

Caring for **textiles** and **clothing**

Museum collections often include clothing and textiles. These beautiful, fascinating objects are very vulnerable to damage and deterioration. But there are various straightforward and commonsense steps you can take to ensure their proper care.

Conditions and techniques

This guide outlines some basic conditions to consider and practical techniques to use when caring for textile and clothing items, for example:

- environmental factors affecting textiles, such as light, temperature, and attack by living things
- handling and storing
- appropriate actions to take for cleaning and repair
- techniques for display
- packing and transporting.

The focus of this guide is specifically on textile care. For a general guide to collection conservation, see *He Rauemi Resource Guide 5: 'Preventive Conservation'*, which suggests practical steps you can take to protect your collections overall.

If you're dealing with Māori textile taonga, see *He Rauemi Resource Guide 18: 'Caring for Māori Textiles'*. That issue focuses specifically on ways to care for kākahu, kete, piupiu, and whāriki. It also gives detailed instructions on how to make your own storage box – useful for all textile collections.

Both issues should be read as companions to this guide.

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Textiles and the *environment*

Textiles are fragile and vulnerable. If in doubt, ask a professional conservator.

Light, temperature, moisture, dust, and living things such as fungi, insects, and rodents can all damage textiles. Most environmental damage is irreversible, and professional conservation treatment can be expensive, so minimise harm by thinking ahead and providing the best possible conditions to store and display your textiles.

PREVENTION IS ALWAYS BETTER THAN CURE.

All light is damaging, not just UV light.

Light

Light is the greatest enemy of textiles. Damage from light accumulates over time and is irreversible. Light causes fading, bleaching, and colour changes, and can make materials dry and brittle. You may not notice deterioration at all until it's too late.

Fluorescent bulbs emit more UV than incandescent (regular) ones, and spotlights create hot spots.

Solutions

- See *He Rauemi Resource Guide 5: 'Preventive Conservation'* for general guidance on protecting your collections from light damage.
- Keep light levels low. A conservator or electrician can measure these levels using a lux meter; the recommended light level for textiles is 50 lux.
- When displaying textile objects, place lighting outside display cases, if possible, to avoid heat building up. Spotlights can cause problems by creating 'hot spots' and drying out textiles.
- Consider using lighting that turns on automatically as people approach an area and turns off when they move on. This means that textiles aren't exposed to light unless it's necessary.
- Store textiles in total darkness. Consider approach-activated lighting for the storage area too.
- In a museum, block off or screen windows. If you're displaying textiles in a historic house or building, filter the light during opening hours by pulling down roller blinds in a plain, fine, light-coloured cotton fabric. When the building is closed, cover the windows with dark curtains or blinds to keep out all light.



Example of embroidery damaged by light
Photograph courtesy of Valerie Carson

Damage from light happens gradually. You may not even notice until it's too late.

Temperature and moisture

Temperature and relative humidity affect each other, and they should be considered together to avoid fluctuations and extremes. Natural fibres such as cotton, linen, silk, wool, and plant fibres react to changes in temperature and humidity by absorbing or releasing moisture. This makes them expand and contract, and can eventually break the fibres.

Too much moisture in the air can allow moulds and mildew to grow on textiles.

Dyes may bleed. Too little moisture, or too much heat, dries out textiles and makes them brittle.

Solutions

- See *He Rauemi Resource Guide 5: 'Preventive Conservation'* for detailed information on measuring and controlling relative humidity and temperature.
- Display textiles at a constant temperature of 18-20°C and 50-55% relative humidity. For storage, 12-18°C and 50-55% relative humidity is ideal.

Example of mould stains on a sample
Photograph courtesy of Valerie Carson

- Keep the temperature stable. Many museums switch off their heating at night, and this fluctuation in temperature speeds up the deterioration of textiles.

When considering temperature and relative humidity, remember you need to protect your precious collection items, not just keep museum staff comfortable.

Dust

Dust can physically damage fibres by causing cuts and abrasions. It also obscures a textile's appearance.

Solutions

- Old buildings are naturally dusty and the movement of people creates dust. As a result, you need to dust and vacuum regularly.
- Make sure doors and windows fit well.
- Textiles on open display can act as a filter and retain dirt and dust. Display items in cases or within glazed frames.
- However, don't make a display case airtight – this may cause problems with humidity. Allow filtered air to move in and out by placing a fine mesh filter over a small opening in the case top, or velvet ribbon around the case door.

