


Quilt Care for the Twenty-First Century

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For the ordinary person, the word crazy conjures up visions of mad scientists—erratic behavior, wild hair, and bulging eyeballs. But couple the word with "quilt" and the image turns to one of complex beauty. Since the reign of Queen Victoria when the crazy quilt craze began, the decorative and extravagant crazy quilt has never wavered in popularity, and there looks to be no end in sight to its widespread appeal.

How should I label my quilts?

 Each quilt in your possession needs to be labeled and documented as thoroughly as possible. Take a photograph of each and keep it with documentation, preferably in an area separate from the quilt (in a safe deposit box, for example). The documentation and label should contain the following information, at a minimum: the name of the quilt; the maker; your name as owner; the city and state where the quilt was made—or where it came from if it is an antique; and the date, or approximate date, it was made.

In your documentation, note any special stories or information about the quilts, such as shows entered and prizes won, as well as the source of the design on the quilt. If it is a family quilt, whether it is one made by you or a deceased relative, it is appropriate to have a photo of the maker transferred to washed, unbleached muslin and sewn also on the back. Photos of the people who made the quilt and their surroundings are especially nice for your great-grandchildren. This will also be useful for quilt historians and researchers. In addition, people tend to value something more when it has a face connected with it. Photos can be transferred for a very reasonable rate at many of the photocopy stores.


I'd like to know about displaying my quilts.

 If you display your quilt over a quilt rack, put a soft white or pale towel over the rack to protect the quilt from the acid in the wood, then lay the quilt over that. If you are going to hang the quilt on a wall, you need a full-length sleeve on one end of the quilt if it has a definite direction in which it should be hung. If the quilt has an overall pattern and could be hung in either direction, make a sleeve for each end. Mark the quilt so that you can remember which end was hung last when you take it down. The quilt should not hang in direct sunlight. If you use fluorescent lights, the light should be filtered. Incandescent lights should be at least 10-12 feet from the quilt. Quilts should not be hung in the kitchen where they might be exposed to harmful moisture, smoke, or cooking oils. If there is a smoker in the house, the quilt displayed should be aired frequently as cigarette or cigar smoke will ham quilts over time.

Some people hang a quilt on the wall, and there it stays year

after year. This may not be a problem in the immediate future, but it will be for future generations. A good rule of thumb when displaying a quilt is six months up, six months down. If the quilt is very fragile or light-sensitive, it may only be able to be displayed for special occasions such as holidays. If you display a quilt on a bed or other flat surface, try to keep all your two-footed and four-footed friends from jumping and playing on it.


How should I store my quilt?

 The best way to store it is laid flat in a low-light, moisture-free environment. Some people store their quilts on a guest bed, one quilt on top of another. If you are going to fold your quilt, put rolls of batting, soft flannel, or acid-free tissue paper in the folds. If you use acid-free paper, keep in mind that this finish is not permanent. It is recommended that you change it annually. Acid-free boxes last a little longer—two to three years. Quilts should be folded in configurations of thirds, and they should be refolded at least twice a year to avoid dangerous fold lines. They can then be wrapped in a sheet or other cloth or placed in a pillow case.

Some very delicate quilts such as the Crazies, Log Cabins, Yo-Yo quilts, Cathedral Windows, any quilt with a high amount of embellishment, or simply fragile old quilts, can be rolled. Obtain a cardboard roll from a carpet store and cover it with soft batting and clean muslin or flannel. Lay a clean white sheet or large piece of unbleached muslin over the front of the quilt and wrap it to the inside, rolling the quilt carefully—not too tight and not too loose. Cover it with more clean muslin or flannel. You can store the roll under the bed if you make a little stand for it. Small wooden blocks make good stands with two nails standing up on each block to accommodate the ends of the roll.

To protect them from things that go chomp in the night, you can put your quilts inside a cedar chest, wrapped in cotton first, as cedar can stain. Some people find that Artemisia (Southernwood), an herb, placed in a cloth bag, and hung near the quilt can help with insect problems. **Don't use mothballs!** Aside from the genuine risk they pose to your health, they also can interact with some of the dyes or mordants in antique quilts and cause damage. Checking the condition of your quilts periodically is the best hedge against bugs.

My quilt is dirty; should I wash it?

 It seems as though in America, anything that is made of textile just can't get dry-cleaned or washed enough. Both are a bad idea in this instance, as they tend to fade colors, wear out fabric, and generally shorten the life of quilts.


If you do have a quilt dry-cleaned, use a dry-cleaning company that specializes in such cleaning. Contact a museum with a textile collection for recommendations. Keep in mind the dry-cleaning can absolutely shred some quilts, and in some cases the dyes or mordants will again create some very unexpected effects.

So how do you clean your fragile quilt? One way is to spread an old sheet out on your carpet. Put your quilt on top of it and weight it down. Get out your vacuum and connect the upholstery attachment. Put some netting (such as bridal netting) on the brush and secure it with a rubber band. Vacuum one-quarter of the quilt at a time. When you have completed the top, turn it over and do the back the same way. This will get the dust out and freshen up your quilt. If the quilt is less fragile, it can be put in the dryer, on air only, for about fifteen minutes to remove dust and refresh the quilt.

