

Textile Care and Conservation: Works from the Heide Collection



Mirka Mora, *Bat Cat* c. 1972, casein paint on calico, 27 x 26 x 3 cm, Estate of Mirka Mora

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Introduction to the resource

This resource focuses on the methods and considerations used to present, conserve and take care of textile based artworks in the Heide Collection.

The Heide Collection comprises art and cultural material from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and includes many textile works, by artists including Mirka Mora, Lisa Gorman, Erica McGilchrist, Meredith Turnbull, Hanna Tai, Sidney Nolan and Paul Yore.

Specific conservation techniques and materials (e.g. climate control, lighting, gloves, display cases) are used in the care and conservation of these works. This resource features on the specific techniques used for the care and conservation of textile based works in the Heide Collection, and includes some specific case studies from the collection.

About textile conservation

Textiles is an umbrella term referring to various fibre-based materials and processes, including woven fabrics made by interlocking threads from natural or synthetic sources.

Created by hand or machine through numerous methods, textiles perform a range of functional and aesthetic roles across the areas of art, craft, fashion, industrial design, science, and engineering.

Fibre Practice is a practice of making that involves using natural or synthetic fibres, fabric, or yarn in art, design, and crafts.

Methods include, but are not limited to, weaving, knotting, twining, coiling, pleating, and braiding where the nature of materials and process of making are as important as aesthetic and/or conceptual outcomes.

Textiles are produced from a variety of natural or man-made fibres, or a combination of the two, incorporating organic or inorganic materials.

Textile conservators have a comprehensive knowledge of fibres, colourants including inks, dyes and pigments and an understanding of design and construction techniques. They work with a wide range of other materials and a diverse range of contemporary objects including, apparel, costumes, embroideries, furnishings, hats, memorabilia, screen prints, tapestries, screen prints and other forms of textile art.

Textile conservators aim to prevent biological degradation, stabilise the structure of the object or garment while reducing stains and products chemical degradation.

It is important for those caring for collections to understand what causes damage to textiles, how to recognise the symptoms and, most importantly, how to prevent damage occurring.

Mixed-media artworks can have textile materials incorporated in them.

Quick Summary

1. Textiles are versatile materials: They are used in art, craft, fashion, and engineering, and can be made from natural or synthetic fibres.

2. Fibre Practices in art: Artists use techniques like weaving, knotting, braiding, and more to create unique and meaningful works using natural or synthetic fibres.
3. Textile conservators play a crucial role: They preserve various objects, including apparel, costumes, embroideries, and tapestries, by preventing damage and stabilizing structures.
4. Importance of textile conservation: Understanding how to protect textiles is essential for those caring for collections to prevent deterioration and maintain the quality of the artworks.
5. Textiles in mixed-media artworks: Many artists incorporate textiles into their mixed-media creations, adding texture and depth to their artistic expressions.

How Do You Conserve Art Made from Textiles?

Textiles can often be more fragile and difficult to handle than other materials because their structure is different from, say, metal, stone, wood, ceramic, or plastic. Conservation therefore involves attending to the preservation of materials that degrade over time;

For textile art, there is a lot of consideration given to the handling of the object and how it should be exhibited as well as stored. Environmental conditions are very important: fibres and any colorants can be damaged by photo-oxidation, so lighting must be limited or low.

Relative humidity and temperature must be controlled, as fibres can absorb humidity or dry out and become brittle. In some cases, off-gassing of certain chemicals in the vicinity of the object—from a storage crate or an exhibition vitrine for example—can cause long-term damage. Off-gassing can negatively affect many materials, in fact, not just textile art.

Artworks with textile components frequently need special mounting and the design mechanisms for display should support the structure of the often-flexible material and form.

Careful consideration of the support design and materials continues through the long-term storage of works, since the structure of the artwork can crease, distort, warp, and even become discoloured if improper materials contact its surface.

The role of the Collections Manager at Heide

Staff members at Heide Museum of Modern Art work together very closely to fulfil the various functions of a public art museum—to acquire, care for and conserve works of art, and to develop varied exhibitions from the collection and other sources.

The Collections Manager is responsible for:

- Supervising storage conditions for the Collection and Archive
- Managing preventative conservation
- Coordinating records and documentation regarding the Collection and Archive

- Administering new acquisitions
- Administering outward loans of the Collection and Archive to other institutions for exhibitions
- Accompanying touring exhibitions or outward loans of the Collection and assisting with the installation and demounting of the exhibition in the host venue
- Observing the condition of Collection artworks and sourcing appropriate conservation treatment for any damaged or deteriorating objects

At Heide, the Collections Manager also coordinates the installation and de-installation of Collection artworks for each exhibition including:

- Overseeing install technicians during the installation of artworks for display
- Completing comprehensive documentation including cataloguing and condition reporting
- Assisting the Exhibitions Manager in the coordination of display materials and exhibition environments as required

The Registrar is responsible for:

- Coordinating records and documentation for incoming loans of artworks for temporary exhibitions, including writing legal contracts, preparing insurance cover, organising the packing, crating and freight of artworks and undertaking other relevant safety precautions
- Supervising handling and movement of artworks. Condition reporting loaned artworks on arrival at Heide
- Ensuring that all loaned artworks, when on display or in storage, are cared for appropriately and environmental factors such as light, pollutants, humidity and temperature changes do not affect the artworks' condition

Conservation at Heide Museum of Modern Art

What kind of climate control system does Heide Museum of Modern Art use?