Attack by insects, rodents, and microbes

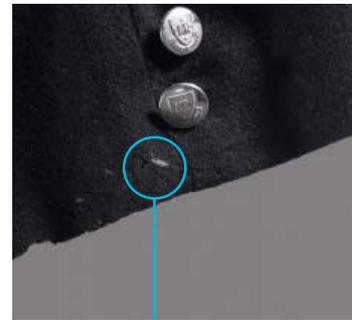
Spores of mould and mildew are always present in the air. In moist conditions, these can grow on textiles and cause staining and damage.

Mice, rats, borer, and carpet beetles are pests that museums can do without. Moths and carpet beetles favour wool and fur, but can attack other fibres, even synthetics. Rats and mice can also be very destructive.

Solutions

- Keep storage and display areas scrupulously clean and tidy.
- Buildings with a controlled environment will reduce insect infestation, as the building must be sealed to maintain a stable environment. As a result, insects are less likely to come in through open windows and doors.
- Pests can also arrive with collections and objects coming into the building. See *He Rauemi Resource Guide 5: 'Preventive Conservation'*, page 9, for advice on dealing with this.

If in doubt, get advice from a professional conservator. See page 16 for the New Zealand Professional Conservators Group's contact details.



A moth case on a jacket sleeve
Photograph courtesy of Valerie Carson

Housekeeping matters

Good housekeeping is vital for preserving textiles and minimising the likelihood of pests, so make sure you have a high standard of general housekeeping. Clean, well-stored textiles are less vulnerable to deterioration. Regularly inspect, vacuum, and dust your display and storage areas. Most pests like dark, undisturbed places to feed and reproduce. Clean, well stored textiles are less vulnerable.

Remember that prevention is better than cure. Keep storage, display and work areas clean, tidy and dust-free, and make sure food is never eaten or kept in these areas.

Apply good housekeeping principles.

Handling

textiles

Handling can cause wear and tear of textiles. Aim to handle them as little as possible. Protect them from skin contact.

Solutions

- Wear clean cotton gloves or disposable gloves to protect textiles from grease, dirt, perspiration, and acid on your hands.
- Before you move an item, think ahead. Know where you're going to put it down.
- How large or heavy is the item? Make sure you have enough people to carry it. If you're taking it through doors, you may want to open these ahead of time.
- Support objects carefully and gently so their weight is evenly distributed.
- A table on wheels, a trolley, tray, or box should be available for moving textiles.
- Good documentation and labelling, including photos and measurements, will also minimise the need for handling.

Wear disposable or clean white cotton gloves when handling textiles.

Labelling and documentation

Don't use ball point or other pens near textiles.

Good labelling and documentation means you can minimise handling, as it's easier to find items.

- Have detailed documentation of the textile's fabric type, colour, age, provenance, dimensions, and condition. Include photos and measurements.
- Keep records of where the item is stored; when it's on and off display; any loans, and its condition on return; and dates of housekeeping or conservation treatments.
- Label each item with an accession number. Write the number with a Sanford Rub-a-Dub laundry-marking pen on cotton tape or an acid-free card swing label. (Do this before attaching the label to the item!) Using cotton thread and a medium or fine needle, stitch the label on with a minimum number of stitches. Don't take stitches through to the item's outer surface.
- Put labels in a consistent position, so it's easy to find them. Make sure they won't show if the textile is on display.
- Never use pins or adhesive tape, and never write the number directly on the textile.



Example of a correctly labelled textile

Storage

Choosing a suitable storage area

Textile storage areas should be clean, dark, and well ventilated. Don't store textiles on the floor or next to outside walls, as the floor may be vulnerable to flooding and outside walls fluctuate more in temperature. Ask yourself how easy it is to place the items and remove them from their storage area. Remember you want to minimise handling.

Storing textiles in a box or a drawer creates a smaller micro-environment that is easier to control. Storing items on open shelving means the whole room is the environment, which is a much larger area to control.



Textiles well stored in a drawer

Never store food or drink near textiles or textile storage areas.

Tips for storing textiles

- Don't store textiles in plastic. This can trap moisture and encourage fungi. In the event of a fire, the intense heat may melt the plastic and fuse it to the textile.
- Label boxes and drawers accurately - textiles can then be found easily and you minimise handling.

