



Wedding Gown Preservation Guide

By Katherine Wright

Cleaning and preserving your bridal gown as soon as possible ensures that your gown remains in the best condition possible.

With so many wedding gown cleaning and preservation options available, ***all claiming to be the best***, it can be very confusing. This wedding gown cleaning and preservation guide is designed to help you make the best ***educated decision*** on the care of ***your*** wedding gown.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

To make *SMART* choices for *YOUR* gown

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Part 1: Why you should 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, perspiration and 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.



This gown was neglected and not properly cared for.

Bridal Gown Cleaning and Preservation - A 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™ 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 2: 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.



*Victorian Wedding Dress
Victoria and Albert Museum*

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 sharply folded and creased.** 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. **Risk of mold and mildew growth.** If a garment is stored in an environment with more than 60% relative humidity, it can encourage the growth of mold and mildew spores, especially if the garment has not been cleaned.

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

Part 3: 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 can oxidize in stains or discoloration and it 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. **Hydro Carbon (Also known as 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.

4. **Greenearth**

This is a fairly new silicone based solvent. Like Hydro-carbon, it is safer for beads and sequins, but is not quite as effective at degreasing as perchloroethylene and the Stoddard solvent. However, it is safer for the environment and has less government restrictions than any other solvent.



Petroleum-based solvent

Some bridal gown care labels state, Dry clean only with petroleum based solvent. The Stoddard solvent, hydro-carbon and Exxon DF 2000 are all petroleum based. Many dry-cleaners advertising themselves as "green" are utilizing hydro-carbon solvent or Exxon DF 2000. Also note that GreenEarth solvent should be as safe as a petroleum based solvent for your wedding gown. You should be able to find a cleaner utilizing one of these solvents with a few phone calls or a website search.

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?
6. Will the dress be cleaned by itself? If not, how many other dresses will be cleaned with it?
7. Is the dress insured while in the care of the dry cleaner? What kind of insurance?



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?



Here is a sad case of how an *inexperienced* dry cleaner damaged this beautiful couture gown.

Part 4: 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 is 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.



*Yellowed Dress stored
in plastic bag*

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 and lignin free environment and in the dark is your best protection against yellowing.
- Padding or wrapping your gown with acid-free tissue or cotton muslin will help to prevent acid migration.
- Storing your clean wedding gown in an acid-free and lignin-free preservation box or preservation bag will be best in a dark, interior closet or under a bed.

Buffered tissue should be used for wrapping and filling 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 if folding is minimal to fit inside the preservation box. However, because of the size and dimensions of wedding gowns, this is difficult and often compromises are made, usually by folding the gown more than what is desirable.

To help prevent permanent creasing, boxed gowns should be refolded into a different position every 2 - 3 years. (Cotton gloves or powderless nitrile gloves should always be worn when handling preserved gowns.)

Bagged gowns that are hung in a closet have less risk for permanent creasing, and will need less maintenance.



Mildew and mold

Keeping your wedding gown in an environment with less than 60% relative humidity will protect it best from mildew and mold growth. Most boxes, including sealed boxes are not air tight, so you must assume that air will get in, ***but be certain that moisture does not.***

If moisture condenses inside a wedding dress preservation box or any container, then the gown is at great risk for mold and mildew growth. Wedding dress preservation in a cotton bag has the best air circulation which helps keep the humidity level around the garment constant, as long as it is stored away from moisture.

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.

Perspiration and 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 and stored in a dark place will protect it from the damage caused by light and dust.

Part 5: 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.

Also, avoid storing your wedding gown or any heirloom garment in a closet adjacent to an exterior wall that does not have an adequate moisture barrier (most older homes do not). Moisture may seep into the walls and onto your gown.

Remember, museum conservators recommendations are:

Keep it clean, cool, dry, wrinkle free and in the dark.

Sealing, Boxing or Bagging your Bridal Gown

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, unless you are NASA it may be impossible to keep oxygen out of the box. And sealing a bridal gown poses several risks for your gown.

- Sealed wedding gown preservation puts your gown at greater risk for contamination from any acidic cardboard or plastic component fumes.
- It puts your wedding dress at greater risk for permanent creasing damage (because you cannot refold your gown periodically as recommended by conservators)
- Oxidized stains, yellowing, or other problems will not be caught and remedied as **sealed wedding dress preservation makes inspection impossible.**

Boxing

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, you will be able to refold your gown periodically. This will help protect your gown from getting permanent creases. And if you discover any oxidizing stains during inspection, the sooner they are taken care of, the better for your gown.

Acid-free box or just acid-free coated? Lignin-free or not?

The quality of the wedding gown storage boxes can vary significantly. Many wedding dress 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, lignin-free board.

Some boxes are acid-free but not lignin-free. Unfortunately lignin will break down within a few years, releasing acid as it decomposes, and then the acid-free box will no longer be acid-free. Ideal box storage will be in an acid-free and lignin-free box utilizing acid and lignin free tissue or cotton muslin for wrapping and padding.

Box Preservation Recommendations

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 or Hanging 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 cotton wedding dress storage bag has the best air circulation which helps keep the humidity level around the wedding gown stable. This assists in protecting the gown from mold and mildew. A bagged gown is the **easiest to inspect** periodically and **requires no re-folding** maintenance as the boxed method does.

