

## Guidelines

### Background

In the early 1980's it became obvious that a general change in museums' policy and direction was threatening the survival of costume collections. Costume, being made largely of textiles, has a limited life and requires special treatment if it is to survive even in an ideal museum with specialised staff. Discussions were initiated, largely through the leadership of Chairperson Ingrid Bergman (Stockholm), at the ICOM triennial Meeting in Buenos Aires in 1983. The basis for the Guidelines was adopted unanimously by Costume Committee members at the next triennial in 1986, and published soon after. Subsequent additions have been made, notably to the Recommended Reading and the section on Photography.

Our aim was to provide a quick reference for busy curators, many of whom were suddenly given responsibility for costume without any training, for volunteers working in museums, as well as to support trained costume curators who found their standards under threat from new management oblivious to the fragility of costume. The Recommended Reading includes basic reading on cataloguing and conservation.

We remind readers of the stated opinion of Janet Arnold (1932-98), one of the most respected costume historians of this century: when a garment has been cleaned or conserved, it can cease to be a historic document.

The Committee welcomes comments and suggestions to these guidelines. Please send them to the Committee.

### Collecting costume

The first rule is to show respect for the integrity of each item.

A clear policy is essential. See for example:

- ICOM Costume Committee "Clothes Tell Stories", on-line workbook, Chapter "Working with Clothes", Article "Collecting Policy"
- [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org) (Acquisitions)
- Running a Museum, A Practical Handbook, ed. Patrick Boylan, ICOM 2004
- Collection Policy Template - Museums & Galleries NSW, American Alliance of Museums, Standards of Stewardship

Take only objects you intend to keep.

Ask for as much information as possible (see also “Clothes Tell Stories” Chapter “Working with Clothes” Article “Documentation” and “Dress and Personal Narrative”)

## Accessioning

No ballpoint pens!

Record as much information as time permits, using pencil when working with the object (ink from ballpoint pens cannot be removed without damaging historical textiles; (see also “Clothes Tell Stories” Chapter “Working with Clothes” Article “Documentation” and “Marking and Labeling Costume”)

Each object must bear its permanent accession number.

Record all the information given.

### Details:

Record all the information given, and evaluate it, and ask for the following:

- Name and address of donor, lender or seller - relationship to original wearer - designer/maker, whether amateur or professional - photographs or other illustrations showing the object in use - date when acquired - purchase place and price - present day value - purpose of making - history and circumstance of wearing/care/repairs/secondary use
- If the history is unknown, the date of the object must be estimated and recorded by a qualified person (the century is not sufficient).
- Sign and date information recorded.
- Number each object with its permanent accession number.

## Care

Handle as little as possible.

- Keep new pieces separate from the collection, and immediately on receipt, inspect for pests (and treat), and remove superficial dust.
- Handle as little as possible (see also “Clothes Tell Stories” Chapter Working with Clothes” Article “Handling Clothes”)
- Objects intended for preservation must not be worn.
- Immediately on receipt, before integrating with the collections, the object must be inspected for pests and mould, and if necessary, treated by mechanical means, such as brushing or vacuum-cleaning under screening, or if seriously contaminated, by fumigation in consultation with a conservator.
- No washing by anyone but a trained conservator.

- Vulnerable items made from fur, feathers, hair or wool should be kept in isolation for several months before integration.
- Wear clean cotton gloves, don't use hand cream or perfume and no jewelry which might catch in loose threads. Gloves protect cataloguers as well as objects.
- Avoid folding. If unavoidable, use acid-free tissue paper to cushion the folds.
- Transport only under dust covers, using buffered trays or trolleys. Dustcovers should be made from well washed unbleached, or partly bleached calico.
- No smoking, eating or drinking in any room containing objects.
- No flower vases near working areas.

## Handling

(see also "Clothes Tell Stories" Chapter "Working with Clothes" Article "Handling Clothes")

Costume requires trained personnel for handling (as opposed to many other types of museum objects). Handling should be done only by a curator/departmental technician so trained.

Costumes and accessories should be handled, mounted, positioned, and secured only by trained curators/departmental technicians.

Costumes and accessories should be carried and handled in storage trays (see also "Clothes Tell Stories" Chapter "Displaying Clothes" Article "Exhibition Technique - Transportation").

## Storage

Good housekeeping is essential.

- Storage area should be kept very clean.
- The environmental conditions should be as near ideal as possible:
  - Temperature / relative humidity:
    - For textiles 18°C - RH 50-55 %
    - For leather 18 C - RH 50 %
  - Maintain minimum variation.
- Light area only when working on objects.

### Details:

- Windows should be blacked out.
- Fluorescent light should have ultraviolet screens. Each section should have its own switch, so that only the working areas need be lit at any one time.