Storage requirements for flat and three-dimensional textiles

Flat textiles

Flat textiles can include wall hangings, carpets, curtains, household linen, bed covers, flags, tapa, cloaks, embroidery, lace, and some costume.

Store them flat where possible. If you don't have enough space, roll flat textiles over a covered tube and suspend the tube. If a textile is too large to roll, you can fold it. However this should be the last option you consider.

Storing textiles flat

Store textiles flat in acid-free boxes or in drawer units. These may be metal or wooden. If wooden, make sure the wood is sealed with three thorough coats of Watyl Estapol Acrylic. Line and interleave the textiles with acid-free card, acid-free tissue, well-washed unbleached calico, or Tyvek.

See page 7 of *He Rauemi Resource Guide 18: 'Caring for Māori Textiles'* for instructions on making an acid-free box for storage. You can also buy various sizes custom-made from Conservation Supplies.

Rolling flat textiles

1. Use cardboard tubes covered with acid-free tissue or Tyvek.
2. The greater the tube's diameter, the less times the textile has to go around it. Make sure the tube is longer than the item being rolled.
3. Pad large tubes with Dacron wadding covered with washed unbleached calico. For small textiles, you don't usually need wadding.
4. Sandwich the textile **face down between two layers of washed unbleached calico or acid-free tissue**, then roll it carefully around the tube, keeping it smooth and straight.
5. Always roll textiles face down. Decoration such as embroidery, painting, or decorative weaving is less likely to fracture with a convex curve.
6. Cover the roll with a layer of washed, unbleached calico or Tyvek, then tie the whole roll with at least three Tyvek strips 40-50 mm wide. Tie them firmly in a bow - but make sure there are no indentations.
7. Suspend or support the roll so there's no pressure on the textile.

Folding flat textiles

- Only fold textiles if there's not enough space to store them flat or rolled.
- Pad folds generously with crumpled acid-free tissue or Tyvek- or calico-covered sausage shapes of Dacron wadding. This will stop sharp creases forming, which in time wear and fracture.
- Refold at least once a year.

Large textiles require two or more people to roll them.





Three-dimensional textiles

These can include:

- most items of clothing
- costume accessories, e.g., handbags, hats, shoes
- dolls
- basketry
- upholstered furniture.

When storing three-dimensional textiles, avoid hard creases or too many folds. Make sure they have full padding and support.

Storing different types of three-dimensional item

Hats, shoes, bags, and basketry

Pack these loosely with tissue inside or insert covered Dacron wadding so they hold their original shape.

Fans

Keep fans closed. Wrap in acid-free tissue.

Umbrellas and parasols

Keep these partially open. Put a roll of tissue around the handle, just inside the cover.

Dolls

Place small pieces of bunched tissue up dolls' skirts. Dolls with moving eyes ('Sleeping dolls') should be stored face down on a padded surface.



A beaded dress with damage to the shoulder area caused by wire hanger



Upholstered furniture

Cover furniture with cotton or Tyvek dust covers.

Costumes

- Do up all buttons, hooks and eyes, and zips.
- Hang the costume on a padded hanger (see *'Hanging costumes'* below) or lay flat.
- When storing dresses in acid-free boxes, put the skirt in first, front down, and fold the bodice back over the skirt. Pad folds well and also pad the bodice and sleeves.
- Put only one dress in a box.

Only hang costumes that are strong enough. Damaged, delicate, bias cut, knitted, and beaded garments should be laid flat. You can store beaded costumes safely using a special duvet you make yourself. See instructions on page 10.

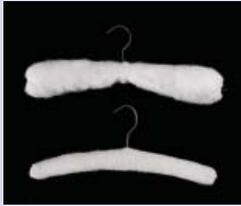
Hanging costumes

- Wire and wooden hangers that aren't padded can cause a great deal of damage to the neck and shoulder of garments. See page 9 for two types of hanger you can make yourself.
- When hanging dresses, either one or two piece, carefully hand stitch at least four pairs of cotton tape lengths to the waistband or waist darts. Tie each pair in a bow on the hanger shoulder, slightly shorter than the waist-to-shoulder measurement, so they take the strain off the skirt.
- Always cover the garments with individual front-opening covers of Tyvek or well-washed calico.



