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Fabric Treasures: Caring for Quilts in Your Collection

Handout, Bibliography, Resources

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Definitions

Quilt – three layers (top, inner batting, backing); quilted with a running stitch by hand or machine; top can be patchwork, appliqué, decorated with beads, embroidery, paint, etc.

Whole cloth quilt – one large plain cloth, can be pieced from lengths; no patchwork or appliqué on top; the overall quilting is the surface design; three layers are top, batting, backing

Patchwork – pieces sewn together to create the top design; usually squares, triangles, other geometric shapes arranged in a pattern; can be combined with appliqué

Appliqué – from the French ‘to apply’ – pieces of cut out fabric shaped arranged in a pattern and sewn down on the top cloth; appliqué allows for more realistic designs, such as circles, flowers and petals, leaves, vines, animals, people, buildings, vessels, etc.

Comfort, Comfortable, Comforter – three layers are tied with yarn or thread; there is no quilting

Spread, Cover – not a quilt; two layers (a top and back); top can be pieced, embroidered, appliquéd or a combination of these techniques; it is not quilted; used most often as a spread

Yo-yo - not a quilt as it is not quilted; classified as a cover and decorative bed covering

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Resources

American Institute for Conservation website; look under “Find a Conservator”

ICA – Art Conservation, Cleveland, OH; conservation and restoration of art and textiles

International Quilt Museum – conservation resources

<https://www.internationalquiltmuseum.org/collections/care-and-conservation>

Ohio Quilt Guild Directory; list of Ohio quilt guilds, possible resource for volunteer help, etc.

Quilt appraisal - The Professional Association of Appraisers – Quilted Textiles (PAAQT); look up online for information and to locate appraiser in Ohio

Smithsonian Institution Museum Conservation Institute; online resources for textile care

Care and Cleaning

1. Cleaning

- Best method to remove surface dust is to move a section of fiberglass screen (edges taped with masking tape) over quilt. Vacuum the front and back on low speed using hand-held vacuum with brush attachment. If quilt has shattered silks or frayed areas, do not vacuum those parts.
- Avoid washing in machine or drying in dryer. A fragile quilt can come apart at seams and worn areas; color can fade and bleed into other areas; quilting can pull apart; fabric can shrink; and a wool batting will shrink and distort the quilt shape. The older the stain, the less likely it can be removed anyway.
- Avoid dry cleaning – cleaning chemicals are harsh and can harm fibers.
- For a valued quilt, consult with a textile conservator to learn about special cleaning.
- Remember – valuable antique quilts in museum collections have stains and wear.

2. Storage

- Well-funded museums store quilts on rolls or flat, but this is usually not possible for small museums.
- Fold the quilt and place crumpled acid-free tissue paper in the folds to prevent sharp creases.
- If possible, store quilt in archival acid free box. Otherwise, quilt can be folded, wrapped in muslin and stored no more than three deep.
- Periodically take the quilt out of storage and re-fold along different lines. This can help prevent permanent folds and splitting of fabric. (Ideal is every three months.)
- Store at even temperature and proper humidity.
- Avoid storing in wooden drawers or boxes; wood can leach acids that will permanently discolor the fabrics; do not store in cardboard or wrap in newspaper.
- Do not place moth balls on or near quilt.
- Do not store in plastic containers because moisture can be trapped.
- If the quilt is spread on a bed for display, avoid bright sun and strong light which can fade colors, sometimes unevenly. Rotate with other quilts.

3. Repair

- Old quilts can have tears, worn areas, insect holes, missing quilting and shattered or disintegrated silk or cotton fabric. Nothing can be done to reverse shatter and decay.
- Do not add new fabric to an old quilt to replace missing fabric. If the silk or cotton is so deteriorated, matte tulle bridal netting can be placed over the area (if surrounding fabric is stable) and stitched down to hold the remaining fabric in place (this is done in museums).
- Avoid replacing the binding (which can wear out) with a new one for it will look out of place with the quilt's overall age and 'feel'. Enjoy the quilt as it is.
- There are professional conservators who repair and refurbish vintage quilts that require special treatment. Look online for resources.

4. Quilt documentation

- Attach to quilt a cloth label with accession number that corresponds to information in the database.
- Gather as much information from donor such as quilt maker, date, location, pattern, purpose of the quilt. Note "as reported by donor" because much information is passed down orally in families (or not at all) and can be misstated or inaccurate.
- Do not write on the quilt itself.
- A quilt can be appraised by a certified trained quilt appraiser to improve basic information for the database.

5. Quilt appraisal - The Professional Association of Appraisers – Quilted Textiles

(PAAQT) is an international organization established in 1992 to train, promote, educate and guide professional certified quilt appraisers.

- Reasons for a quilt appraisal can be to establish value for insurance purposes or prior to donating a quilt to an institution; and a desire to learn more about the quilt, its date, construction and quilt care.
- If it is believed a quilt has substantial monetary or historical value, consider having it appraised and insured. (In some cases, professional conservation improves value.)
- A professional quilt appraiser is knowledgeable about history; textiles; quilt dating; construction techniques; regional and national values; patterns; and care. Appraisers stay current with quilt market trends and values.
- Appraisers have been trained to evaluate antique, vintage and newly made (traditional and contemporary styles) quilts.