

The Care and Display of Art Quilts

Concern about the longevity of quilt art is sometimes given as a reason for not collecting it, but this concern is usually not justified. Museum experience shows that when environmental controls are in place and care is taken with the way quilts are stored, they can last a lifetime and longer.

Conservators at The Textile Museum in Washington, DC, and the International Quilt Study Center and Museum (IQSC) in Lincoln, Nebraska, recommend that the ideal environment for displaying quilts and other textiles provides indirect lighting, a consistent room temperature between 65 and 72 with air circulation, and humidity between 50 and 55%.

While achieving the environmental conditions called for may not be possible continuously, you can take measures that greatly reduce the risk of damage or deterioration:

1. Do not mount a quilt above heating vents, radiators, or air conditioners. These locations will expose it to high heat and excessive humidity and make the quilt susceptible to mold and mildew.
2. Do not expose unframed quilts to kitchen fumes or smoke from any source, including cigarettes.
3. Keep indoor lighting indirect and do not allow direct sunlight on your quilts. Florescent lights emit ultraviolet rays and incandescent lamps generate heat in their immediate vicinity, both of which cause damage. Fading caused by ultraviolet rays in natural light can be minimized by covering windows with a transparent, flexible UV filter. Close the curtains or blinds if the room is unused. If the quilt is to be framed, use museum glass or acrylic with a UV filter. Remember that the fading and weakening of fibers caused by heat and light may not be evident for many years.

Longevity also depends on proper display. When you buy a quilt, ask the artist or gallery for mounting instructions. If the quilt is large, the gallery may provide this service for you. If you purchase directly from the artist, hardware may be included with the sale. Make sure that you understand how to use it for installing.

Quilts should be supported across their entire width when installed. Most artists stitch a fabric sleeve (tube) to the top back to hold a rod or slat that is then attached at each end to the wall. D-rings or eye screws can be attached to the rods, or holes drilled through them, to accommodate picture hangers or nails. Slats and rods may be metal, acrylic, or wood. Wood slats should be sealed with polyurethane because the acid in wood discolors fabric. If your quilt comes without a sleeve, you can have one sewn on or do it yourself, leaving $\frac{3}{4}$ inch at each side so that the hanging device will be invisible. Also, attaching the hanging device so that the back of the quilt does not touch the wall helps prevent damage should the wall become wet. Mount the device on a sealed board attached to the wall or use long screws with a wingnut, creating a space between the quilt and the wall.

Frail or light quilts, such as those made with silk panels, also need full support across the top. If a quilt seems to need support to maintain its shape, a strainer – a rectangular wooden frame over which pre-washed fabric has been stretched – could be used. The artwork is stitched invisibly to this fabric in a way that provides balanced support. Framers experienced with textiles know how to do this without damaging the textile.

Frames are advisable for heavy quilts that are to be displayed for an extended period of time; otherwise, gravity will distort their shape. Frames also provide maximum protection for small works. The quilt is mounted on an archival mat board covered with pre-washed cotton or cotton blend, with the quilt stitched invisibly through the fabric. Again, an experienced framer may be required. Spacers placed between the quilt and the glass allow for air circulation and should prevent mold or mildew. If the framer uses museum glass, the viewer can appreciate more of the tactile characteristics of the artwork than is possible with ordinary glass. Anti-reflective museum glass, which includes a strong UV shield, has excellent clarity.

While maintaining a suitable environment and displaying quilts properly extends the life of any textile, caring for your quilts begins at the time of purchase. Ask the artist or gallery for instructions and a list of materials and processes used to make the object. This information facilitates professional cleaning or restoration. Wash your hands before handling your quilts. To clean a quilt, remove it from the wall and vacuum both front and back through a length of vinyl or nylon window screen obtained at a hardware store. If you do not have a micro-brush for your vacuum cleaner, use a rubber band to fasten a piece of cheesecloth over the end of your upholstery brush. Examine the quilt carefully for insects or signs of mold or mildew. If you find this kind of damage, or if the quilt remains soiled after a vacuuming, consult a conservator for an evaluation and advice. Never wash an art quilt or attempt spot cleaning with water or dry cleaning chemicals.

Quilts should be stored at the same temperature and humidity described above. If possible, store them flat and layered on a bed in a darkened room, covered with a sheet and then a plastic drop cloth. Use acid-free tissue paper to separate those with embroidery, embellishments, or other surface design elements. If space is limited, quilts can be rolled with tops facing outward, but be sure to wrap the tube with acid-free tissue paper first. Avoid folding and do not allow any contact with raw wood.

By exercising good judgment about the care and display of your contemporary quilts, you will not only receive a lifetime of pleasure from them, but also leave a legacy to be enjoyed by others for many years.

Kate Lenkowsky is the author of Contemporary Quilt Art: An Introduction and Guide (Indiana University Press, 2008). Earlier versions of this article were published on the website of AmericanStyle magazine and in the SAQA Journal.