At Heide state-of-the-art HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning) systems are used to control and maintain all gallery and storage environments. This provides stable temperature and humidity.

What is the specific lighting system in each gallery space?

The Main Galleries and Heide Modern have been recently upgraded with a Bluetooth operated LED lighting system.

What are the lux levels requirements we work within?

Light sensitive materials such as textiles require light levels of 50 lux (compared to paintings that require 250 lux)

How often do the pest control inspections happen? What are the systems in place in the gallery?

Heide's Integrated Pest Management system involves a monthly check by an external specialist pest control company, regular monitoring by Collections and Exhibitions staff, and regular cleaning of facilities for pest prevention.

What are some of the techniques commonly used to preserve textile art works?

Accumulated surface dust can contribute to deterioration of the textile. It can attract pests, discolour the material, and absorb humidity. Depending on the textile substrate material, there are special techniques for cleaning, including using a soft brush and gentle vacuuming through a screen panel so that the fibres are not disturbed.

Sometimes the stitching or a tear needs to be reinforced. It is important to make it blend in with the original surface, but remain distinguishable to conservators and researchers so that it is evident that the repair is part of a treatment.

A lot of emphasis is placed on preventative conservation. Doing less to the work, but ensuring that it is properly stored, handled, and exhibited, and has the optimum conditions for long-term preservation is key.

Development of proper handling, mounting and storage systems is a very important part of preserving textiles. They usually need some sort of intervention or support.

Quick Summary

1. **Fragility of Textiles:** Textile art is delicate and can easily degrade over time, making conservation crucial to maintain its beauty and integrity.
2. **Importance of Environmental Control:** Proper handling, exhibition, and storage conditions are vital for textile preservation. Limiting light exposure, controlling humidity, and preventing off-gassing are essential considerations.
3. **Techniques for Preservation:** Cleaning techniques using soft brushes and vacuuming through a screen panel help prevent dust accumulation and damage caused by pests and humidity.
4. **Repairing Textile Art:** Reinforcing stitching and repairing tears require skilled techniques to blend repairs with the original while preserving the artwork's authenticity.
5. **Emphasis on Preventative Conservation:** A key approach is to focus on proper storage, handling, and exhibition methods to minimise the need for extensive interventions and maintain the artwork's long-term preservation.

Causes of deterioration of textiles and treatments

Fluctuations in levels of temperature and relative humidity can accelerate the deterioration of textiles, and encourage the growth of mould, mildew and insect activity.

Natural and synthetic dyes are often fugitive, meaning these objects are particularly sensitive to moisture and exposure to light. Continuous exposure to ultraviolet radiation will initiate and increase fading and fibre degradation.

Natural fibres are especially susceptible to insects, with moths, carpet beetles favouring wool and silk, and silverfish and rodents preferring cotton and flax.

Potential Problems

- All textiles are easily damaged by exposure to light. Silk is the most vulnerable, but prolonged exposure will cause changes and damage to all fibres such as fading, yellowing and becoming brittle.
- Associated materials may stain a textile item. For example, metals will corrode, tarnish and dull over time. If the corrosion products are 'active' they may start to stain the surrounding fabric. Some plastics have an inherent tendency to degrade and again, the breakdown products can stain surrounding material.
- Bacteria, moulds and insects may cause damage to all textiles such as holes, grazed areas and staining. Damp conditions and the presence of protein-rich materials such as starch and food stains increase the risk of this type of damage.
- Crushing, creasing, tears and loose fittings occur because of the way textiles are stored and packed
- Textiles may be much more fragile than you realise. The sewing threads can become weak or strained and the seams may split without warning. The textile itself may become inherently weak, and so might fastenings, trimmings, lace or embroidery.

Handling and Moving Textiles

- The delicate nature of many textiles means correct handling is important: loose threads, failing adhesive and bulky elements make storage and display of textiles particularly difficult.
- Textiles are particularly at risk when handled or moved. In general, they should be handled as little as possible, especially if there are any metal elements, as touching these with bare hands can mark the surface easily.
- The potential for damage can be minimised by laying it out in a clean space with plenty of room.
- Wear fine cotton or thin vinyl gloves when handling or touching the textile and remove jewellery that may snag.
- Keep food and drink away and avoid using pens or markers around this area.
- Use pencil to write labels.
- When thinking about moving textiles, plan the task and weigh up the risks. Support the textile when lifting it (small textiles can be moved on boards or sheets of paper; larger textiles may be rolled round tubes) and make sure that you have a clean and safe space to take the item to.
- Keep any pieces or decoration which come loose with the item in acid free tissue paper or a small bag and consult a conservator as soon as possible.
- Textile conservators working with costumes may construct mannequins or complex 3D sculptural supports for display, and to use when cleaning or repairing them.