- The environment should fluctuate as little as possible. Cool conditions about 18° C with relative humidity between 50 and 55 % are currently recommended. Leather prefers a low humidity of 45 to 50 %, and should be kept separately, as should fur, feathers and woollen objects, because of their deleterious effect on other textiles. No natural fabric is inert. Each type reacts to, and is influenced by its environment in a different way.
- Good housekeeping is essential, with regular, thorough vacuum-cleaning into all corners and under all shelving, as a precaution against pests. Use of chemicals to prevent pests, including moths, has been known to cause irreversible damage to all textiles, fibres and dyestuffs, and could lead to the development of resistant strains of insects.
- Flat storage on padded surfaces is preferable to hanging, though hanging costs less and takes less space. Stress must be minimised, using individually padded hangers and white cotton tapes to take the weight of heavy skirts. Strained materials will tear and develop creases and distortions.
- Ensure sufficient space to allow air circulation around objects.
- Storage furniture and boxes should be raised off the floor to avoid damage in case of flood.
- Only fluorocarbon fire extinguishers should be provided for use in costume and textile areas.

## Conservation

Wrong treatment may destroy an object forever.

- Prevention is better than cure.
- Wrong treatment will destroy an object forever.
- Conservation should be done by professional specialists, in consultation with the curator.
- If in doubt, leave it alone.

### Details:

- All aspects of preventive conservation should be thoroughly understood by curatorial staff, as this is the most effective form of conservation. (see also “Clothes Tell Stories” Chapter “Displaying Clothes” Article “Exhibition Technique – Preventive Conservation”).
- Historic textiles should never be left crumpled, or with uncushioned folds.
- Tables used for conservation should be padded under a washable dustcover.
- Conservation involving washing or cleaning fluids and stitching should be done by a conservator, in consultation with the curator.
- If no conservator is available, cleaning, other than vacuum-cleaning, should be avoided, and repair kept to a minimum. The wrong treatment may destroy an object. If in doubt, leave it alone.
- All treatment should be recorded on catalogue card or in your database with the appropriate name and date, signed and dated.

## Display and out-loans

Keep light levels low.

- No object should be on display indefinitely.
- Costume should be displayed in recommended light of 50 lux maximum.
- Temperature and humidity: For textiles 18°C - RH 50-55 %; For leather 18 C - RH 50 %
- Costume should be kept in an enclosed, ventilated environment.

### Details:

- No object should be on permanent display.
- Make sure that display materials (paint, fabrics, mounting materials) are safe and compatible with the objects (see also “Clothes Tell Stories” Chapter “Displaying Clothes” Article “Exhibition Technique - Planning”).
- Lighting should be kept to a minimum. There is no safe level, but 50 lux is currently recommended for displays (see also “Clothes Tell Stories” Chapter “Displaying Clothes” Article “Exhibition Technique - Planning”).
- There should be no light outside exhibition hours from any source, including daylight from which ultra-violet rays have been excluded. Lights must be outside cases to reduce heat from lamps. Flattering lighting is better than cosmetic conservation (see also “Clothes Tell Stories” Chapter “Displaying Clothes” Article “Exhibition Technique - Planning”).
- Glass cases reduce the risk of vandalism, and show that the museum takes its responsibility seriously.
- Open displays are discouraged, because of the fluctuating conditions generated by visitors, who generate high humidity, varying temperatures and dust. Proximity to the objects causes security problems, because people will touch, breathe and move about. The environment should be the same as in storage, with cases kept at a steady 18°C, with a relative humidity of 50-55% (see also “Clothes Tell Stories” Chapter “Displaying Clothes” Article “Exhibition Technique - Planning”).
- Dust that collects on costume exhibited in the open may be difficult or impossible to remove, requiring cleaning procedures that are dangerous for the costume.
- To ensure that display methods do not cause stress to the objects or holes from pins, all exhibitions should be in consultation between curator, conservator and display designer.
- No aerosol types of cleaning and polishing materials should be used.
- To avoid static electricity, glass should only be wiped, and never polished with a dry cloth.

## Future considerations

Don't remove evidence!

- New research methods continue to be developed which may reveal significant information for the first time, provided that no evidence has been removed by zealous cleaning or excessive display demands.
- For ethical and scientific reasons, the watchword should therefore be: NO interference with objects accepted into a museum collection. Interference reduces their value as historic documents.
- However, the interest awakened through eye-catching displays and blockbuster exhibitions may determine the future safekeeping of costume collections, whether supported by taxes or private means. Compromises are inevitable.
- Constant co-operation between curators, exhibition designers, conservators and scientists is the most necessary ingredient in promoting the best conditions for making a costume collection available to the public.

