

Caring for your lace

Washing old lace and embroidery at home

The following simple process is only suitable for white or cream pieces which are made of cotton or linen thread. You should seek the advice of a professional conservator before treating any lace or embroidery which is:

- More than 100 yrs old
- Made of silk thread
- Embroidered with coloured thread
- Heavily stained or damaged

Never use bleach, napsan, Bio-ad or other chemicals on fragile or important textiles. You will damage the fibres and shorten the life of the article dramatically.



Often people try to whiten old wedding veils to match modern white fabrics – with disastrous results. It is much more sensible to match the wedding dress fabric to the lace.

You will need the following

- A container large enough to spread the lace out flat while it is being washed, eg a wash trough or bath
- Pure soap flakes or conversation grade detergent
- A 'tray' on which to lift the lace while it is wet; this can be made from a piece of fibreglass window mesh, with the cut edges covered with fabric tape to prevent snagging the lace (you can stitch this on by hand or machine)
- Several sheets of blotting paper
- A natural sea sponge
- A plastic shower spray and hose for attachment to the taps
- A sheet of glass, Perspex, or other shiny surface on which to dry small pieces of lace
- A sheet laid over towels to dry large pieces

This ivory silk wedding dress, with machine-made lace and bead trim, was worn by Emma Oghiltree when she married Francis Robertson at Parkes Hill, Victoria on 29th March 1887. The dress was kept carefully by Emma and her family for just over a hundred years until her great grand-daughter donated it to the Museum in 1989.

Method

1. Make up a washing solution according to the manufacturer's instructions, using lukewarm water. Make sure all the soap is well dissolved. Do not be attempted to make the solution stronger than recommended.
2. Spread lace out flat on the mesh tray, and place tray on top of several thicknesses of blotting paper on a work surface near the washing solution.
3. Sponge any obvious spots with the soap solution, just pressing the wet sponge onto the sponge over the blotting paper. *Do not rub the lace.* When this appears to have been effective lift the tray of lace into the washing solution and leave to soak for up to an hour, patting the lace down gently at intervals so the dirt is more easily loosened.
4. Pull out the pug so that the water drains away, and give the lace a *gentle* running water rinse with shower spray. When there are no more bubbles visible, soak the lace in a clear water bath for a few moments. If the water becomes cloudy or bubbly, repeat this step until the water clears.
5. Give a final rinse in de-mineralised water to remove any iron particles which may have been collected from the water supply. (These may later rust and stain the lace irreversibly).
6. Lift the lace from the washing vessel on it's mesh support, and transfer gently from the tray to the Perspex or other drying surface. The surface tension between the water and the shiny drying surface will ensure that the lace dries flat without need for ironing. Large items should be spread out on a clean sheet over towels, perhaps on a shady lawn or a well ventilated floor area.
7. Avoid ironing if possible, and never iron without a press cloth under the lace as well as between the iron and lace.



Hedebo lace tablecloth (detail) made by Roma Field in Australia, about 1925.

Did you know

In the lace study centre you can see a particularly fine length of late 17th-century Venetian needle lace which governor King brought to Sydney in the early 1800s. Descendants of the governor donated it to the Powerhouse Museum with a paper wrapper bearing the inscription; 'Great Uncle Gidley's ruffler which he wore when he was with King Billie' (King William III, 1650-1702).