Controlling the Environment

- Light, dirt, fluctuating humidity and pests all cause damage.
- Keep exposure to light, especially daylight (which contains ultraviolet radiation), to a minimum.
- Colour comparison between the front and reverse of a textile or between concealed and exposed areas will indicate whether light damage has occurred.

- The fading of dyes is irreversible and may also be an indication of damage to the textile fibres.
- Light exposure produces cumulative damage
- Try to keep humidity levels stable (for example, away from extremes of central heating).
- Damp conditions (over 65% relative humidity) promote mould growth and heat can make textiles brittle.
- Poor environmental conditions can also encourage pest activity.
- Check items on a monthly basis for insects and other problems. The larvae of clothes moth and carpet beetles (also known as woolly bears) are particularly damaging to textiles.

Packing and Storage

- The best way to keep textiles safe is to ensure they are properly stored when not in use.
- Store items in a clean, dry, dark place and make sure they are accessible for regular inspection.
- Package and cover as much as possible to protect from dust which is often acidic and attracts moisture and insects into the textile.
- Pack textiles items into a clean sturdy acid-free box with plenty of white acid-free tissue paper underneath and between any folds; use as big a box as possible to avoid making a lot of folds. Box up or cover as much as possible; this protects objects from light, dust and excess handling. Boxes should also be labelled to make it easier to find objects later.
- Textiles should be hung on padded hangers, stored flat or rolled between layers of acid-free tissue in customised tubes.

Treatments

- Textile conservation treatments include wet cleaning and dry cleaning, stain reduction, repair, and flattening and lining to stabilise objects.
- Brush-vacuuming, using a HEPA filter system and soft brushes works to remove dust that can damage surfaces and attract pests.

Quick Summary

1. Causes of Deterioration: Textiles experience wear and tear over time due to their specific functions and inherent weaknesses in their construction. Fluctuations in temperature and humidity can accelerate deterioration, encouraging mould, mildew, and insect activity.
2. Potential Problems: Exposure to light can cause fading, yellowing, and brittleness in textiles, and associated materials like metals and plastics can stain the fabric. Bacteria, mould, and insects can cause damage, especially in damp conditions.
3. Textile Conservation Treatments: Textile conservators use various techniques, such as wet cleaning, dry cleaning, stain reduction, repair, and flattening, to stabilise and preserve textile artworks.
4. Handling and Moving Textiles: Textiles are delicate and should be handled with care to minimise damage. Using gloves, avoiding food and drink, and planning movements can help protect the textiles.

5. Controlling the Environment: Proper environmental control, including limiting light exposure and stabilising humidity levels, is essential to prevent damage and preserve textiles. Regular inspection and proper packing and storage also contribute to the preservation of textile artworks.

Exhibiting Textiles

Light Damage and Conservation of Textiles

Textiles in museum collections are highly sensitive to light, causing irreversible damage such as fading, brittleness, and loss of detail. To preserve these valuable art works, it is essential to manage light exposure carefully during exhibitions. Maintaining light levels below 50 lux in gallery spaces allows for comfortable viewing while minimising harm.

- Light Sensitivity of Textiles:
 - Textiles are highly sensitive to light, making them susceptible to permanent damage in museum collections.
 - Signs of Light Damage: Fading of colours, alterations to hues, and loss of detail are visible indicators of light-induced damage.
 - Gradual Deterioration: Light damage occurs progressively, weakening the fibres and threads, leading to brittleness, tearing, and eventual disintegration.
- Importance of Prevention:
 - Irreversible Damage: Once light damage occurs, it cannot be reversed; conservators cannot restore faded colours or original strength.
 - Conservation Efforts: Light-damaged textiles often require conservation treatments to ensure their stability for display.
- Reducing Light Exposure:
 - Optimal Light Levels: Maintain light levels at or below 50 lux during textile exhibitions to allow viewing while minimising damage.
 - Limited Exceptions: Exceeding 50 lux should be done only when necessary and for short periods.
 - Managing Daylight: Use window blinds and curtains to control intense and variable daylight exposure.
 - Eliminating Ultraviolet (UV) Radiation: UV radiation is the most damaging part of light. Exclude daylight and filter artificial light sources to reduce UV radiation to no more than ten microwatts per lumen of visible light for textiles.
- Planning Display Periods:
 - Short Exhibition Periods: Plan short display periods, ideally less than three months and typically not exceeding one year, to minimise cumulative light damage. Allow for lengthy 'rest' periods in storage after the works have been on display.

