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Preserving a Christening Gown and Petticoat

Dear Donia,

I have a family christening gown and matching petticoat that dates back to the 1870s. How do I launder and preserve it safely?

Q. Dear Donia,

I have a family christening gown and matching petticoat that dates back to the 1870s. It's been stored in a cardboard box for the last 50 years or so and has yellowed. I would like to launder it safely. What detergent/cealning materials should I use? Orvus? Woolite? A second issue is that at some point, several small tears in the gown were mended with (shudder) iron-on tape. Is there a safe way to remove this tape?

I'm a textile person myself but not a trained preservationist. I'd be grateful for some best-practices info. Thank you, Kathie



A. Dear Kathie,

The first thing to determine is what fabric your christening gown is made from. If it is silk, do not go any further as washing will be very detrimental to the fabric. If the gown and petticoat are cotton and in stable condition, you can wash very carefully.

To wash, use an anionic detergent such as [Orvus](#). This will rinse clean and be much safer for the textile. If the gown or petticoat have been dyed or have dyed components, have towels on hand to blot (never wring) the textile if it does start bleeding.

Wash the gown and petticoat individually in a large tub so that there is as little distortion to the pieces as possible. A clean bathtub works well for this. Follow the directions on the Orvus container and use cold or luke-warm water, never hot. Place the textile on a piece of nylon window screen like the kind you can get at the hardware store and lower into the water and gently agitate in an up and down motion, not side-to-side. The screen will then allow you to lift the textile out of the water so that you can drain the tub and fill with clean water for rinsing. Rinse at least twice to ensure you get all the soap out. After rinsing, lift the piece out of the tub on the screen and blot (don't wring) with successive towels until the towels don't take out any more excess water. The item should then be dried flat—wet textiles are heavy and fragile so don't hang and definitely don't put in the dryer. If you have a spare, thoroughly cleaned, window screen, this would work well to place on feet and air dry the dress and petticoat.

In regards to the iron-on tape, that is a bit trickier. You can find information all over the internet about removing the tape with chemical or an iron, but this advice is generally geared

toward modern pieces. The problem with trying to remove the tape is that you may get the carrier off but the adhesive will remain in the fabric. If there is a piece of tape that you can do a test on and is not in a conspicuous place on the petticoat, you could try removing the tape with the heat of an iron. Place a scrap piece of cotton on top of the tape, iron over the tape until it attaches to the scrap cloth and lift up. This does not always work, but it is worth a test if you are very cautious. Be very careful to not iron the historic fabric directly as high heat could cause the aged cotton to scorch.

If the gown and petticoat are cotton, after washing you will want to store them in an alkaline (non-acidic) environment. The best way to store them is, ideally, flat in a box such as one of these from our sponsor [Hollinger Metal Edge](#). The box should be lined with acid-free, lignin-free, buffered tissue that can then be folded over it. To further protect the pieces while folded, sausages of wadded tissue should be made to place in the folds. These sausages will help prevent the folds becoming weak or breaking points for the cotton threads. Fold over the excess lining tissue and put the lid on. Be sure the box is labeled and store in a bedroom closet or some other similar place. Don't store in an attic or basement.

Washing and removing the tape are potentially damaging treatments so please proceed cautiously, you don't want to lose this wonderful piece of your family's history.

Thank you for your questions, and please don't hesitate to contact me again if you have any further questions!

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