

# June 2009 Newsletter

## Textiles 101 – Antique Textiles and Quilts

Recently, I had a discussion with a woman about an antique quilt. It was a white quilt appliquéd with green and yellow floral pattern. The problem with the quilt was that the green had faded to brown and bled into the white fabric. Upon further discussion, she told me that it had “1855” embroidered on it, and it was given to her by a friend from Ohio. She loved the quilt, but the bleeding of the fabric really bothered her.

She asked me if there was anything that could be done to clean up the quilt. She had asked several other people with no results. Using water on one corner of the quilt had only caused all of the fabrics to bleed.

I discussed some things with her, but decided that a good review of my own was necessary.

### Problems

The problem with antique fabrics and quilts are that the dyes in the fabrics were not always stable. Natural dyes were far more stable than synthetic dyes. This was particularly true with green fabrics. The natural green dyes retained their colors, while the synthetic dyes created around the late 1850's faded to brown.

Turkey reds and indigo blue were very popular because they resisted fading. Browns, pinks, and yellows were also common. Purples are difficult to find, as a permanent purple dye was not created until 1862. Most purples from that period have faded to brown.

Also, the fabrics themselves have greater potential for deterioration because of age. Previous storage problems like humidity and sunlight will affect the stability of the fabric itself. Small rips or holes in the fabric can easily become larger, and any stress on one section of a quilt, will affect other sections of a quilt (causing additional tears).

### Solutions

My first consideration was dry cleaning – sounds logical, but upon further research – dry cleaning is a no-no. The chemicals used in dry cleaning may cause additional damage because the fabrics are so delicate. Not to mention, the chemicals are anything but dry.

Washing an already bleeding fabric is not a good idea – another logical solution. Knowing the instability of antique fabric dyes is an important factor here as well.

Research suggests that vacuuming with a low suction vacuum removes dirt that is trapped in a quilt, and delays further damage from that dirt. Depending on intended use, this may be the only cleaning necessary. If there is large tears, etc, use a thin fabric as a “screen” to minimize further damage to those areas.

General airing out is a good idea, to eliminate smell. Use a sheet under and over the quilt, laid out on the lawn, to minimize the effects of any elements (sun, etc). Don't hang the quilt from a clothesline, as this is too much stress on the quilt, and may cause additional damage.

If you choose to wet wash an antique quilt, know the risk that you are taking. Wet washing can permanently damage an antique quilt – damage that most likely is not reversible. Use a gentle soap such as Ivory Snow or Deft. There are also special products such as “Soak” designed to textile and quilt laundering. You can use your washing machine as a wash tub, but use your hand for agitating. Rinsing and spinning on a gentle cycle may be more gentle than hand ringing the water out. Either way be very careful. Lay flat to dry with a sheet under and over it for protection.

Hopefully, this gives you some food for thought on the use and care of antique quilts. Many are great treasures of the American past and a wonderful addition to any quilt collection. Enjoy.