- Measuring Light Exposure: Use a lux-meter or an ultraviolet monitor to assess the light falling on textiles and make informed decisions about display durations.
- Storage Considerations:
 - Dark Storage: Store textiles in the dark outside visitor hours and keep lights off in unoccupied storage areas.
 - Surrogates and Replicas: If light restriction is challenging, consider using surrogates or replicas instead of accessioned items.

Damage Caused by Moisture and Heat

Moisture poses significant risks to textiles, particularly those made from natural fibres. Fluctuations in relative humidity cause textiles to swell and shrink, leading to issues like lifted painted areas on banners. Regular monitoring of humidity and temperature levels is essential.

- Effects of Moisture on Textiles:
 - Natural Fibres' Absorption: Textiles made from natural fibres easily absorb water, causing them to swell and become longer when wet and shrink and become shorter when dry.
 - Damage to Weakened Fibres: Old and weakened fibres cannot withstand these changes, leading to breakage.
 - Substances on Fibres: Coatings and dyes on textiles can move when wet and re-deposit when drying, resulting in damage such as stains and embrittlement.
 - Water Contamination: Soaps, dirt, or acidic chemicals in water can cause color changes, stains, holes, and damage to textiles when left behind during drying.
- Identifying Moisture Damage:
 - Limp and Lifeless Silks: Removal of dressing from silks can leave them limp and lifeless
 - Stained embroidery: Dyes in embroidery threads may run, leading to stains
- Humidity on Textiles:
 - Swelling and Shrinking: Moisture in the air causes swelling and shrinking of textile fibres, leading to internal friction and damage.
 - Changes in Relative Humidity: Fluctuations in relative humidity over time can cause different materials to separate, leading to issues like lifted painted areas from the ground on banners.
 - Humidity-Related Issues: High humidity (>65%) can lead to mold outbreaks and pest infestations, while low humidity results in brittle and dry textiles.
- Preventing Moisture and Heat Damage:
 - Avoiding Accidental Wetting: Keep textiles in areas free from water and with a low risk of flooding.
 - No Washing: Avoid washing museum textiles, as it can cause irreparable damage.

- **Monitoring Humidity and Temperature:** Regularly monitor humidity and temperature levels in the museum to understand the environmental conditions.
- **Stable Relative Humidity:** Maintain relative humidity levels between 40% and 70%, with the ideal range between 45% and 65%, for 90% of the time.
- **Controlled Heating:** Implement a heating regime that maintains temperatures between 10°C and 20°C while controlling humidity.
- **Smart Storage:** Avoid storing textiles in problematic areas like hot and dry top floors or humid basements.
- **Promote Air Circulation:** Avoid overcrowding in storage boxes and hanging cupboards to allow for proper air circulation.
- **Use Humidifiers or Dehumidifiers:** If necessary, utilize humidifiers or dehumidifiers to regulate the museum's environment.

Damage from Materials in Contact with Textiles

The use of packing and display materials in museums can pose risks to textiles. Acidic conditions in materials may cause gradual damage to textile fibres and dyes, even if the effects aren't immediately visible. Poor quality card, paper, and boards made from wood products can lead to browning, yellowing, and embrittlement over time.

- **Risk from Packing and Display Materials:**
 - Textiles encounter various packing and display materials in museums, and those not meeting conservation standards can pose a risk.
 - **Gradual Damage:** Acidic conditions in materials can lead to faster degradation of textile fibres and dyes, though the effects may not be immediately visible.
- **Culprits of Damage:**
 - **Poor Quality Card, Paper, and Boards:** Materials made from wood products, like hardboard, can cause browning, yellowing, and embrittlement in textiles over time.
 - **Chemical Emissions:** Plastics, varnishes, paints, adhesives, dyes, inks, and self-adhesive tapes may emit damaging chemicals that harm textiles.
- **Incompatibility Issues:**
 - **Reactions Between Materials:** Incompatible materials can lead to the release of harmful chemicals, resulting in damage to textiles.
 - **Rust from Metals:** Metals containing iron can react with moisture in the air, causing rust that stains and creates holes in textiles when in contact with these metals.
- **Irreversible Damage:**
 - **Effects Over Time:** Damage from chemical interactions and incompatible materials may take years to become apparent but is irreversible once it occurs.
- **Preventive Measures:**

- **Use Conservation-Grade Materials:** Ensure that packing and display materials meet conservation standards to minimise risk.
- **Monitor Textile Condition:** Regularly inspect textiles for signs of damage like browning, yellowing, or embrittlement.
- **Avoid Harmful Chemicals:** Be cautious when using materials emitting damaging chemicals and opt for preservation-friendly alternatives.
- **Prevent Metal Contact:** Keep textiles away from metals containing iron to avoid rust-related damage.

