



# SAVING YOUR Treasures

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



## Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center

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## CARING FOR YOUR CHRISTENING GOWN

When caring for historic or modern heirloom textiles, the first instinct many have is to wash the item, bleach it, and starch it to death. The other frequent response is to do nothing at all and pack the piece away forever, baby stains, sweat, and all. Neither of these responses is appropriate.

The first and most important step in the long-term preservation of a textile like a christening gown or wedding dress is to clean it prior to storage or display. Cleaning will help remove residues and compounds that will hasten deterioration of the textile and will increase the chances of attack by mold and pests. The challenge is to be careful in determining the best method to clean each item. Wedding dresses, for the most part, are best cleaned soon after use by an experienced dry cleaner. (See "Caring For Your Wedding Dress") However, small cotton and linen items like christening gowns and handkerchiefs are often best cleaned by careful hand laundering.

### **Is it safe to wash?**

The first step in laundering textiles is to determine whether or not it is safe to launder the item. Only 100% cotton and linen textiles should be considered for aqueous (water) cleaning. All other types of textiles, including silk, wool, blends, and synthetic materials, will need to be evaluated by a textile conservator before any decision can be made about the safety of a cleaning method.

In general, textiles that have any applied decoration, such as embroidery, needlework, sequins, colored fabric appliqué, or applied ribbons, bows and other decoration, should not be laundered. Fabrics with dark dyes should also not be laundered, while white and off-white cotton and linen items can usually be safely cleaned. Only the hardest of objects in the best condition should be hand washed. If there is any doubt that there may be parts of an object that might run, bleed, shrink or disintegrate during laundering, the item should not be hand washed.

### **Cleaning**

#### ***Vacuum***

Before washing any item, remove surface dust and dirt by vacuuming the item with a variable speed HEPA vacuum cleaner using extra care not to place the nozzle attachment directly on the fabric. Some cover the nozzle with clean gauze; others recommend you vacuum over a section of clean fiberglass screening, to avoid sucking up too much of the object or loose bits into the vacuum. Use the lowest power possible to remove loose surface dust and grime. If you do not vacuum the item before washing, you run the risk of driving dust and dirt into the fabric during laundering or leaving materials on the fabric that will cause stains and tide lines during laundering and drying.

### ***Preparation***

For very fragile materials, it may be prudent to loosely enclose the item in a clean white tulle or soft mesh enclosure. Items can be loosely shaped and stitched inside for support and protection during laundering. Contoured sleeves for example, can be loosely stuffed with tulle to retain and protect their shape during cleaning.

Adequate flat surface space is essential for wet cleaning to be safe. You must be able to lay the piece out **fully** prior to washing and for drying. Use the largest washing container available; in a home, this may be the bathtub. Deionized water is preferred, but tap water will be fine if deionized water is used for the final series of rinses. Make sure the water is tepid, never hot nor cold.

Lots of clean white toweling and sheeting will be needed. Extra white tulle may be needed for the drying process. All should be clean and soft.

The cleaning agent used should be an anionic detergent like Orvus® WA paste (Proctor and Gamble) or another gentle anionic detergent. Other soaps and detergents can be too aggressive and may have optical brighteners, fragrances, bleaches, and other additives that can be harmful for historic textiles. **Very little detergent is needed. For an average bathtub filled to a depth of 8 to 10 inches, use only a teaspoonful of Orvus® WA paste.**

Before beginning the cleaning process, be sure to clean and dry the container (tub) to be used.

### ***Soaking***

Line the container with a support fabric such as clean, unbleached muslin or a cotton sheet. This support fabric will be used to lift the textile item out of the final rinse. It must be larger than the container and should hang over the sides.

Fill the container with tepid, deionized water and slowly and carefully immerse the item in the water bath. Allow it to sit for ten minutes. Do not wring or twist the item. Do not swish or swirl the item.

After this initial soaking period, use the flat of your palm or a clean cellulose sponge to gently press water through the textile in a slow blotting manner. Do not press hard; be gentle with the textile during all steps.

Note the bath water. Has it changed color? Is debris floating in the bath? Is the soil being removed from the object? Is the item safe? Can you safely continue?

### ***Washing***

If it appears that a detergent may be needed, change the rinse water and add a very small amount of detergent to the second bath by mixing it first into a secondary container like a pitcher and then adding this solution to the bath.

Repeat the gentle blotting action with palms or a cellulose sponge. Replace the detergent bath with a new rinse bath. Repeat the blotting action with palms or a clean, rinsed cellulose sponge. Determine if another detergent bath is needed and repeat if necessary.

### ***Rinsing***

After the final detergent bath, the item will need to be rinsed several times. **Rinsing is the most important step in the laundering process.** Do not skimp on this step. Generally, textile conservators recommend at least four complete changes of rinse water.

Any stains or discolorations remaining at this stage are best left. Additional washing methods and stain removal techniques are too aggressive for historic textiles and often have dire implications for the long-term condition of the fabric.

Remove the item from the bath by using the support layer underneath. Grasp the edges of the muslin or sheeting and lift using the support, not the object. It is often best to have someone to help with this step. The object will be significantly heavier than when you last handled it.

### ***Drying***

Lay the wet textile and support on a layer of clean dry towels and use other toweling to blot excess water from the object. Blot as much water as is possible from the textile, replacing the bottom toweling and the blotting towels as often as needed.

When fairly dry, move the textile to a new layer of dry toweling and use clean tulle or gauze to loosely stuff the shapes of the object and to allow airflow inside the item.

Use gentle finger pressure to shape and flatten portions of the item. Lace can be set flat. Ruffles can be straightened. This step is important because it is strongly recommended that **historic textiles never be ironed or steamed**. Ironing or steaming dirty and dusty textiles will “set” the dirt on and in the fabric. Ironing and steaming even clean textiles will cause serious long-term damage to the fabric.

When the object is well laid out and the interior is supported, cover the item with a thin layer of clean sheeting and allow it to air dry. A circulating fan, set on low, can increase airflow to hasten drying. It may take quite a while for the textile to thoroughly dry.

### ***Proper Storage or Display***

After laundering and drying the object should be properly prepared for storage or for display. (See other information on the website.)

### **Materials:**

Deionized water  
Cotton toweling and sheets  
Orvus® WA paste anionic detergent (Proctor and Gamble)  
Tulle and gauze  
Cellulose sponges

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