Talk Dirty to Me
Cleaning Historic Clothing and Textiles

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What is a textile?

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What is dirt?
PARTICULATES

Dust and other dirt particles that accumulate on and within fibers

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INSECT REMAINS

Dead insects, casements, webbing, and frass

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SOOT

General term for dark and oily deposit caused by air pollution or fire
ACCRETION

Deposit of extraneous material on the surface, such as mud or fly speck

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STAIN

Dirty spot that remains after initial cleaning
DISCOLORATION

General change in the color of an area from the prevailing tone
What can (usually) be cleaned

• Particulates on the surface such as dust, pet hair, insect casements, fiber

• Deposits of dried soil, food, paint, other organic material

• Circular stain or tide line caused by moisture spreading and drying

• Dirt from use at hem, at cuffs, etc.

• Overall yellowing seen after passage of time

• A dingy, dull tone with a lack of reflectance

• Body odor, mustiness, mildew, or “grandma’s attic” smell
What can’t usually be cleaned

• Old stain previously cleaned, such as blood, wine, or food
• Oxidized stain from liquid, mildew, “foxing”
• Dye transfer or dye bleeding
• A particularly stubborn stain
• Soiling on an extremely fragile textile
• Fading caused by exposure to light
Surface Cleaning
Vacuuming

• Dirt that goes on the textile dry, can frequently be removed without wetting

• Particulate matter should be removed by vacuuming before the textile undergoes additional cleaning

• All textiles should be vacuumed before being put in storage, whether coming from exhibit or a new acquisition

• Need for frequent vacuuming is an indication that there may be other factors at play in your collection

• All staff and volunteers should know how to safely vacuum textiles in the event of a insect infestation or other collections disaster
Surface Cleaning
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Surface Cleaning

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Bonded Soiling
Dry Cleaning

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Dry Cleaning

- Educate yourself. Read Conserve-o-Gram

- Find a commercial drycleaner you trust. Speak to the person who is doing the cleaning

- Temporarily stabilize weak areas, buttons. Separate belts. Remove some decorative elements

- Discuss the process with the dry cleaner

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Wet Cleaning
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Wet Cleaning

• The reduction in tensile strength in wet fibers
• Shrinking and matting of textile fibers
• Presence of water-soluble dyes and finishes
• Permanent removal of substances including pollen and forensic evidence
• Residual chemicals and substances left by the cleaning process
• Need for ideal work space and equipment
Wet Cleaning
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Wet Cleaning
Testing

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Testing

- Dust and soot on white wool twill
- Mud on green wool flannel
- Tea stain on white cotton poplin
- Cellulosic degradation on cotton lace
- Baby food on blue cotton twill
- Paint accretions on blue cotton twill
- Adhesive accretions on pink silk ribbon
- Hand dyed silk habotai
- Vintage red cotton sewing threads
Soot/dust
Mud
Paint accretions

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Adhesive accretion
Baby food
Tea stain
Cellulosic degradation
New dye
Old dye