

Quilt History

Repair, Restore, Conserve

What to do with damaged antique quilts

by **Kris Driessen**

See also: **Quiltbus** Restoration and Conservation Supplies

Do you have a quilt that needs a little TLC? Maybe one that has been passed down through your family or one you rescued at a garage sale? Don't be afraid to make repairs to it. Many damaged quilts can be repaired or restored using basic sewing skills and careful cleaning. Quilt restoration stabilizes a quilt, extends its life and makes it more pleasing to the eye of the beholder. If you don't know one end of a needle from another, though, contact a local **quilting guild** or fabric shop. They may know someone who is willing to work on old quilts.

If you want to do it yourself, remember restoring an old quilt is a painstaking but rewarding job. Don't be afraid to try, but think it through first. Sometimes it is best to just leave a quilt alone. Successful quilt restoration relies on making a repair that blends invisibly into the body of the quilt and cannot be easily detected. If you have a quilt that is historically important or is a precious family heirloom, you may want to have it professionally restored. Contact a local museum or the **American Institute for Conservation** for conservation information.

What is the difference between repair, restoration and conservation? Repairs simply fix the quilt. Replacing a binding with modern fabric or machine mending fraying fabric is a repair. Restoration returns the quilt to a useable state. It still may not be perfect, but it won't have holes or areas of torn fabric. Normally fabric of the same age and wear pattern is used, although appropriate reproduction fabric may work in a pinch. Conservation preserves the quilt intact. Damage is stabilized so it doesn't get worse, but nothing is done to the quilt that can't be undone.

Start by looking over the quilt for damage before doing anything else. Watch for spots that show signs of stress. It is possible for another area of a quilt to split or tear because of the stress you are putting on the part of the quilt you are repairing.

Repair any loose seams or stitches by gently turning the loose edge of the fabric under and appliquéing it down using very fine cotton or silk thread. **Silk thread** melts into your fabric to become practically invisible BUT it is stronger than cotton and may cut the cotton threads in the long run. Practice this technique on muslin before trying it on your quilt.

Unless your quilt is filthy, you shouldn't wash it until after you are finished and then only if it really needs it. Try vacuuming it first. Lightly vacuum your quilt on low power using a brush attachment through a screen, if this is appropriate for your quilt. Damaged quilts, samplers, painted and embroidered pictures (as on a crazy quilt), and beaded work should not be vacuumed. Damage can be caused when by the suction of even a low power vacuum. If your quilt is just smelly, try airing it by draping it over a railing (on a sheet or large towel) on a breezy day. Do not put it on a clothesline. The stress of hanging over a small piece of rope may cause damage. You could also lay it out on your lawn on a clean sheet, with a clean sheet on top of course, to protect from the sun.

Do not wet wash your quilt unless absolutely necessary. Never, under any circumstances, dry clean it. Some stains are better off left alone. Keep in mind you may damage your item irrevocably. If it is an important piece, seek the advice of a professional first. More information on wet washing your quilt is available **here**.

Is there an area of missing fabric? You can repair small areas by simply appliquéing a patch over the spot. Replace the damaged fabric with vintage fabric if possible, or use a modern reproduction fabric. Try to match the missing piece in value and hue, not necessarily the print. Disguise the repair by placing the edges of the patch next to the seam lines of adjacent blocks. Do not remove the fabric underneath. Requilt by following the existing lines.

It's also possible to cover badly frayed fabric with a sheer mesh. Bridal illusion (tulle) or chiffon is an inexpensive alternative to the silk crepe-line, or Stabiltex (Terelene/Tetex) used by professional restorers.

Did you know you can create fabric on your computer? If you just need a little, try making it! Scan the fabric you want to use into your computer. Print it on a piece of transfer fabric paper like **Printed Treasures** or fabric treated with **Bubble Jet Set** and ironed to freezer paper. Do not use a laser printer for this process, it will melt the freezer paper.



If your quilt is badly damaged, you may be able to cut off one section and use the fabric from that section to repair other parts of the quilt. For example, you may be able to cut

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other parts of the quilt. For example, you may be able to cut off a row of blocks from the top or bottom, or you may make two corner cuts to make a four poster style quilt. You will, of course, have to rebind the quilt to disguise the part that you cut off. You could also add a piece of flannel or cotton as a **beard guard** to cover over the top row of damaged blocks in your quilt. Better a wall hanging that you can enjoy than a quilt in a drawer that makes you sad every time you think of how damaged it is.

Is there an area where the fabric has simply split? You could try making an upside down bandaid out of **Fine Fuse**. Slip a bit of the Fine Fuse underneath both sides of the split and gently push the edges of the split back together. Touch just the area necessary with the tip of your hot iron, or use . The Fine Fuse will melt and stabilize the area. Again, practice on muslin first so you are comfortable with this method. It is permanent and cannot be undone.

Do you need to replace batting? Keep it authentic. **Quilters Dream** makes excellent quality cotton batting that is great for restoration.

Do you need to replace the binding? This is an easy job, but make sure to replace the binding with the same type that was used originally. As a general rule, straight edge binding was used prior to 1900; bias binding was used afterward.

You must document all the work you do on this or any other quilt. Make a fabric label that includes everything you know about the quilt and as much as possible about the person who made it. Even if you don't know anything other than "bought at garage sale in Schenectady NY", it is still better than nothing. Document all the work you did to it, too, and any other information you feel is pertinent. Sew this to the back of the quilt. If you want to include more information on paper - a genealogy, for example - make a pocket out of the label so the history will always be with the quilt.

To make a fabric label, iron a piece of high thread count muslin to an 8 X 11 piece of freezer paper. Roll this through your typewriter and type on it, or type it on the computer and use your ink jet printer to print it out. If you can't do either one, simply write the information on the fabric with a fabric pen if you have one, a ballpoint pen if you don't. No excuses now!

Avoid displaying your restored quilt in a room with poor ventilation, high humidity or other temperature extremes. Chose a method of display that distributes the weight of the quilt over the entire quilt such as an unused bed. This assumes you don't have any cats. Cats are notorious for finding the only antique quilt in the house on which to sleep. Spread a length of muslin or a sheet on top of the quilt to keep off dust when it is not being viewed.

If you don't have a spare bed, you could fold it and place it over a quilt rack or even the back of an unused chair. If possible, pad the folds with acid free tissue paper. Don't fold it over a sharp surface like a chair rung or table edge. This just invites damage. Every month or so, refold the quilt along different lines.

To display a quilt on a wall, sew a hanging sleeve to the top of the quilt and hang it on a non-wood rod. Suspend this rod from the ceiling using wire or attach brackets to the wall. A hanging sleeve is a four-inch wide tube of fabric sewn along the top back edge with stitches every inch or so through all layers of the quilt. It looks a bit the casing of kitchen curtains. Make sure the hanging sleeve is sewn securely. Watch for signs of stress. Never use nails, pins or staples to hold a quilt on the wall. Display quilts in areas where light levels are low. Light damage to textiles is irreversible. Both sunlight and artificial light will cause fading.

For more information, we highly recommend the 4 DVD **Quilt Restoration Workshop** Set offered by the Kirk Collection. You can buy preservation materials and acid free storage items from them, too. You may also like to look around the **Alliance of American quilts** website for more information, or visit our **Quilt History Bookshop**.

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