

## Get the Facts!

# WEDDING GOWN CLEANING AND PRESERVATION GUIDE

---

## 1. Why Clean and Preserve Your Bridal Gown?

You spent a great deal of time and thought selecting your wedding dress. You may hope that a younger sister or perhaps even a daughter will someday wear your gown. Or you may want to hold onto your beautiful gown for sentimental reasons. Either way, your wedding gown is a treasured keepsake that if properly cleaned and preserved, can last for years to come.

After the wedding, many bridal gowns are left in the plastic garment bag with good intentions of cleaning and preservation sometime soon. That *soon* often turns into weeks, and then years. This procrastination poses some serious risks to the gown:

- **Oxidation of stains, seen and unseen.** Your dress may have noticeable stains from food or make-up, or the hemline may be soiled. Or your dress may look clean to you, but don't be fooled, spills from alcoholic beverages or clear soda may dry clear, but oxidize with time, turn brown and become more difficult to remove later. Body perspiration may cause the dress lining to turn brittle over time. Your dress needs to be cleaned in order to keep it in the best condition possible.
- **Plastic fumes:** Gowns kept in plastic gown bags are exposed to the most harmful environment possible: plastic fumes. Most plastic gives off chemical fumes that cause the yellowing of bridal gowns. Some brides take the initiative to get their dress cleaned, but still leave their gown in the dry-cleaner's plastic wrap or garment bag.

Cleaning and preserving your bridal gown as soon as possible ensures that your gown remains in the best condition possible. *Ideally, your dress should be cleaned and preserved within days or weeks of your wedding.*

## Part 2: A Wedding Dress Preservation Case Study

When I was married in the early 80's, the most common preservation method for bridal gowns was to vacuum pack it in a box. This was to protect the dress from oxygen, the supposed enemy of the gown. It was an expensive process, and my husband and I were *starving students* on a shoe string budget, so my dress hung in my closet, without even a plastic cover for it. Being a skilled seamstress, I had sewn my own wedding gown and so I did not have the garment bag that bridal shops provide you with the purchase of a gown.

Each time I saw my dress hanging in the closet I felt a twinge of guilt. I believed I was putting the gown at risk, not having it vacuum packed. And yet, over time, I forgot about my dress, and it remained in its spot in the closet.

In 1994 I was approached by a friend who asked that I assist her with a new type of bridal gown preservation. Designed by textile preservation experts, *Museum Method* bridal gown preservation technique was different than other preservation techniques. It allowed you to easily inspect and admire your bridal gown any time you like.

My friend explained to me that the vacuum packing that had been the rage in the 80's was the worst thing that could be done to a gown! When the gown was vacuum packed, and all the oxygen was sucked out of the box, it left the gown shriveled up. Later, when the box was opened, the gown was a mess! Each place that the gown had been creased was now *permanently creased*. Sometimes the dress came out in shreds.

When I took my wedding dress out of its spot in the closet to preserve it, I found that it didn't look bad. I discovered that oxygen hadn't yellowed it after all! It was a little dusty and it did have some oxidation spots because I had never had it cleaned.

I then cleaned and preserved my gown with *Museum Method*<sup>TM</sup> bridal gown preservation. I was thrilled with the results. My gown looked beautiful!

My bridal gown still looks fabulous today. I know because I can easily check it, and often do. *As it turned out, oxygen was not the enemy that everyone supposed it was.*

Since the 1980's, bridal gown preservation has improved tremendously. Vacuum packing is no longer commonly done. There are now several options available for bridal gown preservation. However, there are quite a few variations of these options, all claiming to be the best. It can be very confusing. How do you determine which method will truly keep your gown in the best condition?

### Part 3. Determining the Best Gown Preservation

A good way to determine the best bridal gown preservation technique would be to check with museum textile conservators to see how they preserve heirloom garments and what their recommendations are for bridal gown preservation. But who has the time?

That is why we have done the research for you. We have consulted with museum conservators at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and summarized the information they gave to us.

#### Museum garment preservation

The Victoria and Albert Museum in London has a wonderful collection of gowns that are hundreds of years old. The dresses in **storage** are hung on **padded hangers** and covered with **cotton sheeting** to protect them.

