hoop can serve as an inexpensive frame for muslin or screen material as well. If your vacuum is the upright style, always use a brush attachment with a screen in place – do not directly vacuum over an historic rug or other fabric piece. Using gentle pressure, vacuum in the step-



Vacuums like this one are a key tool for taking care of all your historic textiles. Photo courtesy of the Ohio History Connection.

by-step, row-by-row method; that is, pick up the brush and move it over slightly before pressing down again. Try to avoid using rubbing or scrubbing motions, which can cause damage to the fabric. If your textile has areas where it is more three-dimensional (for instance, on a flocked velvet piece), use a natural bristle brush to gently “flick” the dust from these areas into the covered attachment of your vacuum cleaner. This method will prevent the raised elements from being ground down or damaged by the weight of your vacuum.

Generally speaking, we don't try to remove stains from historic textiles. Processes to remove old stains and deposits can cause harsh and irreparable damage to the rest of the piece. We suggest consulting with a conservator or textile expert before attempting to spot treat or remove stains. ■