Boxed storage of a dress

Making garment hangers



Simple padded hanger

- Use a wooden (not wire) hanger, with a long hook to allow for high collars.
- Place three layers of Dacron wadding over each shoulder. Stitch these together under the hanger, and around where the hook emerges.
- Cover the wadding with calico or Tyvek to keep all the layers together.

Te Papa hanger

Materials

8mm aluminium rod
 Custom-made 'Te Papa hanger' aluminium hooks from Ullrich Aluminium
 50mm diameter polyethylene foam rod
 See page 15 for supplier contact details.

Tools

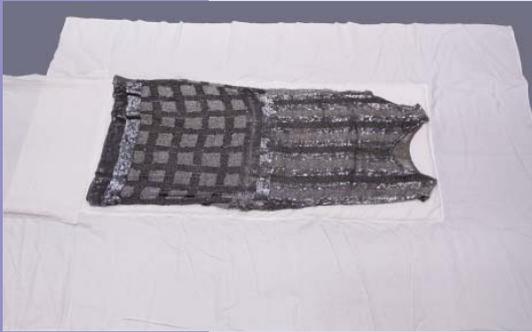
Hacksaw
 Fine grain metal sandpaper
 Long auger drill bit (6mm) and power drill
 Allen key (about 3.5mm) for tightening grub screw
 Vice for holding and bending rods
 Craft knife, ruler, etc.



Instructions

- 1 Cut a piece of aluminium rod 400mm long.*
- 2 Sand the ends and any rough edges.
- 3 Mark the centre of the rod. Insert into the hook at this point, and tighten its grub screw using the Allen key.
- 4 Clamp the hanger in a vice. Bend the rod to the angle needed to fit the garment's shoulder line.
- 5 Cut two pieces of foam rod 250mm long.
- 6 On the end of the foam rod, mark the centre of its diameter.
- 7 Clamp the foam rod in the vice, being careful not to distort the shape. You can do this by sliding the rod inside a piece of clean 50mm PVC drainpipe before putting it into the vice.
- 8 Drill through the foam rod lengthwise from the centre mark, to a depth of 200mm. You can do this by putting a piece of masking tape 200mm along your drill bit. Then drill at low speed, making sure you keep the drill centred, until the tape reaches the end of the foam rod.
- 9 Cut one end of each foam rod at an angle, so it will butt against the other foam rod at the hanger's centre. The foam should cover the base of the hook where the aluminium rod goes through. Also carve out the end of the drilled hole, to fit the hook's base.
- 10 Thread the foam rod onto the hanger.
- 11 Wipe down the hanger before use to remove any aluminium filings.
- 12 Make sure the garment doesn't touch the aluminium rod or hook. You can place a small offcut of foam rod over the shank of the hook to stop collars touching the aluminium.

* 400mm is the most commonly used aluminium rod length. Some larger garments may need 450 or 500mm lengths, or even longer for garments with wide necklines. Remember to adjust the foam rod length too, in these cases.



Making a beaded-dress duvet

A beaded-dress duvet is an excellent way to store and transport beaded garments. It prevents the weight of the beads from stressing the ground fabric.

To make the duvet:

- Cut a length of well-washed unbleached calico, about 2080 x 1190mm. Machine hem the raw edges.
- Cut a piece of Dacron wadding, about 1300 x 600mm. Place in centre of calico.
- Cut two further lengths of calico, each 1330 x 600mm.
- Place one of these pieces on top of the Dacron wadding. Machine stitch in place along all four sides.
- Hem the second piece and lay it over the padded section. Stitch in place along one short edge only, to create the long flap.
- Carefully place the beaded garment on the padded section. Cover with the long flap.
- Fold the long sides over the centre and then the short ends. The garment is now completely covered and supported.
- Roll up the duvet with the garment enclosed. Tie it with cotton tape or Tyvek strips, to secure.

Treatment

Cleaning

One of the most commonly asked questions about textiles is how to clean them. Wet cleaning or washing can have irreversible results. They should never be undertaken lightly or by an untrained person. Always consult a professional conservator. See page 16 for the New Zealand Professional Conservators Group's contact details.

A gentle vacuum to remove dust is the easiest and safest form of cleaning in untrained hands. Place a piece of monofilament screening over the textile or use nylon net over the short end of the hose (see images below), and use the lowest suction setting to carefully vacuum the item. This will avoid sucking up the textile. Don't do this on very fragile or fractured garments!

