

Rectifying Home Remedies

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Endangered Heritage

Abstract

The history of caring for material culture is as old as material culture itself. Many care instructions are passed on with the objects and sometimes they are not. When they are passed on by word of mouth, instructions often mutate through the same process as Chinese whispers. Alternatively, care practices can evolve with strange substitutions leading to deleterious results. When faced with some disasters like deep fried lace, professional texts offer little advice. This article will look at some of the more curious home remedies, myths and care practices and the subsequent conservation treatments developed to rectify them.

Introduction

Many items are brought into my laboratory by clients who are confused by the damage and appearance of their artwork. They had, to the best of their knowledge, ‘done the right thing’. They may have taken the work to reputable framers; stored them the way their grandmother had advised or, worse, followed the published instructions in thematic books on how to clean everything!

Furriers used to offer their clients cold storage of their furs over the summer to eradicate insects. These services have gone and people are turning to strange alternatives: spraying Baygon™ surface spray over the fur until there is a visible white residue, which is difficult to remove with anything but ethanol, is one example. Storing items with lavender is common enough but in the Middle East and Mediterranean countries they recommend using bay leaves, which offer nothing other than a balanced diet for case moth.

Excessive sprinkling of naphthalene flakes, mothballs and borax is common enough as is

using bars of soap, which are commonly left on piles of linen leaving a brown stain often through many layers. I am still uncertain if people think it is the perfumes in the soap or the alkaline nature of soap that is supposed to be deterring the insects and when quizzed they always reply “well I don’t really know, doesn’t it work?”

Kimono

The strange substitution of one smelly thing for another by a previous owner of a kimono led to a near disaster in the lab. The kimono, from around the 1940s, was printed navy and white with a grey lining and there was a stain in the upper back approximately 35cm by 25cm. The stain was brown and odourless. The garment had general grubbiness and the owner wished for it to be cleaned and the stain removed. The dyes were tested and stable and the stain was also tested. It looked like it may improve with water but it certainly didn’t improve with solvents. There was no odour during testing, there were no warning signs or additional tests I could have carried out so I proceeded with the usual due care.

A wash bath was prepared with de-ionised water and 0.1% solution of Teric G12A7™ an alcohol ethoxylate (all pH 7.3). The item was submerged and within a few moments a strong smell of naphthalene without the menthol component rose from the water. The pH meter was clicked off standby in time to watch it free fall from 7 to 4.8 in the space of 1 minute. NaOH was added to the second pre-prepared rinse bath bringing the pH to 8 and the item transferred to the second bath, which I had intended to be for rinsing but I was now alerted to a serious pH issue.

The first sink was emptied and refilled as the pH free fell again, as it got to 4.3 the water had a faint blue hue the dyes were shifting, not unexpected at that pH! I worked as fast as I could to refresh the sink and buffer the sink with the item in it with a constant drop-wise addition of 0.25M NaOH. The fumes coming off the water were overwhelming so it was fortunate that the fume extraction elephant trunk was already positioned near the sink. The smell had altered to the smell of urinal deodorisers (paradichlorobenzene), and it was getting stronger.

These waxy crystalline deodorisers volatilise in air. The more the item was rinsed in de-ionised water the more residue of the chemical seemed to be released into the water making the situation worse. The pH could not be adjusted and rinsed fast enough or long enough and did not ever stabilise for longer than 30 seconds. Concerns for the dye increased, as the length of time the item was wet was getting unacceptably long. I had moved the item from one sink to the other repeatedly for one hour using over 150 litres and still the pH could not be stabilised. I decided to remove the item and start drying. There was no blue dye blotting off the item indicating that the pH adjustment was enough to stabilise the dyes.

The lab smelt strongly of urinal deodoriser fumes. The item was blotted and left to dry. The pH was still, in all likelihood, unacceptably acidic. The only option I can see for this item would be to repeat wet treatment many times, so the dyes were not kept wet for extended periods but only for a short period each time, eventually reducing the acidity. There was no way to anticipate the previous owner's use of a large

urinal deodoriser as some sort of insect deterrent.

