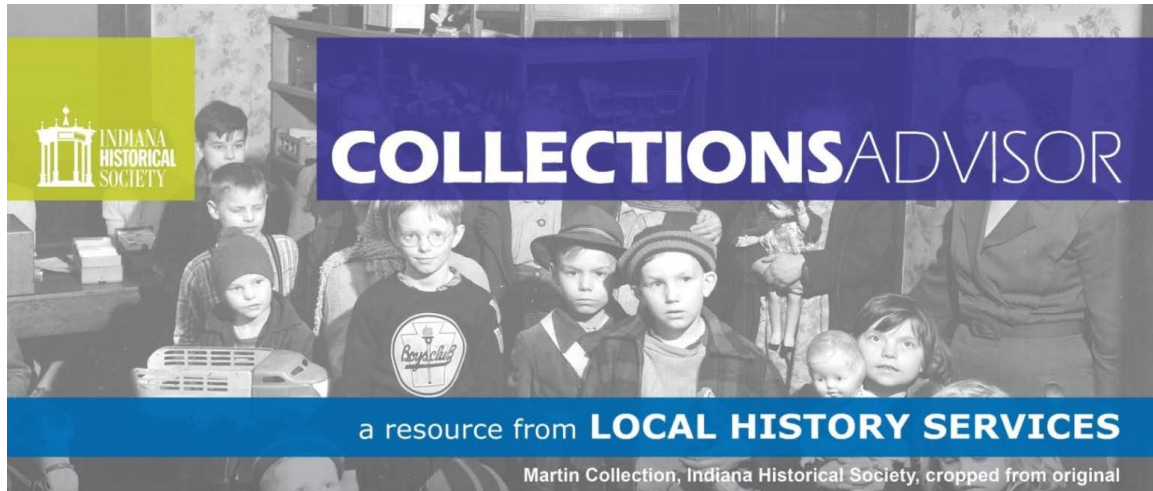


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Connecting to Collections project.



Issue 52, February 2016

Tips for your Historic Costume Collection

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Most collections contain a little bit of everything, including historic costumes. I would love to take a moment and share a few things I have learned studying and working with historic costume artifacts. All of these can be applied to collections at work or at home.

There are three main types of care: preservation, conservation and restoration. Most museums are in the business of preservation, which focuses on caring for objects in a way that preserves them for future generations. Conservation deals with the stabilization of an object so that damage does not get worse and is usually the undertaking of trained conservators who perform tasks such as stabilizing a tear so the item can withstand going on display. The final type of care is restoration and is rarely undertaken by museums. The main goal of restoration is to make something appear as it originally was by visually masking damage and adding or replacing parts that were lost or broken, such as stripping and refinishing a piece of furniture.

Preservation is the key to keeping your collections for future generations to enjoy, and the best way to go about that is while an item is in storage instead of when it is on display. This way, at least while something is in storage, it is in the best condition possible.

- Use acid-free boxes and acid-free tissue paper, since anything made of wood or wood pulp (furniture, cardboard boxes, etc.) can leach acid and stain textiles.
- Use padded hangers for garments that are strong enough to hang. To determine this, look closely at the garment. Is it thin material with heavy beading, fragile fabric, knit fabric or a bias cut gown? Box it. Is it thick, heavy material like a winter coat or a cotton dress in generally great condition? Hang it. Depending



Acid discoloration on white silk.



Splitting silk lining.

on your storage space, hanging storage can provide an affordable option, because padded hangers are often cheaper than boxes and tissue. For extra protection from dust, wrap groups of garments loosely in clean white sheets or make curtains for the entire rack.

- Store fur garments separately from other items, because they can attract insects. Organizing fur garments into a different storage section – those in boxes and on hangers – makes it easier to keep an eye on them for signs of infestation before it reaches the rest of the collection. If you have an entirely separate closet or small storage room you can use, even better.
- Close all hooks and eyes and zippers before storing garments. This is an easy habit to get into and can make a big difference for historic costumes. All of those tiny hooks and eyes or metal zippers can easily get caught on the garments stored next to them, whether boxed or hanging, causing unnecessary and entirely preventable damage. Plus, doing up the fastenings distributes the weight of a hanging garment more evenly, preventing damage.

It can be nearly impossible to follow the above rules, such as keeping a fur coat separate from a suit it pairs with, when an item goes on display. However, there are some things to consider to ensure that a costume comes off of display in the same condition it was when it was put on display.

- Keep out of direct sunlight. This can be difficult, especially if displaying items in a historic house setting. Keep shades and curtains pulled in rooms that get direct sunlight as this direct light will fade dyes and make fabrics brittle over time.
- If dressing a mannequin, be mindful of how fragile the garment's fabric is. Remember to go slowly and carefully. Mannequins can be difficult since they cannot bend, move or "suck it in" like people can to get into a garment that is a little tight. Avoid stretching the garment to make it fit. It is better to leave that top button undone then force it to close, straining the garment.

When handling historic costumes it can be easy to forget that they are old and fragile and do not act like they did when brand new. Fabric loses its resilience to things like harsh washings (both from machines and dry cleaning), stretching and even too much handling in general. Seams split and fabrics get torn from simple movements that would have been fine 100 years ago when the garment was brand new.

Treat your costume collection with the same care as you would your grandmother, and it will be around to tell you stories and teach you about the past for years to come.

Resources

[Storage Techniques For Hanging Garments: Padded Hangers](#)



Insect damage on wool skirt.

[IHS Lending Resource Center](#)

- *Preserving Textiles* by Harold F. Mailand and Dorothy Stites Alig
- *Unravelling Textiles: A Handbook for the Preservation of Textile Collections* by Foekje Boersma

[Object Storage: Tips from the Minnetrista Heritage Collection Basic Collections Care Guide](#)

[A Few of My Favorite Things = collection Care Tips and Tricks](#)



This publication from the Indiana Historical Society is a service of the Hoosier Heritage Alliance. This project is made possible by a grant from the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services.

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