Cleaning Fabric Art

The information in this article is aimed at artists and hobbyists who have created the artwork themselves who will see the benefits from washing their fabric art. Anything valuable should be sent to a trained restorer who specialises in cleaning fabrics.

It is a good idea to consider washing fabric art before it is framed because natural oils that have soaked into the material from people's hands can cause yellow stains to emerge over time. When handling fabric art it is advisable to wash your hands first or wear cotton gloves.

Since most fabric art is created by hand, it is likely that it will benefit from being cleaned before it is framed. Many things can go wrong when cleaning artworks. If in doubt the best thing is to do nothing. If you have created an artwork from a sewing kit, check the instructions for advice on washing it.

Warnings:

• The results of washing fabric art can be disastrous so it is important to make thorough checks before attempting to wash a piece. Only clean fabric art if you are sure it is safe to do so.

• Do not wash or dry-clean fragile or antique fabric. Get a trained conservator to do it.

• If the artwork has paint as well as fabric and stitching, washing is not advised as the paint used might be water soluble. You should not iron hand-painted items either.

• Anything valuable is best left to a trained conservator.

• Cleaning is not suitable for all types of fabric art and caution must be taken. If in doubt do nothing. It is better to get the advice of an expert first or in the case of valuable or antique textiles get a trained conservator to clean it for you.

Cotton

Cotton artworks include: Batiks, Cross stitches, Embroideries.

Washing will remove the size which is often added to fabric to make it more durable. After a wash the artwork should appear brighter and fresher.
It is safe to wash batiks but they should not be dry-cleaned as dyes might fade.

You must check both the background fabric and the thread for colour fastness. Some dyes will run when they become wet. You must test each different colour thread. Just because one doesn't run, it does not mean the other colours won't run. Each separate colour and fabric must be individually tested.

Some products tell you on the packaging if they are colour fast or if they can be safely washed.

You can test cotton by wetting a few spare strands and leaving them to dry on a paper towel. If they are not colour fast the colours will run. Let the fibres dry and check for evidence of bleeding. You can also rub the fibres against the paper towel to check if any bleeding occurs. If colour runs, the artwork should not be washed.

If the colours start to bleed once the artwork has been immersed in water, the item must be rinsed immediately in cold running water until the water runs clear. If the bleeding colours are not rinsed out and the fabric is left to dry, they will dye other parts of the artwork which could be difficult to remove.

The heat of an iron will seal the dye so if smudges are on the artwork when ironed, it will be difficult to remove them.

Cottons should be hand-washed in lukewarm distilled water. Distilled water is easy to find and readily available. Tap water has chemicals in it which might leave stains on artwork.

The soap used should be mild soap without detergent worked up into a lather.

Be gentle with the artwork – no scrubbing or wringing out. Leave it to soak a while then rinse thoroughly. Test to see if the soap has been fully rinsed out by touching the artwork with a strip of pH paper while it's still wet. The pH should be neutral if all the soap has been removed.

Leave it to dry flat between clean towels. Any creases left in it while it's wet will remain when it's dry so lie it as flat as possible.
Wool

Wool artworks include: Tapestries, Needlepoint, Knitting.

Wool can be safely dry-cleaned although inexpensive wool can fade during dry-cleaning. Washing wool in a washing machine is the cause of shrinkage.

If in doubt let a conservator do it.

Woollen needle art can be cleaned using a low power, hand held vacuum cleaner. Only use it on a low setting. You must cover it first with a meshed grid made of plastic. This will hold the stitches in place.

Silk

The lustre of silk can diminish with moisture so it is best dry-cleaned.

Insects

Dealing with insects is best left to a conservator as the infestation will probably have caused weakening in the fibres. Handle infested artworks with care.
Mould

These are best left to a conservator if the artwork is valuable.

If you are willing to tackle these problems yourself you can leave the item in front of a fan heater until the mould is turned to dust. Be warned: heat can cause fabric to fade or shrink and the heat can also seal in stains making them hard to remove.

You can gently remove the dry mould using a low powered vacuum cleaner. Only use it on a low setting. You must cover it first with a meshed grid made of plastic. This will hold the stitches in place.