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UK COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY — COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

STORING HISTORIC CLOTHING AND TEXTILES

Selecting Storage Containers and Materials

A wide selection of types, sizes, and shapes are available dependent upon the kind of material (artifact) to be stored and how often the material is used or accessed. All textile storage boxes, folders, etc. should be "acid-free" with a pH of 8.5. Ideally, the outside of the box should have a buffer to protect the contents from migrating and from atmospheric acids and pollutants. The inside of the box should be acid free with a neutral pH. It should be non-buffered and contain lignin and sulfur-free alpha cellulose. (Lignin is a complex polymer within plant cell walls that gives the plants parts rigidity. In time it breaks down forming various acids and peroxides which can be damaging.) A non-buffered box is vulnerable to migrating and to atmospheric acids and pollutants and cannot protect the textiles inside from the ravages of these harmful elements. Buffered boxes, however, should not be used to store silk and wool because they are detrimental to protein materials. A storage box that is buffered on the outside and non-buffered on the inside solves this dilemma. All this simply means is that the storage container must be designed to provide support, protection, and stability while protecting your artifact from as much adverse chemical reaction as possible.

Textile storage boxes usually have reinforced metal edges. This not only provides strength and a means for stacking but eliminates glue or other materials which might be an attraction to insects or rodents. Buffered and non-buffered acid free tissue paper is also available.

Boxes should be comfortably filled, never stuffed. Only "like-sized" items should be stored together in a reasonably fitted storage box.

Proper Shelving is Important

Items stored in boxes should be at least 4 inches from the floor to allow for air circulation and to prevent possible water damage. Metal shelving with an enamel finish is acceptable; other metal surfaces should be sealed. Metal surfaces may oxidize from air and moisture to form rust. Protect your textile from direct contact with metal surfaces by lining metal surfaces with laundered, unbleached muslin or sheeting. If wood shelving must be used, it should be coated with three coats of polyurethane varnish (which must not contain formaldehyde) and allowed to dry for several weeks. An alternative to varnish is to line the shelves with 5 mil polyester film.

For More Information

If you have an item of considerable value, contact your local library, historical society, or Cooperative Extension Service for the name and location of a trained conservator or conservation lab in your area.

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