Top 10 Considerations for Exhibiting Textile Art:

1. **Fragility of Textiles:** Recognise the delicate nature of textiles, requiring careful handling to avoid damage during setup and takedown.
2. **Environmental Control:** Ensure proper exhibition conditions with limited light exposure, controlled humidity, and prevention of off-gassing from materials.
3. **Preservation Techniques:** Utilise cleaning methods, soft brushes, and vacuuming through a screen panel to prevent dust accumulation and pest attraction.
4. **Skilled Repairs:** If needed, employ expert techniques to reinforce stitching and mend tears while maintaining the artwork's authenticity.
5. **Preventative Conservation:** Prioritise long-term preservation by storing, handling, and exhibiting textiles properly to minimise interventions.
6. **Causes of Deterioration:** Understand the factors leading to textile deterioration, such as exposure to light, humidity fluctuations, and pests.
7. **Handling and Moving Precautions:** Minimise handling and use fine cotton or vinyl gloves to prevent surface marking. Plan movements carefully to reduce risks.
8. **Controlling the Environment:** Limit light exposure, stabilise humidity, and monitor temperature levels to protect textiles from degradation.
9. **Safe Packing and Storage:** Use acid-free materials and appropriate packaging to protect textiles from dust, light, and handling during storage.
10. **Regular Inspection and Pest Control:** Conduct regular checks for signs of damage and pests to promptly address any issues and ensure preservation.

Questions

The following questions are designed to assess students' understanding of the conservation challenges associated with textile art in a mixed media context, their ability to plan and implement

an exhibition that preserves the integrity of the artworks, and their awareness of the importance of preserving cultural heritage and contemporary art for future generations.

1. What are some challenges that conservators face when preserving textiles alongside other materials?

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2. In the context of textile art conservation, why is proper handling crucial during exhibition setup and takedown?

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3. Describe at least three techniques or tools used to handle textiles safely when installing an exhibition.

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4. As a curator, you have been assigned one of the artworks from the exhibition that incorporates textiles. How would you plan to display it in a way that preserves its integrity while considering its mixed media elements?

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5. Discuss lighting, humidity control, and environmental factors you would take into account in curating an exhibition with textile works.

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6. Why is it essential to wear gloves when handling textiles during the exhibition setup? How do gloves protect textiles from damage?

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7. Compare and contrast the preservation needs of textiles made from natural fibres (e.g. silk chiffon, cotton, linen) and those made from synthetic materials (e.g. recycled nylon canvas, synthetic polymer paint).

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8. Discuss the potential problems associated with light exposure on textiles in an exhibition.

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9. How can curators and conservators minimise light damage while still allowing visitors to view the artworks?

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10. What are some of the consequences of fluctuating humidity on textile artworks? Provide examples of the types of damage that can occur when humidity levels are not controlled.

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Case studies: Selected works from the Heide Collection

Artist - Mirka Mora



Mirka Mora, *The Embrace* 1974, oil, glue size and plaster on cotton canvas, 48 x 45.5 x 10.5 cm. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Deborah Dadon AM 2021

Madeleine 'Mirka' Zelik was born in Paris in 1928 to Jewish parents: a Romanian mother, Tsipa 'Suzanne' Gelbein and Lithuanian father, Leon Zelik. The family went into hiding during the war and miraculously survived the Holocaust. In 1946 Mirka met her future husband Georges Mora, then Chef de Bureau of a Jewish organisation who had saved children during the war, at the orphanage where she worked in Saint Quay Portrieux in Brittany.

Georges assisted Mirka to enrol at the Jean-Louis Barrault theatre school in Paris, where she trained in mime and drama. She also pursued an interest in painting. Mirka and Georges married in December 1947 and their first son, Philippe, was born in 1949. Two years later the young family emigrated to Australia.

In mid-1952 the Moras settled at 9 Collins Street in Melbourne, a studio residence where they lived for the next fourteen years. Second son William was born in 1953, followed by Tiriël in 1958. 9 Collins Street was a hub for the city's cultural community and for a time the headquarters of the newly re-formed Contemporary Art Society. During this period the Moras opened a string of successful restaurants, beginning with Mirka Café in Exhibition Street in 1954, followed by Balzac Restaurant in East Melbourne in 1956, then Tolarno French Bistro in St Kilda, which opened in 1966. Georges began working as an art dealer around this time.

During the 1950s and 60s Mirka combined working in the restaurants and raising her family with her career as an artist. She held her first solo exhibition 1956, at the Gallery of Contemporary Art, established by Heide founders John and Sunday Reed with Georges Mora's assistance, as a venue for Contemporary Art Society exhibitions. Mirka also held solo shows at the Gallery's successor, the Museum of Modern Art of Australia (1958–66), which John and Georges ambitiously modelled on MoMA in New York. In 1967 and 1969 Mirka presented two shows at Georges' commercial gallery, Tolarno.