Treatment for conservation

If you consider a textile needs repairing, consult a professional conservator first.

Textile conservation is about stabilising and supporting textiles, with minimum intervention and no re-weaving or re-embroidering. The technique of darning and using lots of little stitches to hold holes and fractures together is not used by a textile conservator. Frail textiles are supported by mounting over a specially dyed similar fabric, so holes or worn areas aren't immediately obvious.

Never use ...

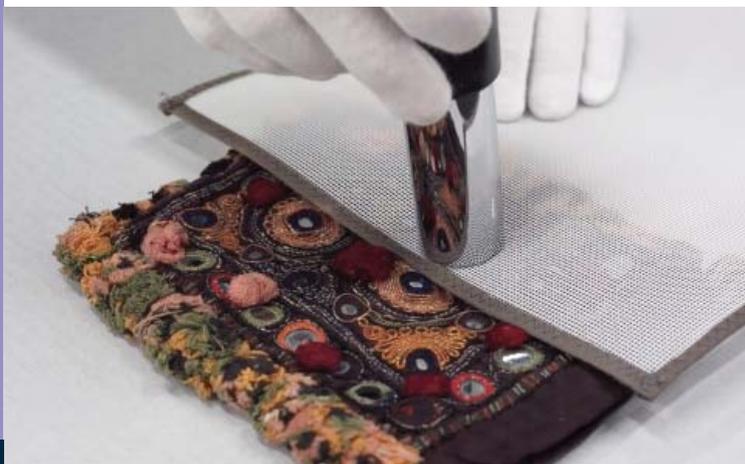
Never use glue, plastic putty (e.g. Blu-tak™), adhesive tape, pins, or staples to repair textiles, even temporarily.



'Misguided enthusiasm', an example of wet-cleaning by an untrained person. The dyes were unstable and bled when wet.

Alteration is unethical.

Correct vacuuming procedures



Displaying YOUR textiles

Only display textiles that are in good condition, preferably in cases or glazed frames to protect them. The display period recommended should be six months followed by an 18-month rest.

If you need a picture framer, choose one who uses conservation methods.

When textiles are being displayed in the open or for a long period (e.g., wall hangings), check them regularly for deterioration, insects, and dust. Remove dust by vacuuming, front and back, through a screen (see page 11).

How to hang textiles

Velcro method

The Velcro method is by far the best for hanging wall hangings and large textiles. It supports the textile by distributing weight evenly along the top edge, making the object easy to install and remove. Many textiles don't have straight edges, and this method allows you to hang the textile more or less straight and adjust its hang. In an emergency, the textile can be easily removed by carefully pulling it away.

1. Textiles to be hung should have a loose lining of washed calico, which will protect them from the wall and stop dust settling on the textile's back.
2. Machine stitch both long edges of a Velcro loop strip along the top edge of the lining fabric.
3. Carefully hand stitch the lining to the reverse top edge of the textile. Take the stitches through the lining and the textile on either side of the Velcro strip. (It is very difficult to hand sew through Velcro.)
4. Use correct stitching tension, as too tight a stitch may cut fibres, and too loose won't support the textile adequately.
5. Staple the Velcro hook strip to a wooden batten and fix to the wall.
6. Hang the textile by pressing the Velcro loop strip to the hook strip.



Hanging textiles using the Velcro method

Trapeze or rod method

For textiles that are too long to display by the Velcro method or which aren't suitable for stitching (e.g., tapa), either:

- roll one end round and round a covered tube, with the required amount of textile hanging down; or
- hang the textile over a padded roller in a trapeze fashion (like a towel over a rail), counter-balanced by its own weight.

Displaying three-dimensional textiles

Display small objects like hats, shoes, or bags with their storage-padding still in place.

Dummies

Most costumes are best displayed on a tailor's dummy or a correct-sized mannequin. The purpose of the dummy is to fully support the garment without imposing strain on it. Tie the waist tapes used for storage (see page 8) on the shoulders.

Excellent dummies and mannequins are available for sale. See the list of suppliers, page 15.

It is difficult to adapt a 20th- or 21st-century shop mannequin to fit and look correct aesthetically for an 18th- or 19th-century garment. You can make a simple, inexpensive dummy by following the instructions in Janet Arnold's *A Handbook of Costume* (page 65) or Jennifer Quérée's article in the *Art Galleries and Museums Association of New Zealand Journal* Vol 8 (November 1977).

