

Caring for Linens & Lace

By Trail End State Historic Site Curator Sharie Mooney Prout; from *Trail End Notes*, November 2009

“How do I clean my dusty but delicate lace?” you may ask yourself upon occasion. Or “What’s the best way to store my large linen family heirloom tablecloth?” Read on for a few simple steps that we employ at the museum to care for our own aging textiles - steps that you can do at home.



Photograph, Lace Doily, undated (Kendrick Collection, TESHHS)

CLEANING

First off, let’s start with how to clean your treasured items. The safest way to remove dust from textiles is by vacuuming. For this you will need a vacuum cleaner with a wand or brush attachment at the end of the hose, and a piece of mesh screen. (If the screen has been cut, place masking tape over the cut edges so that the screen does not snag your textile.)

- Lay your items out flat and place the piece of screen over the area you intend to vacuum.
- Using the hose attachment, gently vacuum the textile while holding the screen, which acts as a barrier between the material and vacuum.
- When you are ready for the next section, lift and reposition the screen
- Never drag the screen across your item.

The purpose of the screen is to minimize the loss of fibers from your material, and prevent the vacuum from sucking up any loose threads or decorations, such as beads and fringe.

If you want to wash your delicate items or treat any stains on them, it is best to contact a professional about the best way to do this. By “professional,” we don’t necessarily mean a dry

cleaning professional. The chemicals used in modern dry cleaning can damage historic fabrics. Instead, check the Web for “textile conservators.”

STORAGE

Next we’ll address the ideal way to store your linens and lace. The best way is to keep textiles flat and unfolded. This is the easiest to do with smaller items like doilies or napkins. If your object is too large to store unfolded, as in the case of tablecloths and long table runners, there are three other museum-safe ways to store them:

- Refold your object in a different manner every few months so that the creases in the material do not become too permanent.
- Pad any folds with acid-free tissue paper. This just means that every time you need to fold over your material, place wadded up tissue paper in the fold so that the material isn’t actually creasing.
- Roll your linens and laces (not quilts) around sturdy, Mylar-covered cardboard tubes, then wrap the exterior in acid-free tissue or unbleached muslin.
- Ideally, textiles should be stored in acid-free boxes, with acid-free tissue paper between each object in the box (or on the roll). The tissue paper helps prevent the transfer of soil or dye migration. Heavier items should be placed near the bottom of the box.
- Acid-free materials are recommended because they do not contain chemicals that contribute to the discoloration of textiles. These can easily be ordered online at museum supply stores like Gaylord Brothers.

One final note: store your silk and/or woolen textiles separately from your cotton and/or linen ones. Fabrics with botanical origins (cotton) are not chemically compatible with those of animal origin (silk). Constant, long-term contact can result in mutual deterioration and, ultimately, destruction.



© 2020 – Trail End Guilds, Inc. & Trail End State Historic Site

All Rights Reserved

For more information, visit www.trailend.org