

Storing Your Wedding Gown

You have invested in the perfect gown for your wedding day, 'heirloom' or 'preserving' your dress properly afterwards will reduce the risk of permanent damage or deterioration to the gown.

What is the aim of preservation?

Storing your wedding gown without consideration, planning or care can lead to damage or deterioration over a period of time. This can include stain formation, fabric breakdown, discolouration and permanent creasing. Your wedding dress can be maintained as a family heirloom for many years provided that some simple attention is given to its care and preservation. There are two basic steps to caring for your dress:

1. To understand and minimize or eliminate those factors that can cause damage
2. Follow basic guidelines for handling, cleaning and storing your gown.

What are the main causes of textile damage?

There are a variety of factors that contribute to the degradation of textiles. These include poor environment, inappropriate storage, chemical pollution and careless handling. Chemical pollution is the main cause of damage and is the result of the migration of acids from surrounding materials into the fabric of your gown. The following factors all contribute to textile damage:

1. **Light** - direct exposure to both natural and artificial light can threaten the longevity of textiles. Visible light causes fading and fibre damage. Ultraviolet is the most damaging type of light and is capable of causing the greatest amount of damage within the shortest period of time.
2. **Temperature and Humidity** - these environmental factors are interrelated. Extremes and fluctuations in temperatures and humidity (moisture levels) can cause permanent damage. Textiles can become brittle when humidity levels are low and, conversely, permanent staining can occur from mould growth when humidity levels are very high. Expansion and contraction of fibres due to extreme fluctuations in heat can discolour and weaken textiles. Trapped moisture will encourage bacteria and insects and cause permanent watermarking stains on fine silks.
3. **Pests** - a variety of pests can cause structural damage and staining to stored textiles, including moths, beetles, silverfish and mice.
4. **Poor Cleaning** - storing your gown when the usage stains such as perspiration, make-up, wine, perfume, cigarette smoke and grass have not been removed allows those stains to migrate through the material and create permanent marks.
5. **Physical Stress** - long-term storage of heavy gowns or fragile silks on hangers (even padded ones) is not recommended. Stress weighting can cause misshapen seams and permanent creasing; metal or wood hangers can increase acid pollution and oil and grease from frequent handling can oxidize in time to cause brown staining on the gown. Never hang your gown in a plastic slip-cover or dry cleaning bag (see below).
6. **Handling** - frequent handling with bare hands can transfer grease, salts and dirt to the gown which can oxidize over time to leave brown stains. Avoid pins and marking pens to label your gown. Do not eat, drink or smoke in the vicinity of your dress. Do not store with metal or plastic jewellery, buckles or belts since these will also increase the risk of acid formation.
7. **Chemical Pollution** - inappropriate storage of your gown will contribute to degradation of the textile fibres due to acid migration from the storage materials.
 - a. **Plastic Covers** - the worst storage medium for your gown is a plastic bag or cover. Storage boxes with plastic viewing windows are also not recommended. The plastic chemicals react with the fabric enhancing acid formation and causing excessive yellowing and tarnishing of white gowns and fading of coloured fabrics. Plastics also trap moisture (see above).
 - b. **Cardboard Boxes** - commercial storage boxes are not made of acid-free board. The acid can migrate and react with the contents of the box within only a few months causing gradual yellowing and deterioration.
 - c. **Glues, Tapes and Adhesives** - used to make commercial packaging is highly acidic and also attracts certain pests.
 - d. **Wooden Chests** - often sold for Wedding Trousseau, the high acid and lignin content of the natural wood will cause more rapid deterioration and discolouration of a dress stored in this way.
 - e. **Inks and Dyes** - the dyes and colourings contained within commercial tissue paper, printed fabrics or wrapping papers may be highly acidic and turn contacted areas yellow. Never use perfumed and patterned drawer liners to store precious textiles.

f. **Sealing** - preserving your gown in a vacuum packed, oxygen free container is not particularly ideal or recommended. This method is usually a last-resort conservation method used by museums or archivists to preserve fragile items. The packaging may not always provide an acid-free environment, may trap moisture and does not allow for access and inspection at regular intervals.

