

# Care & Display of Historic Textiles in Museums



By: Swati Pant & Shahnaz Jahan

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Textile forms an intrinsic part of human civilization and thus it enjoys a rich heritage all over the world. Textile Museums are dedicated for proper understanding of the creative achievements of human race in textile art. Textile museums often organize exhibitions of various high quality products. They are mostly dedicated for proper understanding of creative achievements of human race. Textiles are more fragile than many other objects from past eras. Conservators must take special precautions with these items because some of the most serious threats to textile integrity come from seemingly innocent sources-sometimes components of the textile itself. The article deals with the proper techniques and methods to be used for the display of textiles in museums.

The people of ancient times expressed their philosophical ideas and summarized their worldview by using textile. Over the centuries, they have created a rich and glorious textile tradition. The textile museum collection encompasses textiles dated from early century onwards. Museums provide a unique interactive experience of getting up close to things we usually only see in books, newspapers or on the television. The perception of getting something from a second-hand source is often completely different to the one we see with our own eyes. Because of their wide appeal, textiles-particularly historic costume-are often on permanent display in regional museums. They make striking exhibits and are very evocative of times gone by. But our great interest in them can be their greatest enemy. So historic textiles' 'needs to be preserved and museums serves the purpose. Special care and consideration is required as the historic textiles are generally fragile. We don't always realize just how fragile they are and so don't always give them the care that they need. We display them, wash them, wear them, and feel them to enjoy the texture of the fabric; and in doing all of these things we expose the textiles to the risk of damage.

Following are some definition regarding textiles, their preservation and museums.

### **Textile**

A textile is a flexible material consisting of a network of natural or artificial fibres often referred to as thread or yarn. Yarn is produced by spinning raw wool fibres, linen, cotton, or other material on a spinning wheel to produce long strands. Textiles are formed by weaving, knitting, crocheting, knotting, or pressing fibres together (felt).

### **Preservation**

Maintenance and conservation of works of art, their protection from future damage or neglect, and the repair or renovation of works that have deteriorated or been damaged.

### **Textile preservation**

Textile preservation refers to the processes by which textiles are cared for and maintained to be preserved from future damage. The field falls under the category of art conservation as well as library preservation, depending on the type of collection.

## Museum

The international council of museums (icom) defines a museum as: "a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment."

## Textile museum

Textile museum is that specialized category of museum which primarily preserves different types of textile and textile products. They are dedicated for proper understanding of the creative achievements of human race in textile art. They often organize exhibitions of various high quality products.

Examples of textiles that we may find in museum collections are:

- costume, uniforms;
- tapestries;
- carpets and rugs;
- dolls, parasols and fans; teddy bears;
- patchwork and appliquéd;
- flags and banners;
- needlework;
- curtains, upholstery;
- ethnographic textiles;
- quilts;
- samplers;
- Non-woven materials such as felt; and sometimes, fur.

## Some Textile Museums of the World

- The American Textile Museum depicts America's heritage through art, history and science of textile. In 1972 this museum was accredited as one of the 17 original museums in the country by the American Association of Museum. This museum is actively involved in supporting research, hosting conferences, organizing exhibitions and public programmes. This museum since its inception in 1970 has reoriented its name and mission and relocated to its present home in Lowell, Massachusetts.
- The Textile Museum of Canada was founded by Max Allan and Simon Waegemaeker in 1975 which is dedicated to collection, exhibition and research of textiles from all over the world and encourages more comprehensive understanding of human heritage and identity through textiles. Currently this museum possesses more than 12000 pieces which represents 200 countries and regions.
- Nantong Textile Museum was established in 1985. It is the first special textile museum in China and stands out for the uniqueness of its exhibited items.
- The Calico Museum of Textile was founded in 1949, in the heart of the textile city, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India. The treasure of this museum exhibits comprise of finest woven, spun, painted or printed fabrics collected from various parts of India

- Japanese textile museum 'Yukari' possesses an excellent collection of wide range of old wooden looms, spinning wheels and other implements of traditional textile industry.
- The Fashion and Textile Museum enjoys an excellent location in London, England, one of the premier fashion capitals of the world. The uniqueness of this museum lies in the fact that it displays the talent of local and international fashion and textile designers.

