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## Storing Linens



MARTHA STEWART LIVING TELEVISION

Linens, one of the oldest known textiles, has been used to make everything from the finest lace collars to seaworthy sails. Because of its unique cellular structure, linen is extremely strong and surprisingly heavy; and at the same time, it is also cooler against the skin than almost any other natural fiber. This is because moisture passes so easily through its fibers, allowing for even greater absorbency than cotton.

Chris Paulocik, conservator at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, explains how to properly store your own linen treasures. First, when buying antique linens at flea markets and antiques shops, assess the condition of the textile. It's very unlikely that brown foxing stains will ever come out, and yellowing is irreversible. If the linens you're considering suffer from this sort of damage, it's probably best not to buy them. Always clean linens before you store them, because stains oxidize over time.

When storing your linens, the most important thing to keep in mind is that anything made of wood pulp, i.e., tissue paper, newsprint, or cardboard, will react with the linen, releasing volatile organic gases that break the fabric down over time, turning it brittle and yellow. Colored tissue paper will bleed into the linen. Newsprint will also discolor it. Labels and tags can be problematic. Colored labels and tags can transfer color in the same manner as colored tissue paper and newsprint do. And if the labels contain adhesive, they are particularly problematic. Also, safety pins and straight pins used to attach labels to linens can corrode and damage linens. Purchase labels made out of a material called Tyvec, a washable polyethylene. Mark labels with a pencil or a permanent marker that won't bleed.

There are two kinds of plastic: good and bad. Polyethylene, which is stable, or inert, is a good plastic. Polypropylene releases gases as it breaks down, so it's bad for storing linens. Dry-cleaning bags, for instance, are made out of polypropylene. They react with linen, becoming sticky over time. For larger storage containers, choose semiopaque containers made out of polyethylene.

Acid-free boxes and tubes are available from conservation houses. Attach a picture of the artifact you are storing to the outside of the box, so that you don't have to open it very often. Seal the box closed with cotton twill tape or book-binding tape. Never use masking tape -- its acidic adhesive will ultimately affect the linen. If you can't find acid-free boxes, line cardboard boxes with muslin and wash the muslin every couple of years. If acid-free tubes are hard to find, you can cover acidic tubes with aluminum foil or Mylar, which should then be covered in muslin.

Wrap your linens in buffered, acid-free tissue or Tyvec, which also comes in rolls. Cut your tissue and Tyvec slightly larger than the piece you are storing. Always roll large tablecloths, because creases will become permanent over time. If you must use wood to store your linens, cover it with an adhesive-backed aluminum material called Marvelseal.

Metal hangers can degrade and become rusty. Always throw away foam hanger liners. Avoid wooden hangers as well. Chris uses hangers made from stable, inert polyethylene.

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