What measures can be taken to reduce these risk factors?

There is no such thing as 'permanent preservation' as all things will eventually deteriorate due to the wearing effects of time and the environment. Archival institutions and museums have developed certain methods and archival materials for the long term conservation of precious textiles. By adopting a realistic level of care, correct handling and suitable archival storage for your wedding gown you can achieve a good level of protection from many of the factors that lead to degradation.

1. **Pre-plan** - treat the preservation of your gown as part of the wedding planning process and not as an afterthought. Understand the fabric and accessories that make-up your wedding gown and find a good dry cleaner who specializes in cleaning gowns. Some organized brides keep an emergency stain cleaner to hand during the big day, otherwise arrange for someone reliable to take the dress for cleaning as soon as possible.

2. **Storage** - aim to store your dress in an environment that is as chemically (acid) neutral as possible:

a. **flat storage** - provides even support which helps to minimize fibre damage. Avoid hanging your gown for too long on hangers or in plastic dry cleaning covers. Transfer to a flat box / storage container as soon as time allows.

b. **acid (pH) neutral archival box** - invest in a sturdy archival quality storage container that is specially made for textile preservation and does not contain harmful acids or alkalis. The correct box will protect against light and dust and reduce the risk of minor untoward accidents!

c. **stacking** - don't store more than one item in a container (mixed materials will have different acid content and migration may occur into your dress). Store shoes, veils and purses separately.

d. **folding** - Ensure the storage container is adequate for the size of dress. Too small and permanent creasing may occur, too big and your dress will slide around too freely. Ideally the dress should be folded as little as possible. Fold lines are the places where splitting or shattering of the fabric will occur over time. Therefore taking extra care from the outset will benefit your gown later. Ideally the box should be long enough to take the full skirt length without folding and deep enough for the bodice and skirt to lay over each other without crushing the shape of the gown. Practice first (using the gloves included in the pack) by laying the gown in the box to ensure you achieve the minimum number of folds necessary BEFORE making the final packing. Use only white tissue never blue, black or commercially produced paper. Use the tissue paper in flat sheets between the layers of fabric and rolled into soft scrolls to pad the folds in the material and protect the edges from becoming flattened and crushed. Fold once at waist level (bodice onto skirt). Layer tissue between the skirt and the bodice and pad the fold with rolled tissue. (Fold again at thigh level but only if this is necessary - see size of Archival Box above). Line and support the actual bodice with sheets or softly rolled scrolls of the acid free tissue paper. Then bring the skirt into the centre in vertical soft pleats lined with flat tissue sheets. For excess fabric in full skirts make folds down the length of the gown supported by rolls of tissue. Cover the folded gown with sheets of tissue and place the lid firmly on the box. Store appropriately - see below.

e. **handling** - wash your hands before handling to avoid transfer of grease and salts. Ideally use white lint free cotton gloves when folding and packing your gown (these can be washed and kept for this purpose). Once packed away, try to avoid opening the box and handling again unnecessarily. However, we would recommend checking the dress each year. Carefully unpack and examine the gown for any signs of staining or creasing. Repack again following the above guidelines to prevent permanent folds and creases from developing. If your archival box has been supplied with cotton covers wash these in mild non-biological washing medium (no additives or enzymes) to remove dust. Dry flat and iron carefully.

f. **environment** - plan where you are going to store your dress so that it will not be affected by radiators, underfloor heating systems, damp or pests. Keep out of direct sunlight in a dark place but never in the attic, loft or basement. Storing in a living part of the house such as the bedroom will provide an environment with more stable temperatures and moderate humidity levels.

Please do enjoy your gown and your wedding day but, remember, by taking a little time and care beforehand you will be also be able to heirloom your dress properly for you and your family to treasure long into the future.