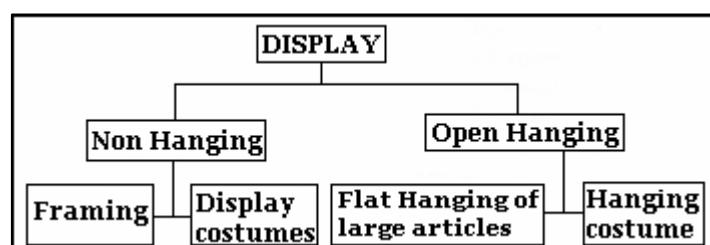
### Some Textile Museums of India

- Bharat Kala Bhawan, BHU, Varanasi
- The Indian Museum, Calcutta
- The Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai
- The National Museum, New Delhi
- Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum, City Palace, Jaipur
- Calico Museum of Textile, Ahmedabad

### General Care and Cleaning

- Textiles are such a part of our daily lives that it seems natural to clean them in order to maintain their condition. While this is appropriate for household linens, in general we should not attempt to clean an antique textile without first consulting a textile conservator. Proper cleaning techniques for antique textiles require a great deal of skill and experience; sometimes cleaning would be more harmful than allowing the textile to remain soiled. A conservator can evaluate the condition of the textile and assist you in determining the best course of action.
- One important kind of cleaning is vacuuming. A low power, hand-held vacuum is the best tool for the job. Lightweight or fragile textiles should be vacuumed through a fiberglass screen (available at hardware stores). Vacuum slowly and carefully, working in the direction of the nap with velvets or other pile fabrics. Avoid scrubbing back and forth.
- When working with museum collections, be sure to wash hands to remove oils, acids, salts, and soils that can stain the textile. Remove jewelry such as rings that might catch on loose threads. Work on a clean surface and do not eat, drink, or smoke around your textile collection.
- A textile can be easily torn if handled improperly. When moving a textile within gently pleat, fold, or roll the piece and support its weight on a tray or sturdy piece of cardboard.

Textiles that are on display they are perhaps more vulnerable to damage than when they are in storage, particularly from light and UV radiation. Textiles are displayed in similar conditions to those outlined for storage; however, as light is essential in a display environment there are some differences that must be considered.



- Textiles are considered sensitive to light, so lighting levels must be set so that they do not damage the collection. The brightness of the light should be less than 50 lux; and the UV content of light should be preferably below 30  $\mu\text{W}/\text{lm}$  and no greater than 75  $\mu\text{W}/\text{lm}$ .
- The temperature should be constant and kept in the range of 18-22°C.
- Relative humidity should be in the moderate range of 45-55%. Controlling relative humidity in a display area may be more difficult than in a storage area. Fluctuations are much more likely, because of the varying numbers of people visiting when the display is open followed by no people at times when the display is closed.
- Protect textiles from pollutants, dust and insects.
- It is also necessary to provide adequate support for costume and textiles while they are on display.

### (A) Hanging Display Methods

#### i. Flat Textiles

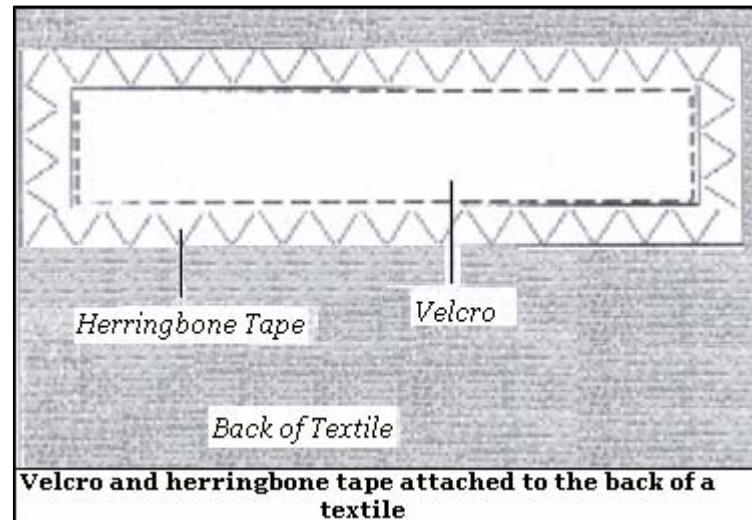
It is best for textiles to be fully supported and protected with mounts and frames. Two methods are commonly used:

##### 1. Hanging textiles using Velcro

Velcro hook and loop tape can be used very successfully to hang textiles for display. But Velcro can be used to display only some types of textiles. The textiles need to be strong and in good condition. This method is best suited to fairly thick types of textiles such as tapestries and quilts. It is not suited to fine fabrics like sheer silks or lace.

##### Steps:

- First, machine sews the soft side of the Velcro to herringbone cotton tape; this makes the Velcro easier to hand-sew to the textile and avoids the Velcro being attached directly to items.
- Position the Velcro and herringbone tape straight across the top of the textile and hand-sew it to the textile. It is important that the stitching goes through all layers of the textile. If the stitching does not go right through all layers, some layers will bear all the weight and others will eventually sag. The top edge will be damaged and distorted.
- Tack or staple the hard side of the Velcro to a wooden bar of sufficient size and strength to bear the weight of the textile. Make sure there are enough tacks or staples to bear the weight of the item which is to be hung for display. Once this is done, the bar can be hung in position.
- Then attach the textile to the bar by aligning the two halves of the Velcro system.
- If the textile does not hang straight or flat at first, the Velcro enables you to adjust the top edge and alter the hang of the textile.