Gross Point Lace

As strange as letting a urinal deodoriser dissolve on a silk kimono may be, the most bizarre treatment of a textile that I have encountered has been the heating of a piece of gross point lace in olive oil. The owner of the lace had sought the advice of an elder at an embroidery guild. She was assured that the reason her fragile lace was brittle was it had lost its natural oils and they needed replacing through the immersion in olive oil and subsequent heating. Twenty years after the implementation of this remedy her daughter brought a much oxidised and yellowed lace collar for treatment. Aghast, I explained that my treatment would, by necessity, be rather experimental as I was sure there were no published articles in the conservation literature on deep fried lace. The collar was so yellow and fragile the lace was difficult to handle, and there were darker scalded areas, which were very weak. The oxidised oil had gone very orange. The first step was to encapsulate the item in Tetex™ with securing stitches between the lace fibres making a quilted parcel to ensure the item could not snag or catch on itself.

Once all the lace was secure the next step was to remove what remaining oil there was, with a mixture of solvents: 70% petroleum spirits, 25% white spirits and 5% ethanol. The item was dry-cleaned in an immersion bath. The amount of oil removed was over one cup in this mix of the waste solvent. The encapsulated collar was placed on a Perspex sheet, between sheets of thick blotting paper. Then it was covered with Mylar™ to slow the evaporation rate of the solvent and increase the movement of oil into the paper. This was a slow process and had to be repeated five times. The item was eventually weighted with lead bags to press out the solvent and oil. The paper was very yellow after the first four times but there was little change on the fifth blotter treatment.

Once the solvent had evaporated the fibres appeared very yellowed, oxidised and there was obviously a large amount of deterioration product and grime, remaining. The encapsulated collar was washed in a blend of two alcohol ethoxylate surfactants Hydrapol BD50™ and

Teric G12A7™ in a total 2% solution in de-ionised water. Hydropol BD50™ was selected because it requires no agitation in solution and is suitable for very fragile items and Teric G12A7™ has good cleaning ability at different pHs. The item was left to soak and the water was slowly warmed, by adding beakers of warmed de-ionised water until it reached 25 degrees, the optimal temperature for the chosen detergents. This washing process was repeated.

The item was then assessed and the fibres were still so oxidised and yellowed, weak and fragile that there seemed nothing to lose by carrying out a reduction treatment in an attempt to reverse some of the oxidation. The item was then soaked in a 1% aqueous solution of sodium borohydride, for 1.5 hours. Initially, it fizzed a lot; the bubbles were so vigorous and aggressive that I was concerned for the safety of the fibres in the encapsulation.

The item was rinsed several times. The item was then blotted and left to partially dry. When it was leather-dry it was removed from its cloth encapsulation and laid out to continue drying. After it was dried it was carefully encapsulated on pH neutral board with a Mylar™ cover to prevent unnecessary movement and allow for study and possible copies to be made of the collar. The item was very delicate and continues to be delicate. The lace is beautiful and is certainly stronger for treatment having taken place. I have subsequently treated the remainder of this collection, which was extensive and had all been heated in oil.



Figure 1: Oil removed from gross point lace

White Ware

It would be tempting to dismiss this hot oil home remedy as the product of dementia, however, of particular interest to conservators should be the number of white ware items that have been brought to the lab after the owner has added melted margarine to the final rinse water. (White ware for the purposes of this article refers to white nappery and household linen.) Apparently, this remedy is still in circulation: add a tablespoon of melted butter to the rinse water to give the white ware a good gloss on pressing and restore the natural oils. I have doubts about the benefits of this ‘sage’ advice but I can attest to the disaster when the butter is replaced with margarine, the white ware goes a yellow colour.

To counter the yellowing of white ware people used to wrap their items in blue tissue paper, which these days isn’t coloured with laundry blue but a rather strong dye. Disaster does occasionally transfer the blue to the object. Light bleaching does seem the best treatment for this. Submerging the white ware in a basin of water and leaving it outside in the sunlight does seem the best way to treat these two types of dye damage (Gardiner & Hackett 1998).

