

Some Aspects of Caring For Cloth: An Overview

by Gregory Loughton #1625
photos by Erin Baxter

From the oldest 18th Century European military rank and specialty insignia through uniforms and headwear, to the most recent military flags, the collector of cloth militaria faces some serious challenges: the inherent fragility of cloth, the environmental/organic hazards, choices for display and storage, and, the financial costs.

Fragility of cloth:

From the thinnest silk souvenir handkerchief to the thickest felt and bullion wire shoulder board, cloth is fragile as compared with “hard” military objects such as edged weapons and firearms. Cloth fades and embrittles with exposure to direct sunlight, weakens and rots when exposed to high humidity or direct exposure to water (a flood situation), can “take on” almost permanent wrinkles, folds, or tears (through poor storage and handling) that can weaken the fabric and impair proper display. Bullion wire and metallic lace oxidize with exposure to air contaminants. Cloth is very vulnerable to insect pests which literally eat away the very objects we spend time and money to collect. However, if cloth receives proper care, handling, storage, treatment, display, it can outlast its human creators, owners, and collectors many times over.

Environmental/organic hazards:

Cloth insignia, headwear, uniforms, and flags can degrade within years from exposure to heat, humidity, and ultraviolet light. That same cloth insignia, headwear, uniform, or flag can almost disappear within weeks when subject to insect pest infestations.

Cloth kept in temperatures over 65 degrees F and humidity over 55 percent relative humidity (typically in places like attics and basements) will deteriorate. Heat will make cloth brittle and humidity will stain and weaken cloth. Use of humidifiers and silica gel to alter/absorb humidity is a temporary measure only.

Cloth displayed in direct sunlight will fade and weaken from exposure to ultraviolet light. Cloth headwear and uniforms on display in direct sun, and framed fabrics and cloth in direct or indirect sunlight will fade. All dyes will eventually fade, but fabrics with red dye will fade and weaken first. Windows can be protected with ultraviolet film sheets applied direct to the window surface. Display picture frames should be fitted with UV inhibiting glass.

REGULAR GLASS is reflective and filters out 47 percent of UV light.

NON-GLARE GLASS cuts down reflection and filters out 47 percent of UV light

ANTI-REFLECTIVE GLASS is not reflective, filters out 78 percent of UV light

CONSERVATION CLEAR GLASS gives a clear image, is reflective, filters out 97 percent of UV light

MUSEUM GLASS gives a clear image with no reflection (looks as if there is no glass at all), filters out 97 percent of UV light

Cloth is extremely vulnerable to insect pests. Most fabrics in need of defence against various moths and beetles are animal-based (wool, horsehair, etc). Clothes moths can destroy fabrics within weeks or months. When we see “the little flutterers” about our rooms, we know there is trouble, but it is the moth larvae, a life form stage of those moths which burrow through our fabrics and cloth, leaving gray or white “furry tunnels” of digested cloth.

The most common commercial moth traps (Aerixon® or Catchmaster®) will trap “the little flutterers” and so reduce moth numbers. More advanced insect traps and chemical inhibitors are available from museum supply companies. One Canadian company is CARR McLEAN Archival Supplies.

Choices of Display and Storage:

Most CSMMI members rely on “Riker boxes” to store and display their cloth, some have hundreds of labeled and stored boxes. Cloth items lay flat in the box according to their sizes. Larger cloth items (small insignia in series, and many flags) can be archivally framed. Headwear and uniform items can take standard sized styrofoam heads and torso forms. Older uniforms need smaller, hand-made Ethafoam™ heads and torso forms (closed-cell polyethylene foam). The most delicate uniforms will have to be flat-stored in acid-free boxes. Large flags up to a certain size can be framed, but will need support by being sewn onto the archival frame. Even larger flags will need rolled storage, again, in archival boxes. The most fortunate (and financially secure) collector will have a room (even a house) filled with headwear and torso forms for his/her collection.

Financial costs:

From the smallest “Riker box” to the most expensive museum-quality torso form or archival picture frame, the costs of caring for your cloth are always to be considered. “Riker boxes” go up to a certain size, after which you will need “ready-made frames” (available at IKEA or craft stores), or purpose-built custom frames available from your local picture frame store.

Headwear and torso forms can range in expense, from tens of dollars to thousands of dollars each (think styrofoam to museum-company level purpose-built).

Picture frames should incorporate archival quality components: wood or metal frames with acid-free mats and backing, walls and spacers to keep cloth away from the glass, UV inhibiting glass (remember that UV GLASS is 3-4 times more expensive than REGULAR GLASS, and MUSEUM GLASS is 5 times more expensive than REGULAR GLASS). To reduce weight of framed large-sized cloth items in frames, plexiglass can replace glass. An archival quality custom picture frame (depending on size of cloth item) can cost from 100 to 10,000 dollars.

These are some considerations for care of your cloth with examples from Gregory’s collection, all frames REGULAR GLASS.

photos by Erin Baxter



Fig. 1: 1980s Soviet Navy non-commissioned personnel trade/specialty badges displayed in in a custom frame with a mat around objects.



Fig. 2: Soviet Navy jack flag centre insignia, red star with white hammer/sickle displayed with mat on top of object in a custom frame.



Fig. 3: 1980s Soviet Navy ensign (rear view) flown from stern mast of a small launch or boat displayed with mat around object in a custom frame.



Fig. 4: 1950s Soviet Navy Captain 3rd rank (senior officer) working uniform: cap, jacket with rank shoulder boards and sleeve insignia, WWII order and campaign ribbons, and dress dagger waist belt.