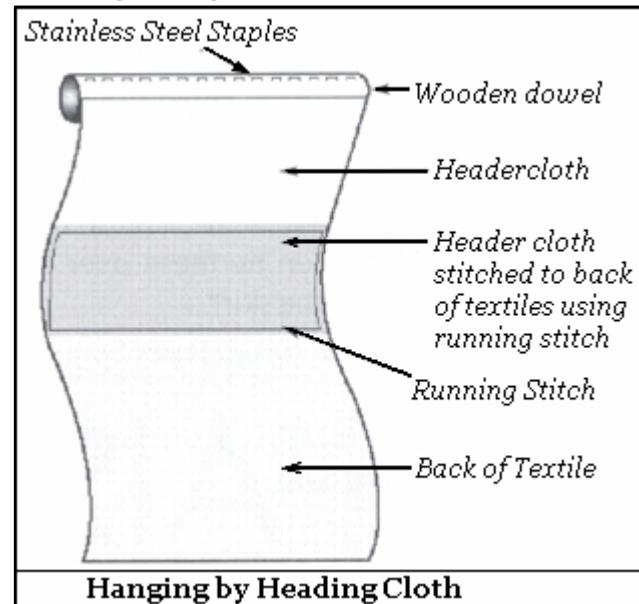


## 2. Hanging by heading cloth

Another method for hanging textiles is to use a heading cloth. This method is suitable only for textiles in very good condition, and is more suited to lightweight fabrics.

### Steps:

- Using running stitch, attach a strip of fabric to the underside of the textile to display. The strip of fabric should extend well under the textile to ensure adequate support, and extend beyond the top of the fabric by at least 500mm.
- Use herringbone stitch to attach the heading cloth to the top and sides of the textile if it has frayed edges.
- To hang the textile for display, attach it to a round, wooden batten, which must first be sealed with acrylic paint to prevent damaging acids transferring to the textile.
- Once the paint is fully dry and cured, the heading cloth is rolled around the batten until the top of the textile is level with the batten. The heading cloth is stapled to the batten using stainless steel staples.
- The batten can then be attached to the wall with fittings such as threaded eyelets screwed into the ends of the batten.



## ii. Hanging Costume

In situations where available storage space is limited, the hanging of costumes can be considered. Hanging is not recommended for fragile or heavy costumes. Padded plastic hangers are recommended for the storage of historic costumes. The use of metal and wood hangers should be avoided. Padded hangers are recommended in order to provide a wide surface of support for the costume. All stored textiles should be covered with a pre-washed muslin or Tyvek dust cover.

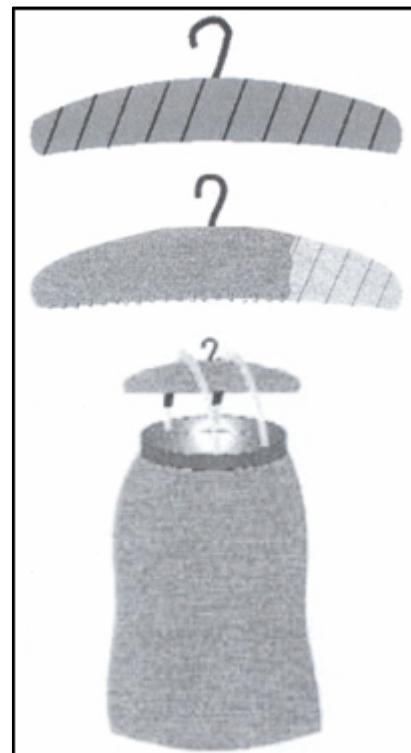
### 1. Hangers

- Padded hangers are used for hanging costume such as shirts, bodices and dresses.
- Other items such as trousers or skirts need additional support.

### Padded coat-hangers can be made in following steps:

**Requirements:** coat hanger, fabric, Dacron, thread, needle.

- Place layers of Dacron polyester wadding over the hanger, padding it to the same width as the shoulders of the garment.
- The hanger should be padded to suit the shape of the garment.
- The Dacron may need to be hand stitched to hold it in place.



- Once the padding is in place, cover the Dacron with fabric to provide a smooth surface on which to rest the garment.
- A stretch fabric is generally easier to fit and sew into place.
- For additional support, for example, for a dress with a heavy skirt, sew white, cotton tapes to the inside of the waistband, then tie these over the coat-hanger to take the weight of the skirt.
- Sew at least four tapes onto strong areas of the waistband.
- Use a fine needle for sewing and sew through all layers of the waistband.