After Georges and Mirka separated in 1970, Mirka continued her artistic career, exploring new media such as painted textile dolls in parallel with her painting and drawing production, and conducting numerous doll-making workshops. In 1971 she held her first exhibition of dolls, at Realities Gallery, Toorak, subsequently teaching numerous doll-making workshops.

From 1987 she was represented by William Mora Galleries and held more than fifty exhibitions in total. She also contributed several large-scale public commissions around Melbourne, including the mosaic murals at Flinders Street Station and St Kilda Pier. In 2002 Mirka was made an Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government. She received the distinction of Heide Fellow in 2008, one of small number of individuals who have been formally acknowledged for their exceptional contribution to Heide over time. Mirka Mora died on 27 August 2018. Her life was celebrated with a State Memorial Service—the first artist to receive this honour in Australia.



Mirka Mora, *Untitled (Doll)*, 1974, oil and gesso on cotton canvas, 27 x 15 x 15 cm. Bequest of Barrett Reid 2000, Estate of Mirka Mora

Mirka Mora's love of dolls and puppets derived in part from her early training in theatre and mime. Later she became an avid collector of antique dolls, which she arranged around her studio in various groupings that informed the scenarios she depicted in her drawings.

In 1970 she began to make her own soft-sculpture dolls, initially by cutting out her drawings, transferring them to cloth, then applying painted features and costumes.

She observed that these experimental creations were like substitute children: at the time her sons were living apart from her, after she separated from her husband, Georges. Mora believed that dolls are not inanimate objects, but a means of capturing the experience of childhood— 'childhood means discovery in the sense that nothing is fixed yet; all roads are still open', she remarked.

Mora's first exhibition of dolls was at Realities Gallery, Toorak, in 1971. John Reed wrote in the catalogue: 'you are not entering an "exhibition" but rather a new world, a world of illusion ... a country which may be strange but it is also beautiful and compellingly familiar. This is the artist's country'. John's description inspired this display of more than two hundred dolls from Mora's studio—some soft, some crafted in plaster, a number embellished with embroidery and sequins, and others clothed in vintage garments.

The extraordinary richness of Mora's imagination is in evidence at every turn, with whimsical figures interacting with fantastical creatures, mythological beasts, babies, ducks, dogs, devils, angels and many more amazing characters.

Mirka Mora's approach to using textile materials in her art was still experimental in the 1970s when she first started to create her famous dolls. She designed and stuffed textile creatures combining sewing and embroidery with painting, and exquisite stitching work to create her dolls. Her textile production gave her the means of succeeding as a single woman, through her workshops, her sales of embroideries and soft sculptures, and contributed significantly to the construction of her artistic identity.

In Mora's daily routine, she did not impose any hierarchy upon different processes; which is why her studio was always crammed with materials – beads, brushes, mosaics, cloth, tubes of paint - in case she wanted to start something different.

Work: *Two Angels with Bird*



Mirka Mora, *Two Angels with Bird* 1980, cotton, silk, cotton thread, sequin, plastic beads. Purchased with funds donated by Beverley Jenkins 2017

Two Angels with Bird demonstrates how Mirka's fine sewing skills lent themselves to her interest in representing feelings, thoughts and relationships through visual symbols. Mirka's embroidery and

tapestry work poetically brought together her interest in symbolism and iconography to ultimately embody her idiosyncratic style. Mirka’s inspiration draws on the fantastic and the poetic, mixing imaginary half-human, half-animal creatures, flowers, plants, and angels with characteristic wide and haunting eyes, in imaginary or reinterpreted landscapes.

Mirka had been home-schooled as a seamstress by her mother, and went on to master the skill upon arriving in Australia in the 1950s. She went onto work as a dressmaker at 9 Collins Street, a business venture that not only marked a way to earn money upon her arrival to Australia, but eventually paved her and Georges’ way into the Melbourne avant-garde art scene. During the early days of life at 9 Collins Street, Mirka would spend her working days making bespoke gowns and accessories, and every other spare moment drawing and painting; as she held a firm belief that art was her true calling. Mirka went on to bring these two vocations together later through her embroideries.

QUESTIONS

1. How might Mirka Mora’s unique use of textile materials, including sewing, embroidery, and painting, impact the preservation and conservation needs of her textile-based artworks like *Sweet Response* and *Two Angels with Bird*?

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2. Given the fragility of textiles compared to other art materials, what considerations should be made when handling and exhibiting Mirka Mora’s soft-sculpture dolls to ensure their long-term preservation?

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3. How can environmental conditions, such as lighting, relative humidity, and temperature, affect the preservation of Mirka Mora’s textile art? How might these conditions be controlled in an exhibition or storage setting?

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4. What conservation techniques can be used to address potential problems in Mirka Mora’s textile-based artworks, such as accumulated dust, tears, and loose fittings, without compromising their artistic integrity?

