

# Guidelines for Caring for and Preserving the AIDS Memorial Quilt

"The aging of textiles is a natural process which cannot be stopped. The rate of deterioration, however, depends on techniques used and conditions present in cleaning, display and storage."

Audie Hamilton, Textiles Home Care and Conservation

The NAMES Project Foundation has been entrusted with one of the twentieth century's most valuable treasures. As of 1999, the AIDS Memorial Quilt consists of fifty-three tons of fabric and other sewn objects. Panel makers have asked the NAMES Project to preserve the memories of their loved ones. The individual panels are created not only by traditional sewing methods but also painting, gluing, photo transferring, weaving, needlepoint, branding, and many other techniques. It would be difficult to preserve the Quilt, the world's largest folk art object, if it stayed in one location, but the Quilt must travel. Since its inception, Quilt sections (called Blocks) have been on display around the world in an effort to promote awareness and healing.

The NAMES Project is challenged with the two-fold task of displaying the Quilt, and preserving it for the future. From the moment a Quilt panel or other textile is finished, there are forces at work to destroy it. However, armed with knowledge a concerned AIDS Memorial Quilt volunteer can prevent or minimize damage.

## Storage

Member Chapters and Affiliates of the NAMES Project Foundation that regularly warehouse sections of The AIDS Memorial Quilt are required to store this Quilt in locations other than private residences. Quilt must be stored in a climate controlled commercial storage facility or in a secured location at either a community based organization or business selected by The Chapter or Affiliate.

## Light

The greatest assailant of all textiles including those that compose the Quilt is light. Indoor light and more so, sunlight, causes dyes and prints to fade but also causes deterioration in the structure of the fibers themselves. An examination of the Quilt blocks not displayed since the DC 96' display reveals slight discoloration from that three-day display.

Another by-product of light is heat generated from an incandescent light bulb or spotlight. Incandescent, track lighting, or halogen bulbs should be used at a fair distance (using the test described below) from the quilt section so that the heat can be dissipated before it reaches the fabric.

There are several ways to reduce damage caused by light. Even indirect sunlight can cause damage when the fabric is exposed for long, continuous periods of time.

### *Guidelines & Procedures*

- Keep light at a minimum at all times.
- Do not display a Quilt block in direct sunlight.
- Control direct lighting by closing window covering.
- Turn off artificial lights when not needed.
- When displaying a Quilt section that is highlighted by a spot or an incandescent bulb, it is good practice to hang the Quilt, light the bulb, then wait 10 to 15 minutes. At that point feel the area closest to the light. If it is warm the Quilt is too close to the light fixture.

## **Air Pollution**

Air pollution and airborne acids are a major enemy of textile. Most of our work with the Quilt takes place in urban settings; cities spew an inordinate amount of sulfur dioxide into the air. These acids can do irreparable harm to most of the fabrics in the Quilt.

Audie Hamilton notes "Acid damage is irreversible since it damages the molecular structure of fibers. In cellulous fibers (cotton) acid causes the molecules to break into smaller molecules, which leads to a weakening of the fiber. Protein molecules (wool and silk) reorganize themselves into a different state...during the later stages you may notice yellowing, brown spots, and material may become brittle from acid burn."

Wood and wood by-products such cardboard can transmit acid to the Quilt panels. The impact of acid content in the air can be reduced by storing and displaying the Quilt in controlled environments.

### *Guidelines & procedures*

- Quilt should no be stored in shipping boxes.
- Storage areas should have climate controls i.e. air-conditioning with filters.
- Storage shelves should be made of acid free materials.

## **Dirt**

Ordinary dirt is another Quilt foe. Particles of dirt and dust cannot be easily seen and are therefore easy to ignore. Dirt and dust particles can have a gritty character with jagged edges. These edges can act as miniature pieces of sandpaper, and over time, actually cut through the fibers.

### *Guidelines & Procedures*

- Quilt storage and display environments should be as dust free as possible.
- Do not display the Quilt in areas with blowing dust.
- Quilt storage shelves should have dust covers.
- Avoid brushing dust and dirt from panels. Gently shake or blow the dirt off.

## **Climate Conditions**

Currently, The NAMES Project Foundation coordinates hundreds of displays across the country. This presents a variety of challenges to the long-term conservation of the Quilt. The care needed to help reduce aging and deterioration to panels is quite different for each of these locales. The conditions of July in Houston vary drastically from the conditions of July in Portland or Minneapolis in January. The Quilt and the items that make it up will react to atmospheric changes. The sections need to be able to expand when there is moisture in the air and contract when the air is drier. "Ideally the temperature should range between from 55 to 57 degrees, with a relative humidity of 45 to 55 percent." (Karen Finch and Greta Putman, *The care and Preservation of Textile*).

Excessive moisture promotes the growth of mildew, molds, and rust on some items. Excessive heat will dry the fabric and cause it to loose some of its suppleness. Heat and moisture will also promote damage to the many photo-transfers that are sewn on the panels.

### *Guidelines and Procedures*

- Never hang a section of the Quilt so taut that it can not expand or react to the atmospheric conditions.
- Never hang a Quilt block in windy conditions.
- Use air conditioners and dehumidifiers to adjust the climates of Quilt storage rooms.
- When a section arrives in a shipment or returns from a display check for any signs of dampness or mildew.
- Silicone gel pellets can be used in storage areas to absorb excessive moisture.

## **Plastic Bags**

Using plastic bags jeopardizes the Quilt; textiles need air circulation. Moisture build-up will invite mildew and rot. Additionally, they may give off fumes that could interact with the different materials that make up the Quilt. A plastic bag could also be and has been confused in the past with trash bags.

### *Guidelines & Procedures*

- **NEVER** store Quilt in plastic bags or airtight containers.
- Do not transport Quilt sections in plastic bags.
- Use Duffel bags or shipping boxes with the Foundation's label on it.

Each panel of the AIDS Memorial Quilt has been given to us as a cherished memory. With these increased display demands placed upon the Quilt, it is imperative that we set and maintain strict standards of care for this priceless artifact. Preventing problems is much better than extensive treatment later. We all share the responsibility of preserving the Quilt and must take action to diminish the deterioration and neglect that will endanger the Quilt's existence.

**For more information on care of the AIDS Memorial Quilt please contact:**

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