Care of Uniforms and Other Garments

Museum storage of garments is of course very different than the care and storage of one's personal clothes. In the home environment, it may be more difficult to control the environment and other variable that affect the preservation of clothing. Some types of clothing, depending on their type, composition, and degree of wear will last longer than others. However, by taking some relatively simple steps you can ensure that they have the best possibility to remain in good condition.

Begin the process by washing the garment, in your washing machine. Rinse it in water several times after washing with soap. If the item must be dry cleaned, do so, but it is generally good to avoid dry cleaning due to the chemicals involved and their persistence.

The ideal way to store garments is to lay them flat. Most do not have the space to do this however, so clothing may be stored flat with one fold, or on hangers (more on this below.) If stored flat or flat with a fold, place acid free tissue in between places were the fabric touches itself, and in between different materials, such as a metal button and cloth. This provides a barrier that prevents damage from one area spreading to another. If there is a fold, pad it with rolled tissue or polyester batting to lessen the stress on the fabric fibers in that area. In addition, the garment should be refolded in a different area to spread the stress.

If you can do so, it is highly recommended that flat garments be stored in an acid free box. Other containers, such as standard cardboard or wood chests, are made of highly acidic material that can migrate to the garment and damage it. In addition, some materials off gas harmful chemicals. If an acid free box cannot be obtained, line the container with multiple layers of acid free tissue as a barrier. It is recommended that this barrier tissue be changed periodically.

Hanging garments on hangers is acceptable for clothing in good shape. Wood hangers are recommended, taking care to ensure they are fully sealed with a clear varnish and allowed to dry. Polyester batting (acid free) should be wrapped around the hander to spread and reduce the stress on the fibers. After this, the garment should be covered to protect it from dirt, dust, and light. Commercial garment storage bags are not recommended, as they are usually made of PCV or other plastics that are not preservation friendly and off gas harmful chemicals. There are some neutral plastic bags available, but some effort may be required to locate the. If an acceptable cover or bag of museum quality cannot be located, one can be made from unbleached muslin. The cloth should first be rinsed in cold water (no soap,) and simply stitched into a cover.

Clothing should be stored in a cool, dark, and dry place, free from wide temperature fluctuations. Avoid the attic and the basement, where temperatures not only reach extremes of hot and cold but also swing widely as seasons change. The ideal temperature is around 72 degrees, with a relative humidity of 55%. It is recognized that human comfort will take priority, and that is fine. The main thing is to avoid extremes on both ends of the temperature scale, wide and rapid temperature fluctuations, and prolonged exposure to high humidity. High humidity coupled with elevated temperatures will induce mold growth. Should this occur, first isolate the garment from other clothing. Then expose the area to sunlight to destroy the active mold (though not for a prolonged period so as not to discolor (fade) the area. If in good shape, wash the garment gently, if not, carefully brush off the mold outside and away from other clothing.

Since humidity is the primarily component in conditions that foster mold growth, increase the air circulation around the garment to try to control it via your HVAC system. If that is not possible, silica gel can be purchased at a craft store. Silica gel absorbs moisture, and placing it near the garment (but not on it) will help lower the humidity. Follow the container directions on how to use and condition the silica gel.

There is no way to prevent mold except by controlling the temperature and humidity.

Protect the garment from insect pests as well. This is done primarily through good housekeeping, as past pest control measures, such as chemical moth balls, are unacceptable due to their hazard to both the garment and people. Keep it away from food and other insect attractants. While sealing the garment in plastic may seem like an attractive way to prevent insect damage, sealing is not recommended as this creates a microclimate, where airborne pollutants and moisture are trapped with the garment and can cause damage, and sealing covers often are in contact with the garment that is to be preserved. Rather, leave the bottom of a cover open, to foster air circulation.

<u>Decorations</u>

Decorations can be problematic as they are made of different materials. Generally, decorations should be laid flat. Where different materials touch, such as metal on fabric, a barrier of acid free paper should be inserted to provide a buffer. If on a uniform, this should still be done if the uniform is flat. A buffer should also be placed between the decoration and the cloth of the uniform, if possible. If the decoration is deteriorated / in poor shape, it is recommended that it be removed from the uniform and stored separately. Otherwise, the advice on preservation above is applicable.

<u>Belts</u>

Belts should be removed from the uniform and stored separately, especially if they are leather as they can deteriorate and cause significant damage. Belts should be stored flat, with acid free buffering between the metal parts and leather or cloth parts where possible. If necessary and if the belt is relatively stable, the belt can be rolled with buffering between the layers. Otherwise, the advice on preservation above is applicable.

Hats

If they have a rigid bill, hats should be stored upside down with acid free tissue loosely stuffed inside to provide support. If there is not a rigid bill, the hat can be stored right side up with interior support. If possible, a buffer should go between different materials on the item. There are commercial storage and support items available, but extreme caution is needed when using a commercial item, as it may not be preservation appropriate. Otherwise, the advice on preservation above is applicable.

Shoes

Shoes can be stuffed loosely with acid free tissue to provide support, and can be stored sole side down. Large / tall boots can be stored on their sides, with appropriate internal support. There are commercial storage and support items available, but extreme caution is needed when using a commercial item, as it may not be preservation appropriate. Otherwise, the advice on preservation above is applicable.

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