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5. In what ways can proper mounting and support designs be employed to preserve and exhibit the varied and often-flexible materials of Mirka Mora’s textile artworks, such as *Two Angels with Bird*?

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6. What are some of the common causes of deterioration in textiles, and how might these factors impact Mirka Mora’s soft-sculpture dolls and embroidered artworks over time?

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7. How can preventative conservation efforts, such as proper storage, handling, and display, be incorporated to ensure the long-term preservation of Mirka Mora’s textile-based art?

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8. Considering the sensitivity of textiles to light, how might light exposure be managed in an exhibition setting to protect Mirka Mora’s artworks from fading and damage?

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9. What precautions should be taken in the handling and moving of Mirka Mora's textile-based artworks to avoid damage caused by direct contact and physical stress?

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10. In light of the materials commonly used in mixed-media artworks, how might Mirka Mora's use of textiles in conjunction with other materials present additional conservation challenges, and how can these challenges be addressed?

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Artist – Erica McGilchrist



Erica McGilchrist, *Queues of Qs* 1981, embroidery cotton, synthetic polymer paint and fibre-tipped pen on linen, 29 x 26 cm (irreg.). Gift of Erica McGilchrist 2013

The Heide Art collection has many works by celebrated Australian artist Erica McGilchrist (1926–2014). Erica McGilchrist was a key figure in the Australian women’s art movement and was dedicated to feminist concerns and women’s struggle for recognition throughout her life. Like many women artists working during this period, she was under recognised during her lifetime.

McGilchrist’s work is represented in major Australian institutional and public galleries, including Heide Museum of Modern Art, as well as private collections in Australia, Israel, United Kingdom and United States. Though she is held in high regard by local arts communities, and celebrated both for her contribution to Melbourne modernism in the 1950s and her co-founding of the Women’s Art Register in 1975, as yet her art is not widely known. To help redress this, her remarkable career as an artist, art educator and activist for women’s art was surveyed in a 2014 Heide exhibition of her work drawn primarily from the Heide Collection.

McGilchrist had many early achievements. In 1958 she was awarded the Helena Rubinstein Mural Prize and her mural was installed at the Women’s University College in Melbourne. She also held the first art therapy sessions at Kew Mental Hospital in the early 1950s and painted sets and costumes for the Ballet Guild.

In 1960 McGilchrist pursued postgraduate work in Munich at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste as a result of a grant. She held exhibitions in Munich and London, and went on to present more than forty solo exhibitions during her career. In 1967 she was the first woman to be commissioned to design a Christmas stamp. In 1979, along with 11 other artists, she was commissioned to decorate a

tram, no. 497, which she designed on a patchwork quilt in folk art style, and represented patches of cloth stitched together. Her design paid homage to the contributions of women and of migrant peoples to our culture.

From the time of her first exhibition in 1951 until she ceased making art almost five decades later, McGilchrist's varied practice explored the complex relationship between the individual and society. This provides a thematic link across the artist's distinct series, which invoke more broadly a range of humanitarian, feminist and environmental concerns.

McGilchrist worked fluidly across different genres and diverse abstract and figurative styles. Her formative works include surrealist-inspired 'automatic' images and expressive figure paintings, while later works feature hard-edge and lyrical abstracts and decorative needlepoints.

A fascination with embroidery evolved from McGilchrist's long-term interest in textiles and the female craft movement. This led to a series of richly coloured embroideries with abstract designs created from the mid-1970s through to the early 1990s. Embroidery was to become her preferred medium in the 1980s and into the 1990s, a liberating change that she found empowering.



Erica McGilchrist, *Fern* 1990, embroidery cotton and synthetic polymer paint on linen, 34.5 x 28 cm. Gift of Erica McGilchrist 2013

QUESTIONS

1. How do textile conservators address the unique challenges of handling and exhibiting Erica McGilchrist's delicate embroideries, which are more susceptible to damage compared to artworks made from metals, stone, or ceramics?

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2. Considering the environmental conditions required for preserving textiles, how are Erica McGilchrist's embroidered artworks stored and displayed to prevent damage from fluctuations in temperature and humidity?

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3. What special mounting and support design techniques are employed by conservators to ensure the long-term preservation of Erica McGilchrist's flexible textile-based artworks, particularly her richly coloured embroideries?

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4. How do conservation efforts take into account the natural deterioration of textile materials over time, such as fibre breakage, weakening seams, and vulnerability to pests like moths and carpet beetles, to ensure the longevity of Erica McGilchrist's artworks?

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5. Given the sensitivity of natural and synthetic dyes used in textiles to moisture and light, what measures are implemented by conservators to protect Erica McGilchrist's textile-based works from photo-oxidation and fading caused by exposure to light?

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6. When it comes to cleaning Erica McGilchrist's textile artworks, how do conservators use specialised techniques like brush-vacuuming through a screen panel to prevent disturbance to delicate fibres?

