

How Should I Clean My Lace?



First answer these questions:

What type of fiber is it made of? Has it ever been cleaned before? Does it have colored threads, yarns or decorations? Does it have a heavy starching? How valuable is it? Why do I want to clean it? What is it attached to? Is it embellished with beads, pearls, ribbon, paint?

*Fiber content: Cotton or linen laces may be carefully hand washed. Silk may be dry cleaned or washed. Rayon and metallic should be left alone.

*If it has been washed or cleaned in the past, it is safe to do it again. If not, know that you are creating irreversible changes in the item by washing it. If that is okay – proceed.

* All colors need to be individually tested for color fastness before washing.

*Washing will reinvigorate the starch and you may end up with a stiffer piece.

* A really valuable piece should go to a textile conservator or dry cleaner that specializes in valuable pieces.

*Stains may not entirely disappear, often they are lighter and less noticeable, but the chemicals and effort needed to take some stains out entirely will damage the lace. Know when to stop. The stain is a part of the lace's history.

* Lace should be washed alone, remove it from a garment before washing.

*Embellishments seldom wash well. Consider removing them, or leaving the pieces as is.

If you decide to wash or “wet clean” as conservators call it:

Fill a tub to about 5 inches with room temperature water (if you have well water, be sure to have it tested for iron and manganese before you use it to wash textiles). You should use distilled or reverse osmosis filtered water for valuable laces. The tub should be clean and rust free. A kitchen sink, laundry tub, bathtub, or rectangular plastic storage bin will all work. I like to use a series of rectangular plastic storage bins on my back porch. Make sure your water source is clean, too (if you are using a garden hose to fill your tubs, clean the hose, too).

Only clean one or two pieces of lace at a time. It should be able to lie flat or almost flat in your tub. Lay the lace on the top of the water and let it get wet. A very dirty piece will start to color the water yellow or brown fairly quickly. Let it soak for about 20 minutes. Let the water out of the tub and refill with clear water. Continue to rinse and soak until the water in the tub stays clear.

If you have particulate soil (little bits of raised dirt on the surface), you may very gently scrape them with a fingernail to loosen. Often particulates easily loosen in water and just need a bit of help to float them away. Make sure the bits go out with the water and don't settle back on the lace.

Stains are tricky. If you don't know what the stain is and if it has been on the lace a long time, it will be a challenge to remove. The plain water rinses will lighten many stains and they become even lighter when dry. If you have heavy stains, you may try detergent, bleach and/or a solvent. Start with detergent: use a laundry detergent with no perfumes, dyes or optical brighteners (these are often called "free and clear" or "green") or Orvus® paste (available at The Lace Museum). Place a teaspoon of detergent or Orvus® per gallon of water in your tub. Add lace, agitate gently with an up and down motion of your hands (wear rubber gloves). Soak and agitate for 10 – 15 minutes. Rinse at least 3 times. You may also add an all-fabric bleach to one of the rinses but you must also rinse 3 times after the bleach. If you know what the stain is: isolate the spot from the rest of the lace (a small spot fits on top of an upside down glass) and dab the spot with a known solvent gently with a cotton swab (i.e. dilute hydrogen peroxide for rust stains). **DO NOT** let the solvent sit on the fabric, rinse immediately! But know that the solvent may dissolve the fabric along with the stain and you may have a hole instead of a spot.

Lay a plastic drop cloth on a surface large enough to hold the lace flat. Lay a layer of absorbent material – white towels and old cotton mattress pads are ideal. Carefully remove the lace from your wash-tub – supporting it completely (cotton is very weak when wet). Lay the lace out and smooth out any wrinkles. Cover with a white sheet or washed piece of muslin fabric, pressing down to make sure the fabric is in contact with the lace. A fan in the room will help the drying process, but do not direct it at the lace. After cleaning, be sure to store your lace properly!

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