CENTER FOR JEWISH HISTORY

15 WEST 16TH STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10011
PHONE 212.294.8301
FAX 212.294.8302
CJH.ORG

Preservation Newsletter—June, 2018

Examining Textiles for Infestation

The most common infestations of fabric materials include fungus (mold), carpet beetles, and clothes moths.
Mold and mildew may grow on organic based fibers particularly when the relative humidity rises above 80%. Look for local discoloration and staining, fluffy, 3-dimensional growth, and thinning or distortion; a musty, unpleasant odor is also a prime indicator of mold. Synthetic polymers are generally resistant to mold and mildew, but finishing treatments, blended fabrics, and food stained synthetic materials can be susceptible.
Insect activity is indicated by the presence of:

- Holes, surface grazing or bite marks in objects. Borer holes are usually perfectly round, while moth holes are more irregular. Small piles of fresh dust often accompany borer holes.
- Droppings (aka "frass").
- Eggs. Insect eggs often look similar to pale poppy seeds.
- Some insects leave webbing from their larval stages.
- Some insects leave cases and cocoons from their larval stages. These can often be difficult to spot as they may be made from the object itself.
- Live insects, dead insects, and cast skins.

Clothing and textiles suspected of harboring mold or insects should be inspected in the quarantine room prior to introduction to the stacks. Textiles that have been stored in cellars, basements, or in tropical climates should always be closely inspected prior to accessioning.
Ideally, clothing and textiles should be laid out flat on a blotter-covered table for inspection. Examine using lots of light, and magnification if necessary. If the item is too large to completely unfold or unroll, open it up in sections: folds and crevasses are likely harbors insects. Stained or musty enclosures, padding, and mounts should be discarded.
If insect activity is detected: if the item is strong enough, it should be thoroughly vacuumed to remove all insect detritus. After vacuuming, bag the material in clear polyethylene Ziploc bags and request that the materials be placed in the freezer in the quarantine room (the objects will have to stay in the freezer at the lowest setting for 3 days, followed by a 7 day rest period while still bagged, followed again by another 3 days in the freezer). Do not remove materials from the polyethylene bag until they have returned to room temperature.
If mold is detected: if the item is strong enough, it should be vacuumed thoroughly to remove loose mold residues. Make sure the item is completely dry before placing into the storage area. Musty odors can be reduced by placing the item into a sealed polyester bag along with activated charcoal.

Once they are moved into the storage area, textiles that have been exposed to mold or insects should be kept away from other collections materials even after cleaning. Box separately, or hang in cabinets designated for this purpose and examine them regularly for a year before integrating them more fully with the rest of your collections.

Fragile and high-value textiles should be referred to a textile conservator for repair and treatment. And as always, the Center for Jewish History's Preservation Services staff is happy to examine materials and give any advice—just let us know what we can do to help!

The Werner J. and Gisella Levi Cahnman Preservation Laboratory