## **(B) Non Hanging Display Methods**

### **i. Framing**

Framing is designed to protect against harmful environmental effects such as light, dust and insect attack. It is strongly recommended that frames containing textiles should be glazed to provide added protection. The selection of glazing materials is important. Glass can be used, but it does have disadvantages:

- If the glass breaks, it can very easily cut your textile; and
- Glass provides only a little protection against the harmful effects of UV radiation.

**Plexiglas 231**, an acrylic UV-filtering glazing, is much better than glass. It does not break and it gives added protection against UV radiation.

The glazing material should not be in direct contact with the textile because:

- this can flatten the texture of the textile through pressure; and
- Mould can grow on the item, if environmental changes result in condensation forming on the inside of the glazing.

A slip, spacer or window mount should be used to separate the glazing from the mounted item. The correct mounting and framing of textiles not only protects and prolongs their lives, but can also greatly enhance their appearance.

### **ii. Displaying Historic Costume**

Many people feel that garments cannot be fully appreciated unless they are worn. It is difficult to get a complete picture of the cut of a garment if it is, hanging on a coat-hanger. For this reason, garments are regularly placed on mannequins for display; however, the mannequins used are not always appropriate. A costume needs to be displayed in the correct way: so that it is supported and not vulnerable to physical stress, and so that it communicates accurate information about the fashions and customs of its period.

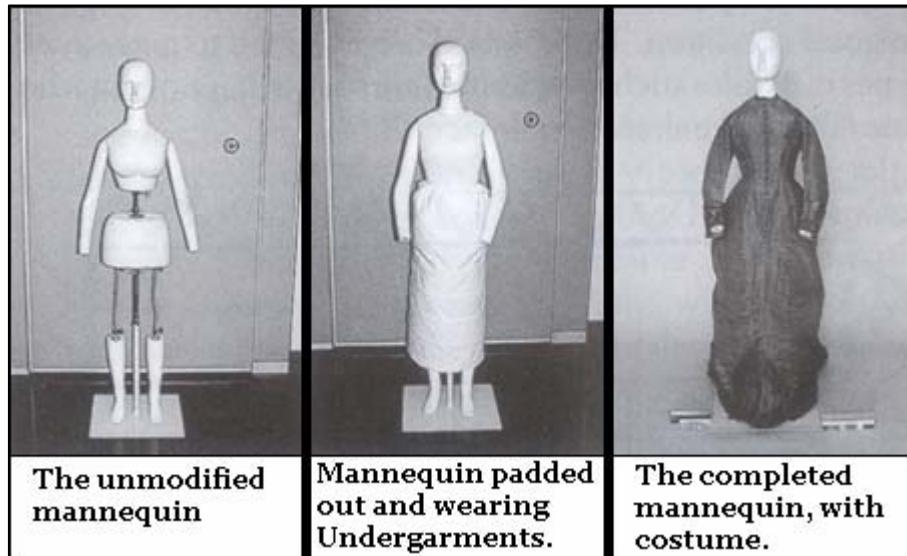
The most important consideration when displaying a costume on a mannequin is to make sure that the mannequin is the right size and shape for the costume. Each costume has a particular silhouette which provides an accurate representation of fashions of a particular period; and this cannot be seen if the mannequin used is the wrong size or shape.

To have a mannequin of the correct size and shape, it is relatively easy to:

- modify a mannequin to suit a particular garment; and
- Provide the correct undergarments for the period.

Contemporary mannequins are generally not suitable for displaying historic costume because they have the wrong silhouette and inappropriate faces.

Undergarments should be made from white or unbleached fabric. They are particularly important in order to provide the correct support for the garment while on display. If a garment is not supported as intended, stresses will arise along the seams of the fabric and irreparable damage will occur.



**The following list of good and bad materials** - from a preservation viewpoint which can help in selecting storage and display furniture, or the materials to use when making them.

Good	Bad
enameled metal	chipboard, Custom wood
acid-free board	uncured PVA glue
acid-free paper and tissue	uncured paint
polypropylene	protein based glues, for example, animal glue
polyester film and felt	cellulose nitrate
polyester film	felt
cotton	polyurethanes
linen	unsealed wood, especially Hardwoods
acrylic paints and varnishes	PVC
sealed wood	wool, if metal is also present

### Conclusion

There are many perils involved in putting textiles on display including distortion from physical stress, exposure to deterioration agents, and vandalism. No historic textile should be on display for extended periods of time. Display of textiles carries even more risk than mounting and, again, professional advice from a conservator or textile display specialist should be sought before making display decisions.

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