Wash all support or lining fabric well to remove the dressing.

Example of a tailor's dummy



Example of how an 1830s dress doesn't look aesthetically correct on a 1930s shop mannequin



Packing and transport

Pack textiles carefully when transporting them. They should arrive at their destination in the same condition they left you.

- Think carefully about packing textiles. Pack frail and oddly shaped pieces so they can be taken straight from the packing case and put into the display case, minimising the need for handling.
- Make sure the textile is comfortable and well supported. Include fittings and mounts, which will make things easier for the exhibition team at the other end.
- If possible, transport textiles in a custom-made wooden crate that is insulated against weather and poor handling, and fitted inside with padded supports.
- When you pack a textile to be transported, apply all the techniques you'd use when storing it. Pack it out with lots of bunched acid-free tissue and Dacron wadding.

Packed kete ready for transport

Photograph courtesy of Valerie Carson



Emergencies

See the *He Rauemi Resource Guide 5: 'Preventive Conservation'* for general guidance on protecting your collections in the case of an emergency.

If a coloured textile gets wet, its dye may run. Do not dry it but keep the wet textile in a sealed plastic bag until you can get advice from a professional conservator. Don't discard it - many textiles can be saved.

Further training

Attend a workshop in caring for textiles for more in-depth information on the subjects covered in this guide. Contact National Services Te Paerangi to find out about training opportunities.

Key points in textile care

- Prevention is better than cure.
- Handle textiles as little as possible.
- Apply good housekeeping principles.
- Keep accurate documentation.
- Alteration is unethical.

Suppliers of materials

General supplies for conservation treatment and packaging

Conservation Supplies, 81 Great North Rd, Warkworth, Auckland, ph (09) 425 7380, email jamorrison@xtra.co.nz. Accepts small orders.

General supplies for storage and packaging

Packaging House, 21 Saleyards Road, Otahuhu, Auckland, with branches throughout New Zealand. www.packaginghouse.co.nz. Good for bulk orders.

Acid-free tissue and acid-free card

Port Nicholson Packaging, PO Box 38 133, Wellington, ph (04) 568 5018, email sales@pnp.co.nz.

Aluminium rod and custom-made hooks

Ullrich Aluminium Company, Private Bag, Petone, ph (04) 568 8184. For custom-made hooks for Te Papa hangers, contact the Production Manager.

Dacron wadding

Charles Parson NZ Ltd, 29 Union St, Auckland, ph (09) 379 9503; 1 Lancaster St, Christchurch, ph (03) 366 1669; 55 Sydney St, Petone, Wellington, ph (04) 568 5822. Sells in bulk - minimum 50m roll. For smaller quantities, try fabric and craft shops.

Ethafoam and polyethylene foam rod

Dunlop Flexible Foams, PO Box 58 136, Greenmount, Auckland, ph (09) 274 5789.

Tailors' dummies and mannequins

Purfex, 15-17 Fremlin Pl, PO Box 8664, Auckland, ph (09) 520 6500, email sales@purfex.com, website www.purfex.com.