You may have a quilt, however, that just has to be washed or wet cleaned. **When in doubt, leave cleaning to a professional.** Wet cleaning is a slow process and should be attempted only on quilts that are strong and colorfast. Quilt Conservators recommend non-ironic detergents such as Orvus Paste, Ivory Liquid, or Ensure.

To wet clean your quilt, dye test all fabrics before doing anything else. Use a soft, clean cloth and room-temperature water. Wet the cloth and press it against the fabric to determine if the dye is fast. If not, stop. Next, test using a detergent solution. If any fabric bleeds, stop. If the colors are fast, fill the washing machine with lukewarm water (80-85°F) and detergent and mix. Put the quilt in the solution. Do not agitate, but move the quilt around with your hands. After 20 minutes, drain water, spin, and rinse. Again, do not agitate during the rinse cycle. Spin and repeat rinse cycle. Dry the quilt flat on a sheet indoors, or on the lawn with a sheet over and under it. Never hang a quilt on a line. Do not store or fold the quilt until it is completely dry. Again, this cleaning process is recommended only for strong, colorfast quilts.

My quilt is in tatters, but won't I hurt its value by repairing it?

 As for repairing your quilt, no matter what controversy is raging over whether to repair or not, consider the following:

1. Who owns the quilt?
2. What is your ultimate intent for the quilt—family heirloom, display, sale, etc.?
3. How much do you value an expensive item of clothing that needs repair and doesn't get it? Will your quilt still be around 100 years from now without repair?

As appraisers, we know that very few quilts have much, if any, monetary value when they are in poor condition. If you love it, take care of it. The key issues in doing repairs are fairly simple. The things we are talking about are all reversible.

4. For silks or fragile fabrics that you don't want to cover over, use washed nylon tulle. It is available from most fabric stores, is inexpensive, and is easy to work with. You simply cut the shape or a piece big enough to cover the bad spot, and use a running stitch to tack it down. You don't need to turn the edges under since the tulle won't ravel.


5. For colored cotton or wool, you can use some of the great reproduction fabrics that are available, or you can get vintage fabrics. Simply cut the shape of the piece to be replaced, including 1/4" to turn under all the way around. Appliqué it over the top of the original piece, and then re-quilt on the original lines.

6. New bindings also can be put on over old. Use a color that matches the existing fabric—not one that is bright and new.

7. If the top of the quilt, or one edge, is heavily damaged, you might consider cutting this part away and rebinding, making a smaller but better-looking quilt.


8. Be sure to note your repair on the back of the quilt so that it is an honest repair.

I have some old quilt tops. Should I finish them?

 Again, they are your tops, and it is up to you whether to finish them, though very old tops or those with historic significance should be left as they are. If you want to do something to stabilize these tops, you can simply add a backing fabric, tack this to the top and turn it over the edges. This also works well if your top is a loose weave or if it is fragile.

You can also add cotton batting and binding and quilt your top if the top is sturdy enough and you would enjoy it more with quilting to enhance its design. It is important when you quilt an antique top not to use polyester batting. Cotton batting will give the quilt the look that it would have had if it had been quilted when the top was made. Whatever you choose to do with your top, we like to think that the maker intended it to be used and enjoyed.

Perhaps I should have my quilt appraised ...

 As a service to the quilt world, the American Quilter's Society has developed a program to certify appraisers who are qualified to give insurance and fair market value to quilts and to quilted textiles. Certified appraisers have been tested on their knowledge of dating fabric and quilts, construction techniques, recognizing patterns and regional influences, and their awareness of the dollar value of quilts. They have also agreed to a Code of Ethical Practices.

There are several types of quilt appraisals. Are you going to

enter your quilt in a quilt show or send it to a relative as a gift? Do you have a collection of quilts? Are you a quilt teacher? If so, you would probably want an insurance appraisal. An **insurance appraisal** is based on what it would cost you to replace your quilt with like and kind. After getting an insurance appraisal, you talk with your insurance company, so that you know you are covered for your quilts.

If you are trying to sell your quilt, you might want a **fair market appraisal**. This type of appraisal is good for professional quilters or to help substantiate the price of a quilt that you may want to sell. There is no guarantee, implied or otherwise, that having a fair market appraisal will help you sell your quilt. This is up to you. To sell a quilt, you need a willing seller and a willing buyer, and it often takes time to locate the right buyer for a quilt. Your appraiser cannot be involved in the selling of your quilt.

Are you planning on donating your quilt to a museum or favorite charity? A **donation appraisal** provides a record that can be used for a tax deduction. The laws governing this are set up by the IRS, and you need to contact your appraiser for current status of the law or information.

If you are not certain which type of appraisal to get, a **verbal evaluation** is an inexpensive way to help determine whether to have a written appraisal. Condition is the first factor to consider. When a quilt is in poor condition, it usually has very little, if any, dollar value. That doesn't mean that it is not valuable to your family or to you. The quilt should still be taken care of as well as possible. Verbal evaluations are also used for dating quilts and giving suggestions for their care and repair.

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