

Rescuing Quilts From the Rag Pile

Even quilts that "look like they've been through three wars and a goat roping" can regain that cared-for look, says Sue Drew. And she ought to know. She has redeemed many bedraggled quilts during her 12 years in the quilt repair and restoration business in Montgomery, Ala.

Cleaning is the initial restoration step for most quilts. However, if the quilt is extremely fragile, it's best to make preventive repairs first.

Before washing, note the type of fabric from which the quilt is made. Spot test prior to washing, especially home-dyed quilts or those with stuffed work. The stuffing may expand when it becomes wet and tear old fabric.

Crazy quilts with their decorative stitching and fragile fabric were never made to be cleaned. But you can use a vacuum with netting over the nozzle hose to remove dust.

See "How To Wash Quilts" for specific cleaning instructions for cotton quilts.

Use the same procedure for wool quilts, but dry them outside. Wool quilts often only need vacuuming.

Cleaning Tips

First, make sure that the quilt fabric is colorfast. Mix a solution of 1 teaspoon of a cleaning product to 1 quart of water and apply it to a small portion of the fabric. Drew recommends L.O.C. by Amway, Ensure by Stearns and Foster, or Ivory Snow by Procter & Gamble.

Blot with a white tissue. If the color bleeds, add 1 cup of vinegar or salt or both to the wash water. Unfortunately, some colors will continue to run no matter what you do and the quilt can't be washed.

"Many experts recommend washing quilts in bathtubs, but I've found that the washing machine is just as safe and much more convenient as long as you take certain precautions," Drew says.

The agitation cycle of the washing machine can cause thread and seams to break and old material to shred. "But you avoid this damage by not

letting the agitation cycle run while the quilt is in the machine," Drew explains.

Drew also parts company with many experts when she advises using the dryer. "But when you consider all the natural hazards a quilt can encounter outside, the dryer is less dangerous—unless the quilt is fragile," she says. "As is true with all of this advice, you have to take it on a case-by-case basis.

"When I dry a quilt outside, I sit with it to keep the animals away," she says.

"Also, many quilts are so thick they may mildew before drying, so avoid a humid day," she adds.

As for taking quilts to a dry cleaners, Drew is adamant: "Don't use them. The cleaning fluids may harm the fabric, and I've also known cases where the quilt was lost."

Quilt tops aren't as sturdy as quilts, so the same cleaning tips do not apply. Tops should be gently soaked in a sink and air-dried.

If the quilt is thought to be 50 years old or older, or if it seems fragile, check with a quilt authority such as a museum curator before cleaning.

Sue Drew began repairing quilts to build her collection without spending a fortune.



Making Repairs

Once you've cleaned the quilt, Drew advises that you repair one block at a time so the project doesn't overwhelm you.

"A general conservationist rule is never do anything that's irreversible," Drew says. For example, applique over, rather than remove, original pieces of material that have deteriorated.

In restoration work, originality doesn't count. "You don't want to end up with too much of yourself in the quilt," Drew explains. "Requilted should be done using the method the original quilter used. For instance, if the quilter used large stitches, then this isn't the time for you to show off your tiny stitches.

"Try to keep to the character of the quilt," she adds. "If the original quilter used a red print and that red print has now disintegrated, you should get a red print as close to the original as possible."

Old materials can be found in attics and secondhand clothing stores. Sometimes that "aged" look can be achieved by using the back of a new fabric or by overdyeing a new fabric with tan dye. Many people use tea as an aging agent, but Drew does not recommend it because tea contains an acid that can damage the material.

Preventing Damage

You can't repair quilts without regretting the harm done to these fine old treasures. That regret deepens when you realize much of the damage could have been prevented.

"I just hate it when people say, 'I've taken such good care of this quilt. It has been in a plastic bag in our cedar chest forever,'" Drew says, shaking her head.

"Well, acid in the wood will stain it and the plastic prevents the quilt from breathing," she notes.

She recommends storing quilts in pillowcases or sheets. Keep them away from excessive heat or cold and never store quilts in attics or basements. Always put a cloth between



This faded, dry-rotted quilt (left) was disintegrating bit by bit. When Sue repaired it, she used materials close to the original colors.

quilts and wood surfaces to prevent acid stains.

To avoid permanent crease marks, fold quilts in thirds part of the time, not always in quarters, and refold every six months. It's a good idea to put acid-free tissue paper in the folds. You can get the paper at quilt shops and art supply stores, or you can order it from quilt magazines and associations.

Sew casings to a quilt that is to be hung and don't allow the quilt to hang longer than three to four months at a time. Allow the fibers to rest for several months before hanging again and rotate the casing's position to another end if the design allows this.

Wooden dowels should be covered with contact paper or 3 coats of a polyurethane varnish. Never hang quilts with nails, pins, or tacks. Also, don't leave needles or pins in quilts when you work on them; the metal will leave rust stains.

Keep quilts away from sunlight. "I can always tell the exact place where the sun hit a quilt that hasn't been protected," Drew says. To avoid sunlight damage, cover windows with protective film, which is available in general merchandising stores.

Don't transport quilts in nontransparent bags. "I know of one case where the quilt was mistaken for garbage and thrown out," Drew warns.

Unless the quilts are beyond re-

pair, don't cut them to make quilted items, Drew implores. "People who think nothing of cutting up a quilt to make a vest or a teddy bear would be appalled if you said you were going to cut up an antique table to make bookends," she says. "And yet, making a quilt probably takes more time and effort than making a table."

Before assuming a quilt can't be

repaired, check with a quilt authority. "Even if the quilt is beyond repair, sometimes you can cut out the bad areas and make a small wall-hanging," Drew says. With the remnants, you can make toys, ornaments, place mats, and other quilted articles, she adds.

By NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON with photos by GARY CLARK

How To Wash Quilts

Washing machines vary. You may have to experiment with your machine to achieve these results.

- Fill the washing machine with cool water and add the amount of cleaner recommended in the detergent instructions. If the detergent is grainy, dissolve it in hot water beforehand. Allow the machine to agitate, then stop it and evenly distribute the quilt in the water. Press gently to cover the quilt and soak for at least three hours.

- Drain the dirty water as needed and refill. Leave the quilt in place and add new soap. But don't allow the machine to agitate. Push down on the quilt occasionally so that the quilt stays completely covered. If the water colors, drain the wash tub and add 1 cup of vinegar to new water. Continue to drain and

refill until the water clears. Use your hand to diffuse the water so it does not spray directly onto the quilt.

- Drain the soapy water and replace with cool rinse water. Keep refilling the machine until the water is clear. Move the quilt to the sides away from the agitator, drain the tub, and spin on a gentle cycle.

- Lift the entire quilt out at one time to avoid tearing the fragile wet fabric. If the quilt is sturdy enough, place it in the dryer with several large, fluffy, colorfast towels. Use low heat. Remove the quilt and spread it on a bed while it is still a bit damp.

If the quilt is too fragile for the dryer, spread it outside on a prewashed white sheet, design side down, out of direct sunlight.