Tubes

Sonoco NZ, ph (09) 836 3009

Fabric shops

Carpet and linoleum stores

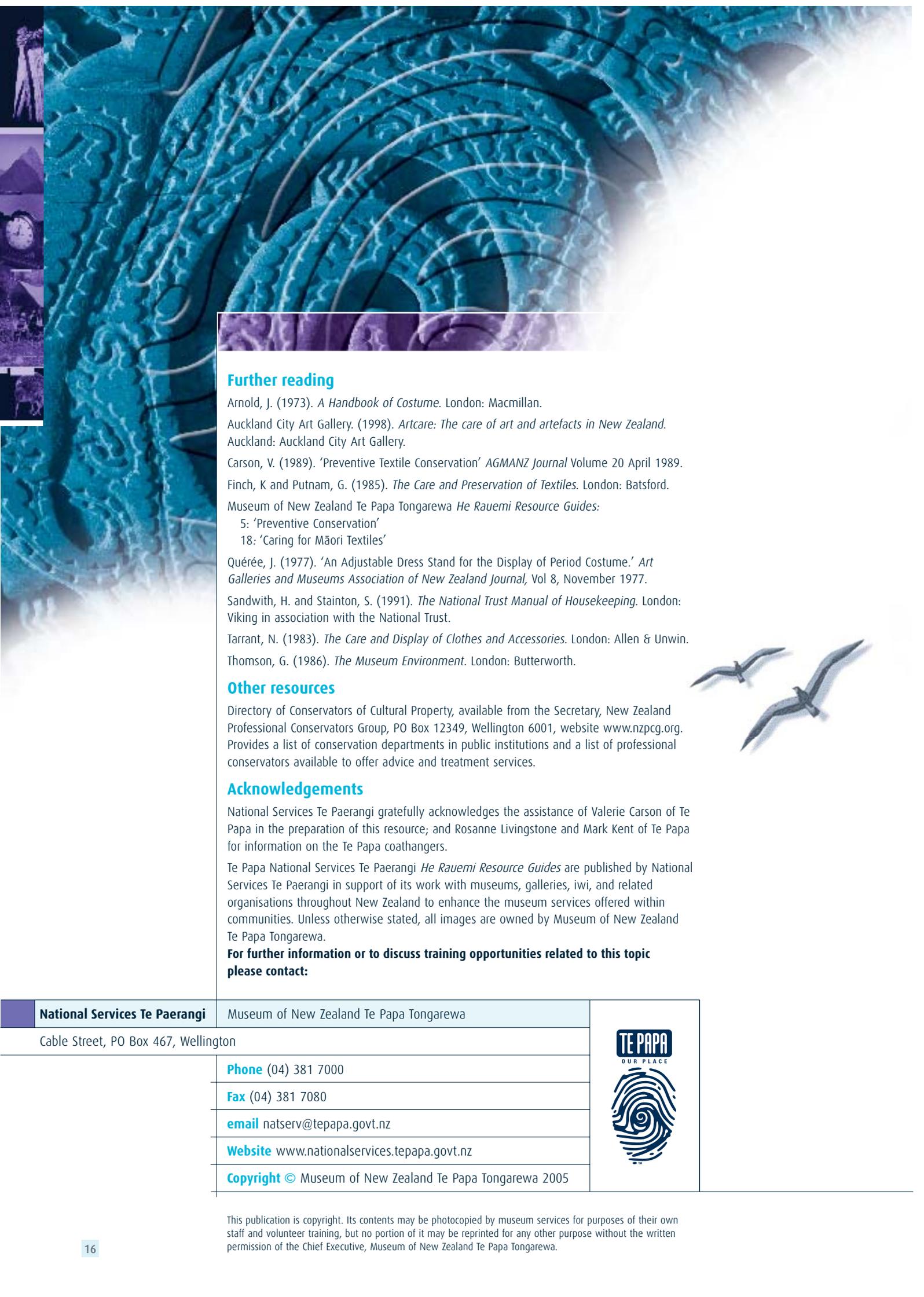
For small tubes, try Gladwrap tubes, etc.

Tyvek

Fabri-cell International Ltd, PO Box 97 047, Manukau City, ph (09) 526 6807.

Gloves

White cotton gloves: Takapuna Distributors Ltd, Box 33 784, Takapuna, Auckland, ph 09 441 3413, email tdl@clear.net.nz, or Kirkcaldie & Stains, PO Box 1494, Wellington. Disposable gloves: available from pharmacies and supermarkets.



Further reading

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Auckland City Art Gallery. (1998). *Artcare: The care of art and artefacts in New Zealand*. Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery.

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Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa *He Rauemi Resource Guides*:
 5: 'Preventive Conservation'
 18: 'Caring for Māori Textiles'

Quérée, J. (1977). 'An Adjustable Dress Stand for the Display of Period Costume.' *Art Galleries and Museums Association of New Zealand Journal*, Vol 8, November 1977.

Sandwith, H. and Stainton, S. (1991). *The National Trust Manual of Housekeeping*. London: Viking in association with the National Trust.

Tarrant, N. (1983). *The Care and Display of Clothes and Accessories*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Thomson, G. (1986). *The Museum Environment*. London: Butterworth.



Other resources

Directory of Conservators of Cultural Property, available from the Secretary, New Zealand Professional Conservators Group, PO Box 12349, Wellington 6001, website www.nzpcg.org. Provides a list of conservation departments in public institutions and a list of professional conservators available to offer advice and treatment services.

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For further information or to discuss training opportunities related to this topic please contact:

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