Yellow has come to be thought of as oxidation by-products particularly in natural fibres, cotton and wool. They can also be an excessive build up of cooking grease or worse nicotine staining. Water and blotter cleaning will shift nicotine the greater risk is always the dyes which seem irregularly fragile. Testing in one area doesn’t necessarily indicate the stability of the dyes somewhere else. Surface residue spills and stains can produce varying results during cleaning.

Chinese Embroidered Doily

A small Chinese embroidered doily was recently acquired in a small local flea market outside of Beijing by a client. It was silk with coloured threads and a velvet quilted surround. The back was canvas and the item was thick. It was also very grubby. I carefully dye tested the silks and they seemed to be stable, not unrealistically I was concerned that they could defy me and run. I decided on a cautious approach.

Wetting a piece of good blotting paper I left the item for 25min under some glass weights. I came back and removed the weights and a strong smell of mushroom rose from the cloth. Peeling back the paper the whole cloth was covered in black and bright yellow mould. In panic I filled a basin with 20L of deionised water and threw the item in. The water turned black, as black as dark miso soup and the lab smelt the same. I filled another basin and repeated the process. More black, lots more black! This little table doily was revealing the reason it had been sold. Provenance unfolded by treatment.

At some time a bottle of soya sauce must have spilt and the doily had soaked it up, the top was probably dabbed with a tea towel and the doily left to dry. Explains why it was so grubby. The padding inside the layers had soaked up a large amount of soya sauce and now it was all coming out. More blotting and finally drying. All of the dyes survived except for one small area in the centre of the doily, this area possibly had a half a lime and a few chillies sitting on it before the soya sauce was split. Unfortunately these dyes had bled, and chasing back the bleed while still damp with white spirits resulted in limited improvement.

The dye was so soluble in this one area if only I could find some really strong capillary action to wick it away from the surrounding cloth. I tried fine sable paint brushes to pull away the bleed. I was not sure of returning the item to the wash bath and trying to alter the pH since it was only in one small area, which had the bleed problem. A small poultice of un-spun silk fibres was tried. Wicking dye bleed with open soft silk fibres from a slubby un-dyed silk yarn does wick the excess dye away better than any other treatment. By placing a little nest of un-spun silk on the area the bleed stopped spreading, leaving a small halo of dye around the affected threads. The capillary strength of the silk worked to pull the dye away from the base cloth.

Conclusion

The care of material culture in the past was often meticulous. The marks of use, residues of varnishes and waxes are often investigated to better understand the history and development

of products finishes and coatings. They often are the best way to authenticate an object and understand its provenance. Increasingly though members of families alter the use of heirloom pieces. Trays are no longer used with teacups and saucers instead the best tablecloth is used with mugs. Babies are given Panadol™ before a christening and the posit is now bright pink. Wall-hangings are used as carpets with pets inside the house.

Many people don't know what EPNS means and keep polishing in an attempt to remove the non-shiny base metal showing through. Items are stored in printed plastic bags and the colours transfer. The litany of modern damage to historic items is extensive. Unfortunately there are so many strange and wonderful products recommendations on the Internet and catastrophic remedies for new damage to family heirloom pieces, the cures are often worse than the damage. The challenges for conservators in the future will be to find ongoing rescues for the strange, the wonderful and the unpublished.

References

Gardiner J & Hackett J, 1998, 'Up on the Roof: light bleaching of large textiles, two case studies'. *Textiles Specialty post prints. vol 8 Annual meeting of the AIC (26) Washington 1999 15-27*

About the Author

Victoria Gill graduated from the Australian National University in 1997 with Honours in Tapestry. She went on to complete an Applied Science degree in Conservation of Textiles from The University of Canberra. Victoria established Endangered Heritage in 2003 and has a small staff of textiles and object conservators working in large and small institutions and for private clients out of the Duffy-based lab.