## Photography

- Good quality photographs reduce the need for handling and examining objects.
- Decide in advance exactly what the picture should show.
- Keep photo lamps turned off except when measuring light level and taking the picture.
- Adjust lighting by moving lamps and not the costumes.
- Keep account of exposure to strong lights and reduce exhibition time accordingly.
- Monitor heat and humidity during photography to comply with recommended levels.

### Details:

- Documentation of historic textiles and costume can reduce the amount of handling and exhibition necessary for sharing the historical, cultural, and technical aspects of historical costume.
- Curators and/or conservators should inform outside photographers of the Museum's guidelines and of the special lighting restrictions on costume.
- TV and film crews are recommended to use UV-filtered HMI lamps for costume; the conservator or curator shall determine whether or not they are to be used.
- To ensure compliance with Museum standards, a person designated by the curatorial and/or conservation department concerned should be present when costume is photographed by an outside photographer.
- Photography, pattern-taking, drawings, and written descriptions are all good methods of documentation. Photography is often done by professionals with more or less experience in museum work; costume curators and conservators must be able to communicate the proper procedures and

the desired end result. Historic costume should rather be well-photographed once than be subjected to repeated sessions of handling and lighting.

- Textiles suffer irreparable damage from light, both visible and ultraviolet wavelengths, as well as mechanical damage caused by repeated heating and cooling (and subsequent drops in relative humidity) that occurs under strong lights. Damage from light and heat is cumulative; costume which has previously been exposed to strong lighting should be displayed less.
- Lights should be turned off or dimmed whenever possible, and maximum lighting should be limited to light measurements and the actual exposure, for example three minutes at a time. The costume can be kept covered with a lightfast drape during most of the set-up time.
- Lights should be kept at a safe distance, far enough away to prevent more than a 5° F temperature increase on the surface of the object. Monitor temperature and relative humidity regularly during a photography session; textiles kept at an optimal RH about 50% are less prone to permanent - and irreversible - damaging of fibres.
- Photo lamps should be provided with UV- and IR-absorbing filters, which may require some colour compensation on the camera. The safest lighting for photographing textiles is considered to be electronic flash (strobe), as tungsten and quartz lamps have very high levels of infrared light (causing heat); the high levels of UV and IR in flash lighting are of such short duration that they are not as harmful, while providing greater colour accuracy and image sharpness. Particular care must be taken during TV and film work, which exposes objects to prolonged and intense lighting.
- Wear clean cotton gloves when handling costume.
- To avoid unnecessary retakes and handling, orders for special photography should be accompanied by specific instructions as to angle, lighting, background, details required, and so on. It is usually best that the person responsible for the order be present during the photography.
- Keep accurate records of all photography of the object, so that existing photos can be used, avoiding repeated photography.
- Before positioning an object, secure the surface upon which it is to rest as well as the background material.
- Whenever possible, move the camera and not the object to attain the proper angle and focus.
- Never adjust the camera lens or lights directly over the object.

## Recommended reading

- ICOM Code of Professional Ethics. See website of the ICOM Costume Committee.
- Anne Buck: Vocabulary of basic terms for cataloguing costume. In *Waffen- und Kostümkunde 2*, Munich, Berlin, 1982, pp 119-151; *Cataloguing Costume*, *Museums Journal*, December 1976, pp. 109-110. See also the website of ICOM Costume Committee for a link to the digital version on Collections Trust ([www.collectionstrust.org.uk](http://www.collectionstrust.org.uk)).
- Care and conservation of costume and textiles, PDF (<http://www.icon.org.uk/images/stories/costume.pdf>)

- Care and conservation of fashion accessories, PDF  
[http://www.icon.org.uk/images/stories/fashion\\_accessories.pdf](http://www.icon.org.uk/images/stories/fashion_accessories.pdf)
- Nordiska Museet, Stockholm: The Boundaries of Antiquarian and of Technical Responsibilities in Conservation, 1982.
- ICOM Bulletin, July 1986 no. 4: The Conservator-Restorer.
- Costume Society of America: Annual Meeting 1987 resolution encouraging the prohibition of wearing objects intended for preservation.
- Susan Blackshaw, Vincent Daniels, Selecting materials for use in the display and storage of antiquities. ICOM, Zagreb, 1978.
- Karen Finch, Greta Putnam, The Care and Preservation of Textiles. London, 1985.
- Karen Finch, Recording Evidence. UNESCO, Budapest, 1985.
- Mary Kahlenberg, "Collecting Considerations", pp 54-57, Textile Conservation Symposium in Honor of Pat Reeves, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986.
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- Jentina E. Leene, ed., Textile conservation, London 1972.
- Mary M. Brooks, Dinah D. Eastop, ed.: Changing Views of Textile Conservation, Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles 2011.