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Vintage Tablecloth Lovers Club

Need to Clean Some Vintage Linens?

To start, we must share this disclaimer:

Under no circumstances does the club take responsibility for any negative effects due to using any of these methods to clean your vintage linens. These general guidelines are shared with you as processes to try. They are methods that club members have used and generally agree work well.

First you must decide “What is good enough for you?” and second you must gather your patience as the processes do take time. It is good to take a before picture of your cloth. You will be better able to judge when you are at the “good enough” point. □

Specifics: Determine the fiber content of your cloth. Considerations in particular are the following.

1. Is it 100% cotton or linen?
2. Is it all or part silk, rayon or other early synthetic fiber?
3. Is it all or part polyester or acrylic?

For all types of fibers soaking is the key. A long soak in room temperature water in a vessel (a five-gallon plastic bucket works well) big enough to allow the cloth to “slosh around” is the place to start. Don't use a cleaning agent at this point. You will be amazed at how much dust and storage residue will come out. As the water darkens, pour it off and add clean water. Repeat until the water stays pretty clear. Watch to see if there is any fading color or disintegration of fabric. If there is stop, squeeze the fabric to remove as much water as possible and let it dry flat.

If you are dealing with silk, fine lace, needlework, or anything delicate be sure to line the vessel with an old sheet or muslin first and use the corners to lift the delicate fabric from the water. Do not kneed, twist or push the tablecloth too hard when removing the excess water from the tablecloth. This will further damage and rip any areas where the fabric is thin. Make sure the tablecloth is free from significant wear holes that may be made larger by vigorous washing.

Squeeze the cloth as dry as you can and check for stains. These will be old stains and spot removers will probably not work like they do on new stains. We believe in “Take the least risk first”. While there are many “formulas” available on line, easily available “over the counter” options include non-chlorine bleach products and also Oxy-free products. We would likely start with a chlorine and oxy free product such as BIZ first. Dissolve any powdered agents in hot water first and then add water so

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that it is just warm. Soak the cloth for a few hours or even overnight and then drain and rinse. Repeating the process one or more times often works well.

If you want to continue to remove tougher stains you can move to the next level of risk, which is using an Oxy product--BUT only if your cloth is 100% cotton or linen. Understand you may risk some color loss. Using Oxy products on the more delicate fibers like rayon or any cloths that have the metallic dyes will almost surely result in large holes making the cloth un-usable and you heart sick. Most if not all members have been there and it is not fun!

If you have the option, before using the Oxy products, we recommend crofting. While hanging a cloth in the sun to dry (usually with the brighter side away from the sun) works well, we have found that crofting is even better. This involves laying the wet cloth on the grass (print side down is best) and letting it dry there. There is a natural bleaching process that will remove those pesky yellow stains (sometimes called ghost stains) and even some of the more stubborn specific stains. This works on rayon as well; be patient and re-wet the cloths as necessary.

Using liquid chlorine bleach: This is high risk. First check for color fastness by mixing 1 tablespoon of bleach with 1/4 cup of water. Use an eyedropper to put a drop of this solution on a hidden seam in the tablecloth. Let it stand two minutes, then blot dry. If there is no color change, it is probably safe to use the product. Use in the recommended amounts and rinse thoroughly. If the stain does not come out within 15 minutes of bleaching, it cannot be removed by this method and any further exposure to bleach will weaken the fabric and remove the color. We do not recommend this for general stain removal. Another option is to use the bleach pens on the white areas of the cloth. Just remember the area must be white, not almond. The bleach pens will leave a truly white spot if the background is an almond color.

If your cloth is all or partly polyester or acrylic, the newer stain removers may be your best bet. Old stains on these fibers are often permanent.

OUT DARN SPOT!

These guidelines are for those stains commonly found on older tablecloths. For newer stains follow your usual stain removal process. Always check for colorfastness and for the age of the tablecloth before using any type of bleach.

Yellowing/Graying

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If it is an old stain, soak the tablecloth in a solution of water with one half of a scoop of powered non-chlorine bleach. Watch carefully. Look for signs that the dye is colorfast. Soak for at least 4 hours, (more if necessary). Line dry in the sun. Repeat the process if still yellow.

Dye Stains/Dye Transfer

Soak the entire tablecloth in a diluted solution of powered non-chlorine bleach. If the stain remains and the tablecloth is colorfast, soak the entire tablecloth in a dilute solution of liquid chlorine bleach and water. Again, test for colorfastness first and watch carefully. Not recommended for tablecloths that were made prior to 1935.

Mildew

Mildew is a growing organism that must have warmth, darkness, and moisture to survive. Mildew actually eats cotton and linen fibers and can also attack manufactured fibers, causing permanent damage and a weakening of fibers and fabrics. To treat mildew, first carefully brush or shake off mildewed area. Mildew is very difficult to remove and will damage the value of a vintage tablecloth. Pre-treat the stains by rubbing the areas with a heavy-duty liquid detergent. Then launder in the hottest water safe for the fabric, using bleach that is safe for that fabric. Let the item dry in the sun. Badly mildewed fabric may be damaged beyond repair.

Rust

Removing rust stains can be difficult. These stains cannot be removed with normal laundering. Do not use chlorine bleach, as chlorine bleach will make the stains permanent. Small stains may be removed with a few drops of a commercial rust remover, or by repeated applications of lemon juice and salt on the stain. Do not let the fabric dry between applications. If safe for the specific fabric, try this old home remedy: boil fabric in a solution of 4 teaspoons of cream of tartar per pint of water. Rinse thoroughly. Rust removers that contain hydrofluoric acid are extremely toxic, can burn the skin, and will damage the porcelain finish on appliances and sinks. Use as a last resort. Often these will work but watch your cloths carefully and rinse immediately.

Scorch/Burn Marks

Scorching permanently damages the fabric. The heat burns and weakens the fibers, and can also melt manufactured fibers, such as polyester. If the damage is slight you might be able to improve the look. Brush the area to remove any charring. If the tablecloth is washable, rub liquid detergent into the scorched area. Launder. If the stain remains, bleach with an all-fabric non-chlorine bleach. In past generations, these holes were often patched with iron on patching. This is still an option particularly if you watch neighborhood sales for the old patching material. This typically came in colors similar to your cloths and is usually a lighter weight.

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Smoke/Odors

Some of the older tablecloths that have been stored for many years have that "old smell" and yellowing. If the tablecloth is not seriously frayed or damaged in any other way, soak the tablecloth in a solution that is safe for the fiber. Watch carefully for any signs of dyes fading. Remove immediately if you see a green or red tinged water. Rinse in cold water. Soak overnight, rinse, and place outside out all day in the sun. Repeat if necessary, but it should work in one treatment.