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

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 interior closets.

Gown Preservation Options Overview

Sealing Benefits

May be acid-free

Easily stored

Protected from
dust and light

Boxing Benefits

May be acid-free

Easily stored

Protected from
dust and light

Can be inspected
and admired

Can be refolded
periodically

Cotton Bag Benefits

Naturally acid-free

Easily stored

Protected from
dust and light

Can be inspected
and admired

Does not need
refolding

Needs minimal
maintenance

No permanent
creasing

Best air circulation



Preservation Options

**Museum Method
(Hanging)**

Heritage Box

Heritage Garment Preservation

Heritage Garment Preservation uses the techniques recommended by professional museum conservators and is similar to heirloom garment storage used in fine museums worldwide.

We offer two methods of bridal gown preservation:

1. **Museum Method™** (hanging) bridal gown preservation
2. **Boxed** bridal gown preservation

Museum Method™ Bridal Gown Preservation

Museum Method™ Preservation uses the hanging method of gown preservation and is similar to heirloom garment storage used in fine museums worldwide. Museum Method will keep your gown in better condition than boxing or sealing it.

With Museum Method™ bridal gown preservation, your cleaned gown is hung on our special "shoulder size" acid-free, lignin-free hanger. Acid free tissue, acid-free filling or cotton muslin fills in the bodice area, removing creases and giving added support to your gown. Our 100% natural, un-dyed cotton bag covers your preserved gown. You can choose to add a custom label on the pocket of your bag with names of the bride and groom and the date of the wedding. There is also a large pocket on the back of the bag to keep a photo and other memorabilia of your wedding.

Benefits to Museum Method™ Preservation

1. **Your gown is easily accessible!** You can inspect your gown to ensure that it has been cleaned to your satisfaction and admire it any time you like.
2. **Your dress is protected from damage from wrinkles and creases.** Fabric, like paper, is weakened from folding, often resulting in tears or permanent creases. With Museum Method creases and wrinkles are almost non-existent!
3. **Your dress is protected from acid migration.** The acid-free tissue, batting or muslin absorbs acid which could damage your gown.
4. **Best air circulation for your gown.** Museum conservators all agree that heirloom garments need protection from moisture. Good air circulation helps keep your gown dry if stored away from moisture. Our cotton cover does not seal in any moisture or chemicals, thus reducing the risk of damage from mildew or chemicals.
5. **Your dress is protected.** Our garment bag is made from 100% acid-free cotton, the first choice in preservation for centuries. Our bag has no zippers that could snag or rust. It also has a pocket in front to keep the cotton gloves that we include. (You should wear these gloves any time you would like to inspect your dress.) Another larger pocket is on the back of the garment bag. This pocket is for you to keep a photograph of your wedding and a written story of your special day.



Museum Method Preservation will keep your bridal gown in better condition than boxing or sealing it.

Boxed Bridal Gown Preservation

With Heritage Gown boxed preservation; your gown is carefully packed in our archival quality acid free and lignin free box. We pad all folds using acid free tissue or cotton muslin. If using tissue, we use buffered tissue for synthetic fabrics, and un-buffered tissue for silk fabrics.

Our acid-free buffered preservation box is not a cheap box with an acid free coating (as many companies offer) but is **acid-free, sulfur free and lignin free throughout** with pH of about 8.5 and 3% calcium carbonate buffer. TAPPI accelerated aging tests show our buffered box will prevent acid migration for up to five centuries! Specifications for our preservation box exceed those used by the United States National Archives and Records Administration.

Our un-buffered box, used with silk fabrics has a neutral pH of 7.0 which is safer for storing silk fabrics.

Manufactured by one of the most respected names in museum conservation, the boxes we use are also used in major museums, archives and historical societies worldwide. Some historic items which have been stored in these boxes are the baseball uniforms of Babe Ruth, military uniforms of Dwight Eisenhower, gowns of Dolly Madison, and the space suits of the original Mercury astronauts.

Archival Intercept

At Heritage Garment Preservation, we utilize the latest technology to keep your garments in the best condition including Archival Intercept® either at the bottom of the preservation box or lined in the box itself. The Intercept reacts with and neutralizes potentially harmful oxidizing gases which are present in normal atmospheric environments. Common pollutants such as chlorine and sulphur compounds and ozone are permanently bonded and neutralized by Archival Intercept.

For best results, we recommend replacing the Archival Intercept every 5 – 10 years. You may purchase it on our website or by phone at 866-268-4696.

Benefits of Heritage Boxed Bridal Gown Preservation

1. Dress can be inspected to ensure that it is cleaned to your satisfaction and periodically afterwards, as it is not permanently sealed.
2. Box is easily stored in closets or under beds.
3. Dress can be refolded periodically to reduce creasing risks



Wedding Gown Expert Discount

Congratulations, you are now a wedding dress cleaning and preservation expert! If you follow the advice in our guide you can feel confident that your treasured wedding gown will be well cared for and protected for years to come.

As a “thank you” for reading our guide, please enjoy a \$25 discount off the care of your gown. Just enter the code: **Guide25** at checkout on our website when you order your expert wedding dress cleaning and preservation.

Note: This cannot be combined with other discounts.



Preserve your wedding gown the right way.
Call us at **866-268-4696** or visit us at **www.heritagegown.com**