Garment preservation at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C. is similar. Heirloom garments that are not currently on display are cleaned and carefully stored in climate controlled conditions. Many dresses are hung on padded hangers, while some garments are laid in drawers or acid free boxes with acid free tissue. **Sharp creases are avoided, as they can damage fabric.** To keep the folds from becoming permanent creases, the garments stored in boxes or drawers are refolded into a different position every few years.

**Neither of these museums seals any of their heirloom garments.** Museum conservators discourage sealing any garment in any container for three reasons:

1. **Fabric weakens where it is folded.** Fabric weakens in the same way that paper weakens where it is folded, so that creases from the folds may become permanent. (You may have experienced this if you have ever let down the hem on a garment.) Or worse, the fabric may tear at the weakened creases. This is why the Smithsonian refolds the garments stored in drawers and boxes periodically.
2. **Inspection is critical.** Periodic inspection ensures that the garment does not develop permanent damage from oxidizing stains or any other problems. The sooner problems are discovered, the more likely they can be remedied.
3. **Sealing promotes mold and mildew.** If the textile can breathe, then the humidity remains constant around the garment. If any moisture were to condense inside a storage container, it would likely develop mildew.

Museum conservators recommend keeping heirloom garments: **clean, cool, dry and wrinkle-free.**

### Part 4: Cleaning Bridal Gowns

The first step in the proper care of your wedding gown is to have it cleaned. But who do you trust with your treasured gown? Your local dry-cleaner? A national company? A little bit of knowledge will help you to make an informed decision.

You should be aware that many local dry-cleaners do not clean and preserve gowns in their facilities, but choose to send their customer's bridal gowns out to *wholesale* dry-cleaners. In determining the best cleaning for your gown,

you will need to know which solvents your local cleaner uses, or if he sends bridal gowns out, which solvent the wholesale dry-cleaner uses.

For best results, find a dry-cleaner who uses *virgin* solvent for cleaning wedding gowns. Because of ecological regulations and expense, solvents are recycled. Impurities that are not filtered out of used solvent can be re-deposited onto garments. Garments cleaned in dirty solvent will have a *dry clean* smell.

A good dry-cleaner will use virgin solvent on all wedding dresses. A clean wedding gown should not smell like cleaning solvent. There should be no noticeable odor.

### **Wet-cleaning**

Some dry-cleaning shops use what is called *wet-cleaning* for their bridal gowns. Wet cleaning is simply cleaning with water and has several advantages.

- It is the best cleaner for sugar spills, most food stains, and dirty hems.
- If the dress has been well rinsed, wet-cleaning leaves no chemicals on the dress, which will help to keep the dress in the best possible condition.
- Water washing removes the fabric **sizing** (a starch like substance added to fabric during manufacturing.) Removing the sizing helps protect your gown, because sizing is enticing to mice and insects!

Some professional cleaners may use either dry-cleaning or wet-cleaning, depending on the gown fabric. Many bridal gown care labels specify which type of cleaning will be best for that particular gown.

### **Dry-cleaning**

Three common dry-cleaning solvents currently used for bridal gowns are:

#### **1. Perchloroethylene**

Commonly called *perc*, this is the most common solvent that dry-cleaners use. It is the best solvent for degreasing and may be your best choice if your dress is silk, rayon, or acetate and quite dirty. However, this solvent is more likely to damage sequins and beads, or melt the glue if they are glued on. A very experienced dry-cleaner will know how to protect the sequins and beads on your dress.

#### **2. Stoddard solvent.**

Harder to find, this is a petroleum-based solvent that is becoming rare. Because of fire regulations, this solvent cannot be used in strip mall type dry-cleaning establishments, and is therefore not commonly used. You may find this solvent in older dry-cleaning shops that have been around for a while. It is safer for cleaning dresses with sequins and beads than perchloroethylene. The Stoddard solvent shouldn't melt beads and sequins or affect the glue if they are glued on.