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7. In cases where stitching or tears need reinforcement in Erica McGilchrist's textile-based works, how do conservators approach the repairs to ensure they blend in with the original but remain distinguishable for conservation purposes?

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8. How does preventative conservation play a crucial role in preserving Erica McGilchrist's textile-based works, and what measures are taken to ensure proper storage, handling, and exhibition conditions to minimise the need for extensive conservation treatments?

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9. What are the considerations involved in planning the display period of Erica McGilchrist's textile art to prevent irreversible light damage? How do conservators measure light exposure and assess its impact on the artworks?

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10. How do textile conservators manage the risks associated with handling and moving Erica McGilchrist's fragile textile-based artworks? What precautions and equipment are used to minimise potential damage during the process?

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Glossary of Textile Conservation Key Terms

1. **Textiles:** Fibre-based materials made through weaving, knotting, and other methods for various artistic, craft, and industrial purposes.
2. **Fibre Practices:** Artistic use of natural or synthetic fibres, fabrics, and yarn, focusing on materials and processes for aesthetic outcomes.
3. **Textile Conservators:** Professionals with expertise in preserving and maintaining textiles in museum collections.
4. **Light Sensitivity:** Textiles' vulnerability to light damage, causing fading, colour alterations, and loss of detail.
5. **Relative Humidity:** The amount of moisture in the air, impacting textile fibres and their condition.
6. **UV Radiation:** Ultraviolet radiation from light sources, causing damage to textiles.
7. **Off-gassing:** Emission of damaging chemicals from materials like plastics, varnishes, or adhesives.
8. **Conservation Efforts:** Preventative actions to stabilise textiles and reduce damage over time.
9. **Fugitive Dyes:** Colorants sensitive to moisture and light, commonly used in textiles.
10. **Environmental Control:** Managing temperature and humidity to preserve textiles.
11. **Display Mounting:** Creating supports and structures for exhibiting flexible textile art.
12. **Handling Gloves:** Clean white cotton gloves used to protect textiles during handling.
13. **Textile Cleaning:** Techniques for removing dust and preserving textile surfaces.
14. **Repair Techniques:** Methods to reinforce stitching or tears in textiles.
15. **Preventative Conservation:** Focus on proper storage, handling, and display to minimise interventions.
16. **Protein Fibres:** Textile fibres from natural sources like silk and wool.
17. **Cellulose Fibres:** Textile fibres from natural sources like cotton and linen.
18. **Synthetic Fibres:** Man-made textile fibres like nylon and polyester.
19. **Mixed-Media Artworks:** Art incorporating various materials, including textiles.
20. **Light Damage:** Harm caused to textiles by prolonged exposure to light, leading to fading and brittleness.
21. **UV Exposure:** Ultraviolet radiation affecting textiles and causing irreversible damage.
22. **Humidity Fluctuations:** Changes in relative humidity leading to fibre expansion and contraction.
23. **Pests:** Insects and mould causing damage to textiles.
24. **Handling Precautions:** Safe practices for minimising damage during textile handling.

25. **Environmental Control:** Maintaining optimal conditions to preserve textiles.
26. **Packing Techniques:** Properly storing textiles to prevent damage from dust and moisture.
27. **Exhibiting Considerations:** Strategies for displaying textiles while minimising harm.
28. **Preservation Techniques:** Conservation treatments for cleaning, repair, and stabilisation.
29. **Frail Textiles:** The delicate nature of textiles and their susceptibility to damage.
30. **Textile Components:** Categorisation of fibres into protein, cellulose, and synthetic types.
31. **Corrosion:** Metals degrading and staining surrounding textiles over time.
32. **Insect Damage:** Holes, grazed areas, and staining caused by pests.
33. **Creasing and Tears:** Common damage from improper storage and handling.
34. **Proper Handling:** Techniques to minimise damage during textile handling.
35. **Protective Gloves:** Essential gear for safeguarding textiles from skin contact.
36. **Light Exposure Management:** Strategies to limit light exposure during display.
37. **Stable Relative Humidity:** Maintaining consistent humidity levels to prevent damage.
38. **Pest Prevention:** Steps to protect textiles from insect infestations.
39. **Clean and Dark Storage:** Proper conditions for long-term textile preservation.
40. **Acid-Free Packaging:** Using acid-free materials for storing and protecting textiles.
41. **Light Damage Indicators:** Signs of fading and discoloration from light exposure.
42. **Humidity Effects:** Impact of humidity on textile fibres and structural stability.
43. **Damage Prevention Planning:** Preparing and considering risks during textile movement.
44. **Textile Support:** Proper supports and structures for exhibiting flexible textiles.
45. **Cleaning Techniques:** Methods to safely clean and maintain textile surfaces.
46. **Repair and Reinforcement:** Approaches to strengthening damaged textile areas.
47. **Preservation Practices:** Prioritising proper storage, handling, and display to avoid intervention.
48. **Protein and Cellulose Fibres:** