



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**Cleaning and Storing a Wedding Dress.
Minnesota Historical Society
Ann Frisina
Textile Conservator**

To promote long-term preservation of your wedding dress, it is a very good idea to clean it after use. Perspiration, food, errant drops of champagne or wine all result in darkened stains over time, and it is highly unlikely the stains will ever be removed once they have darkened. These stains can sometimes be lightened with spot cleaning. This, however, is often harsh and abrasive. Also important is the removal of starches and other finishes that yellow over time as they break down. This yellow type of discoloration can only be lightened by wet cleaning methods.

If your dress is a present day formal gown of silk and lace or a vintage garment, it is considered best to have it cleaned by a professional rather than undertaking this job at home. Formal and vintage gowns are very complex constructions with layers of different materials such as lace, silk fabrics, cotton stiffeners, and boning. Washing with water may distort and damage some of these materials. This is especially common if your dress is vintage. The drying process is hazardous as the garment will often distort and brownish tide lines may form. Dry cleaning is the preferred method of preparing a wedding gown for long-term storage.

A good dry cleaner will examine your dress while you are there. Ask if he or she will test, prior to cleaning, sequins, beads and buttons, as some types will break down in dry cleaning fluid. If a dry cleaner is unable to clean your dress, a textile conservator may be able to help you. A textile conservator will perform spot testing with different cleaning agents and provide you with a written estimate and treatment plan prior to execution. Whether you work with a dry-cleaner or conservator, make sure he or she has experience.

Long-term storage within the home is probably the most common way wedding gowns are damaged. A dress can be hung on a padded hanger if it is not too heavy and will not stretch out the shoulders and bodice. Items that should not be hung are those that have large full skirts and trains, are heavily beaded, or are made of chiffon or lightweight sheer materials. Cedar trunks, while a traditional method of storage, can also be damaging to dresses. The wood is highly acidic and will off-gas, acting as a catalyst in the deterioration of dress materials. Boxing a dress in unbuffered acid-free materials is a more protective method for long-term storage than hanging. Boxing your dress will assist in protecting it

from dust and dirt settling on the surface, which often results in darkened gray fold lines. Be sure the box and tissue lining is acid-free. When boxed, all folds should be lined with rolls of white unbuffered tissue to prevent creases from fossilizing into fractures. Dry cleaners sometimes use a blue tissue, which is not recommended. Blue tissue can sometimes transfer dye to the dress resulting in areas of discoloration.

Insect infestation is another area of concern. Protein materials such as silk and wool, are extremely attractive to moths and beetles, while silver fish eat cellulosic materials, such as cotton and linen. Infestation will result in small areas of loss eaten by the insects during their early development. To prevent infestation, the following steps are advised. Contain your garment in a protected environment. Boxes provide a sealed environment acting as a protective barrier against insects. Use a box without a window as these can be punctured over time, creating access for insects. The area where the box is stored should be cleaned on a regular basis. Cleaning is the best method to prevent insect infestation. Do not use mothballs. Mothballs and flakes only serve to make a smelly garment. They do not deter insects. Also, sealing a dress with plastic is not advised. The sealed environment can result in humidity building up within the dress during times of extreme temperature and humidity fluctuation. The humidity will stain the dress with brown tide lines much like it would in a framed print.

Finally, where you store your wedding dress will also be important. Basements, which often are humid, result in mold and mildew growth. Mold and mildew stains cannot be removed without aggressive spot cleaning by a professional. Rust may also form along hooks and eyes. Metallic sequins will dull with tarnish. An attic, also not appropriate, is often excessively hot in the summer. Heat will accelerate the deterioration of different materials. It is best to store your wedding gown in a closet within the living spaces of the home.

Textile Conservator referral

American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works.

Conservator recommendation online resource.

<http://www.aic-faic.org/guide/form.html>