#### **3. Exxon DF-2000**

This is a newly formulated petroleum-based solvent. Like the Stoddard solvent, it is safer for beads and sequins, but is not quite as effective at degreasing as perchloroethylene and the Stoddard solvent. However, it has fewer fire restrictions than the Stoddard formula and may be the formula of the future as many dry-cleaning shops change over to this new solvent.

### **Petroleum-based solvent**

Some bridal gown care labels state, *Dry clean only with petroleum based solvent*. Both the Stoddard solvent and Exxon DF 2000 are petroleum based. But finding a dry-cleaner who uses one of these can be difficult.

If your gown care label specifies a petroleum based solvent, your local bridal shop may be able to refer you. If they are unable to help you, try looking up *dry-cleaning equipment* in your local yellow pages. Call a sales representative listed there. They can probably tell you which cleaners in your area use either the Stoddard solvent or DF2000. You may also check out the website [www.df2000.com](http://www.df2000.com) for a list of DF-2000 solvent suppliers by state.

You can then call the supplier to find a dry-cleaner who uses DF-2000. When you find one, be sure to ask them how many wedding gowns they clean on a regular basis. **Experience is important.**

### **Dry-cleaner's experience**

Experience is probably the most important factor to consider in selecting a dry-cleaner if your gown is silk. Silk is more difficult to clean and press than synthetic fabrics and requires a truly skilled cleaner. Check with your local bridal shops to see whom they use and recommend. Ask more than one bridal shop. Bridal shops have wedding gowns cleaned on a regular basis. They will probably give you the best advice. Ask the questions listed below to the dry-cleaner that the bridal shop recommends.

#### **Essential questions to ask the dry-cleaner:**

1. Does the dry-cleaner do the work on the premises or send it out? (If they send it out, whoever does the actual cleaning should answer the following questions.)
2. Does the dry-cleaner use *dry-cleaning* or *wet-cleaning*?
3. If dry-cleaning, what kind of solvent does the dry-cleaner use?
4. How much experience does the dry-cleaner have? Who actually does the cleaning and pressing of their customers' wedding gowns? Often one very skilled person will have this job. How experienced is he or she?
5. Does the dry-cleaner use *virgin* solvent for wedding dresses?

#### **You should also know several things about your dress:**

1. What fabric is your dress made of?
2. What kind of cleaning does the care label indicate? If it has a *dry-clean only* label, does it also have the symbol for water washing on it? Look carefully; the label may also state *Professional dry-cleaning or professional wet-cleaning recommended*.
3. How soiled is your dress? What kind of stains does it have (wine, dirt, make-up, etc.)?
4. Does your dress have sequins and beads that need protecting? Are they sewed on or glued on?

### **Cleaning Summary**

If your gown and/or lining is **silk, rayon, or acetate** but does not have beads or sequins you should be able use a dry-cleaner that uses perc. That will be a plus if the dress is really dirty (look at the hemline!) Perchloroethylene is the best degreaser. If your dress is silk, rayon, or acetate, but has beads and sequins, the Stoddard formula or DF-2000 will be the safest.

Be sure to point out any stains to the dry-cleaner. Also, notify the dry-cleaner of any spills on the dress, even if they don't show. Dry-cleaning fluids will not remove sugar stains (such as wine or soda), so the dress needs to be pre-treated.

If your dress and lining are **polyester**, with or without beads and sequins, wet cleaning should be safe and will get your dress the cleanest. Check your label carefully, and look for a *hand wash or dry-clean only* label, or the symbol indicating water washing. If in doubt, test clean an inconspicuous area of the dress. You should be able to safely hand wash most polyester gowns if you are careful.\*

## **Part 5: Bridal Gown Preservation**

Once your gown is clean, keeping it in the best possible condition is your goal. You will need to protect it from:

- Yellowing
- Permanent creasing
- Mildew and mold
- Oxidation spots
- Light
- Dust

### **Yellowing**

It's important to note that one of the leading causes of bridal gown yellowing is the plastic bags that many brides keep their gowns in. Most plastics give off damaging fumes that actually promote yellowing. But, even with proper care, some fabrics will yellow more than others and it may be impossible to prevent all yellowing.

---

\* **Disclaimer:** Check the care label carefully. The manufacturer's directions should take precedence. Our advice is given in good faith but is without warranty.

Generally, silk fabric yellows more than synthetic fabrics, such as polyester, rayon and acetate. However, nylon, which is a synthetic, has a tendency to yellow more than other synthetic fabrics. Gowns that can be wet cleaned have an advantage, in that if they do yellow, they may be able to be whitened for future use with a fabric whitener.

Preserving your gown in an acid-free environment is your best protection against yellowing. Padding your gown with acid-free tissue will help to prevent acid migration. **Buffered tissue** should be used for gowns made of synthetic fabrics such as polyester, rayon, and acetate. The buffering agents in the buffered tissue gives added protection against acid migration. But buffering agents may damage gowns made of animal proteins such as silk or wool, therefore **un-buffered, acid-free tissue** is recommended for silk fabrics.

#### **What about warranties against yellowing?**

Some preservation companies advertise that their preservation method will prevent yellowing and they may even offer a warranty. Look carefully at any warranty offered by these companies. One warranty offered by a leading on-line preservation company stated that they will cover discoloration and damages caused by their company's cleaning and preservation *processes*. Another simply states that the gown may be returned to a participating dealer for inspection and pressing. ***None of them state that they will replace an aged, yellowed gown with a new gown.***

***Keeping your gown in the best overall condition should be the primary concern in preserving your bridal gown.***

So, protect your gown! Get it out of the plastic bag and have it cleaned and preserved in an acid-free environment.

#### **Permanent creasing**

Flat storage is recommended for textiles and garments when possible. However, because of the size and dimensions of wedding gowns, it is impractical. Some compromise must be made, either by folding or hanging the gown. To help prevent permanent creasing, boxed gowns should be refolded into a different position every 2 - 3 years. (Cotton gloves should always be worn when handling preserved gowns.) ***Bagged gowns that are hung in a closet are not at risk for permanent creasing, and will not need to be handled periodically.***

#### **Mildew and mold**

Keeping your gown in a **breathable** environment will protect it best from mildew and mold growth. When fabrics can breathe, the humidity level remains constant around the garment as excess moisture dissipates into the air. But, if moisture can condense inside a box or any container, then the gown is at risk for mildew and mold growth.

#### **Oxidation spots**

An oxidation spot can occur when a substance that was not properly cleaned on the dress oxidizes and turns brown. This can happen even if your dress has been cleaned as dry-cleaning solvents do not remove all substances. Spills from clear soda or wine may go unnoticed at the time of the initial cleaning. Unless these spills are pretreated, it is likely they will oxidize over time. Inspecting preserved gowns periodically ensures the gown remains in the best condition. The sooner an oxidized stain is caught, the more likely it will be able to be removed.

#### **Light and dust**

Keeping your gown covered will protect it from the damage caused by light and dust.

#### **Preservation Options**

There are several different types of gown preservation offered today. While there are slight variations offered, each will usually fall into one of these three categories:

- Sealing
- Boxing
- Bagging

No matter what type of preservation you choose, ***you should keep your preserved gown in a climate-controlled area.*** Do not be tempted to put your preserved gown in an attic or damp basement where temperatures and humidity levels will fluctuate dramatically. Fluctuating temperatures increase the deterioration rate of textiles.

Remember, museum conservators recommendations are: **Keep it clean, cool, dry and wrinkle free.**

## Part 6: Gown Preservation Options: Sealing, Boxing or Bagging

### Sealing

Most bridal gown preservation companies preserve bridal gowns in an acid-free box. Many have a window in which to see the gown. Acid-free tissue is usually used to buffer the folds and a cardboard shape is often used to fill the bodice area of the gown. However, some companies actually *seal* the gown inside the box.

The assumption with sealing the bridal gown is that the dress needs to be protected from oxygen. **However, sealing a bridal gown puts it at greater risk for mildew and permanent creasing damage. Inspection is also impossible if the gown is sealed.**

### Boxed

Boxed preservation is similar to the sealing method but has some important differences. Like the sealing method, your dress is first cleaned and pressed, and then folded into an acid-free box. Sharp creases are avoided, and acid free tissue is used to buffer the folds. However, unlike the sealing method, the box is not sealed, and you are encouraged to open and inspect your gown.

