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Points to Remember: Stitching for Conservation

Hand stitching is a major conservation technique. Instances in which hand sewing is used in conservation include: mending mend seams, rips or tears; attaching linings or backings; securing loose threads to a ground fabric; securing damaged areas to a support fabric; mounting flat textiles for display.

Unlike ornamental needlework such as embroidery, the hand stitches used for conservation are not intended to be “pretty”. In conservation, the goal is to protect and stabilize the artifact, not necessarily to improve its appearance—any visual improvements are a bonus! The type of textile, its condition, and the kind of damage you are trying to stabilize determines the type of stitch used. Machine sewing should only be used if stabilizing a garment that was originally constructed by machine, and, in many cases, particular problems on machine sewn garments have to be stabilized by hand.

Materials: Generally, conservators use the finest needle possible so that it will slip through the weave, not pierce the fiber. Regular hand sewing needles are #10 “sharps.” For conservation you should use a #11, #12, or a “beading” needle. These can usually be found at quilt shops or at one of the large sewing stores like Joann’s or Hancock Fabrics. Using anything bigger than a size #12 when repairing lace or fine batiste baby’s clothes will feel like you are sewing with a nail! Fine specialized needles can also be found through lace making supply houses. (See conservation supply list)

The thread should match the project. Generally speaking cotton is the fiber of choice as it is neither too strong nor too weak for most fibers. It also expands and contracts in keeping with the fibers in the textile. Avoid silk thread, as it is so very strong that it may cut through fragile fibers. If a very strong, but an invisible thread is required, you can unravel a piece of polyester “Stabletex” and use it to sew with. Like needles, thread comes in a range of thicknesses. Regular sewing thread is #50, heirloom sewing thread is #80, which is a very useful size for most general conservation work, and finer #100 or #120 threads are available through the lace supply houses. We also use cotton embroidery floss as it is strong, readily available, and comes in a wide range of colors. Each skein of floss is actually made of 6 strands twisted together. We generally use one strand, which has been “split” from the skein.

Stitches: The stitches illustrated in *The Directory of Hand Stitches Used In Textile Conservation*, published in 1993 by the Textile Conservation Group, a sub-group of the American Institute of Conservators (AIC) is your best source for conservation specific sewing techniques. The original publication illustrates 38 different stitch techniques and may be available through AIC. However, all the stitches used for conservation come from the general vocabulary of stitches used in embroidery and needlework. There are many general stitch guides available, including mid-20th century household mending guides that frequently have good instructions and graphs of how to do various stitches.

Using Volunteer Stitchers: While the actual hand sewing stitches may be quite simple, the skills needed to use them effectively take years to develop. This is especially true when stabilizing 3-dimensional garments that are meant to drape on the body—it is much easier to stabilize most flat textiles, like quilts and samplers, than an 1880s bustle dress with swags, ruffles and beaded trim. Sewing stabilization for clothing requires knowledge of clothing construction and how different fabrics and trims react to being sewn that can only be gained by experience. Sewing conservation is very time-consuming, and it can be very expensive if the services of professional conservators are used, so employing the skills of volunteers with sewing experience is an excellent option for institutions with limited budgets and big projects.

Of course, the collection's curator or conservator needs to determine the skill level of potential volunteers and provide them with supervision and direction. We have had very positive experiences working with volunteers both on complicated conservation projects and exhibit mounting projects that require fewer skills. The important thing to do is to tailor the volunteer projects to the skills of the volunteers and to the amount of time they have available. It is best to start a new volunteer off with a simple project that won't take much time, so that you can assess her skills and she can have a feeling of accomplishment. When working with volunteers, it is important always to keep in mind that they are *volunteering* and will not continue to do so if the experience is not a positive one.