Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material

AICCM COLLECTION CARE FIRST AID WORKSHEET

Textiles, costume and soft materials

Four Questions to Ask

- What do you see?
- What is the risk?
- What is the safest first step?
- When would you call a conservator?

Safe First Steps

- Provide full support during handling and reduce unnecessary movement.
- Remove avoidable strain; improve padded, flat or rolled support according to condition.
- Reduce avoidable light; document fading and investigate pest / damp conditions.

Common Mistakes

- Washing or dry cleaning historic textiles without assessment.
- Direct strong vacuuming, brushing, ironing or steaming fragile material.
- Adhesive repairs, pins, staples or improvised stitching.

Escalation Triggers

- Active pests or mould; weak / shattering fibres; tears under load.
- Staining requiring cleaning, complex costume, weighted silk or fragile decorative surfaces.
- Culturally sensitive material, major reshaping, exhibition mounting or interventive treatment.

Resources

AICCM Textiles Special Interest Group - Professional network for preservation, treatment and care of textile-based collections. Open

AICCM Environmental Guidelines - Australian environmental guidance with risk-based, climate-responsive principles. Open

AICCM Visual Glossary - Condition language for fading, fold, crease, distortion, frass, mould and tear. Open

Textile Storage - Western Australian Museum (video). Open

Canadian Conservation Institute - caring for textiles and costumes - Risk-based guidance on physical forces, water, light, pests, handling, display and storage. Open

Preparing textiles for storage - BC Museums Association (video). Open

Visible sign / scenario	Ask	Safe first move	Tempting mistake	Escalate when…
Hanging strain / shoulder distortion	Where is gravity concentrating the load?	Support weight; reduce hanging strain; consider flat or padded support.	Don't keep hanging because "clothes are meant to hang".	fabric is weak, heavy, torn, weighted or mounting is for exhibition.
Pest holes / frass	Is damage current? What evidence links insects to the textile?	Isolate suspect item appropriately; inspect nearby materials; document and identify pest evidence.	Don't spray household insecticide or discard evidence.	live activity, widespread evidence or valuable / vulnerable collection affected.
Fading / differential fading	What does the protected area tell us about light exposure?	Reduce avoidable light; document and review display duration / location.	Don't attempt to recolour / clean; assume fading can be reversed.	item is highly light-sensitive or exhibition planning needs specialist parameters.
Dust / soiling	Is surface strong enough for any cleaning?	Improve housekeeping around item; use established gentle method only if condition and training allow.	Don't direct strong vacuuming or brushing.	surface is weak, decorated, friable or mouldy.
Fold / crease / crushing	Is storage creating stress or permanent deformation?	Add tissue / inert support; reduce tight folds; improve box fit.	Don't iron, steam or sharply refold.	material is brittle, painted, composite or reshaping is needed.
Tear / weak fibres	Will handling or gravity extend the damage?	Full support; stop load across tear; use a tray.	Don't stitch, pin, staple or adhesive-patch without assessment.	tear is under load, fibres are shattering or treatment / display is needed.
Mould / damp textile	Is material wet or growth visible?	Prioritise health; isolate safely; improve environment; seek advice.	Don't brush, vacuum, sun-dry or seal damp textile in ordinary storage.	active mould, wet material, contamination or multiple items.
Overstuffed / poor costume support	Is the support forcing shape or stressing fastenings?	Reduce pressure; use appropriate padded / shaped supports without forcing.	Don't force garment onto mannequin / hanger.	complex mounting, fragile fastenings or exhibition use.

Resources (continued)

Costume Accessories - Museum of Fine Arts Boston MFA. Open

Vocabulary of Basic Terms for Cataloguing Costume – ICOM. Open

Plastics – CCI. Open

Mold/Fungi - American Institute for Conservation. Open

Textiles- Costumes - Canadian Conservation Institute CCI. Open

An Overview of Textile Conservation Practices in Museums of Australia (PDF). Open

MFA CAMEO Materials Database. Open

Textile Specialty Group: Textile Conservation Wiki. Open

Caring for Your Textile Collection – Winterthur. Open

ICOM International Committee for Museums and Collections of Costume, Fashion and Textiles. Open

Leather, Skin and Fur – CCI. Open

Conservation & Art Materials Encyclopedia Online CAMEO. Open