Because the box is not sealed, the fabric can still breathe. And you will be able to refold your gown periodically. **This will help protect your gown from getting permanent creases.**

### *Acid-free box or just acid-free coated?*

The quality of the acid-free boxes can vary significantly. Many preservation boxes are simply regular cardboard boxes with an acid free coating. These coatings will not hold up as well as authentic archival boxes made from actual *acid-free board*.

The appeal for a boxed or sealed gown is often greatest for brides with large dresses hoping to get their gowns *out of their closet*. However, this method may work best for smaller gowns that require minimal folding.

### Bagging your bridal gown

This newer preservation method is not really so new. It is similar to what museums have used for preserving heirloom costumes and gowns for years. This method is an excellent option, as it keeps the dress protected from *dust and light*. The gown remains un-folded, so *permanent creasing risks are reduced*. The bag allows the gown to *breathe*, which is essential in protecting the gown from mold and mildew. A bagged gown is the *easiest to inspect* periodically and *requires no re-folding* as the boxed method does.

Strapless and spaghetti strapped gowns, as well as heavy gowns should be reinforced with twill tape to add support, and eliminate any damage from long-term hanging. A padded hanger is also essential for long-term storage.

It is important to remember that a clean dress should not be left in the dry-cleaner's plastic wrap or put back into a plastic garment bag. **Remember, most plastics are an enemy to textiles.** And the bagged gown should always be kept in climate controlled conditions. This is easily done in most closets.

## 7. Gown Cleaning and Preservation Summary

### Cleaning Summary

If your wedding gown and/or lining is silk, rayon, or acetate but does not have beads or sequins you should be able to safely clean your gown with perchloroethylene (perc.) That will be a plus if your dress is really dirty (look at the hemline!) Of the different dry-cleaning solvents available, Perc. is the best degreaser. If your dress is silk, rayon, or acetate, but has beads and sequins, the Stoddard formula or DF-2000 solvent will be the safest.

Select a drycleaner who uses *virgin* solvent on wedding dresses. Virgin solvent will get your dress cleanest and will not leave an odor. Also, find a cleaner who has a lot of experience with wedding gowns. Bridal shops will often give your best advice on finding a good cleaner.

Be sure to point out any stains on your gown to the dry-cleaner. Also, notify the dry-cleaner of any spills on the dress, even if they don't show. Dry-cleaning fluids will not remove sugar stains (such as wine or soda), so the dress needs to be pre-treated.

If your dress and lining are polyester, with or without beads and sequins, wet cleaning should be safe and will get your dress the cleanest. Check your label carefully, and look for a *hand wash or dry-clean only* label, or the symbol indicating water washing. If in doubt, test clean an inconspicuous area of the dress. You should be able to safely hand wash most polyester gowns if you are careful.\*

### **Preservation Summary**

Keeping your wedding gown in the best overall condition should be the primary concern in preserving your bridal gown. You will need to protect it from:

- Yellowing
- Permanent creasing
- Mildew and mold
- Oxidation spots
- Light
- Dust

Removing your bridal gown from the plastic garment bag and having it cleaned and preserved in an acid-free environment is the best protection against *yellowing*.

**Boxing** your gown in a box made of acid-free board (not just acid-free coated) is superior to having it sealed in a box because you can refold it every 2 or 3 years, which will help protect it from *permanent creases*.

**Bagging** your gown in an acid-free bag offers the best protection against *permanent creasing* and *mildew* development and does not need the maintenance that boxing requires.

Both boxing and bagging will protect your gown from *dust and light*. All preserved gowns should be kept in a climate controlled environment. **Inspecting** your gown periodically will ensure that it remains in good condition. *Oxidation spots* generally show up within the first year. The sooner these or other problems are discovered, the more likely they are to be remedied.

---

\* **Disclaimer:** Check the care label carefully. The manufacturer's directions should take precedence. Our advice is given in good faith but is without warranty.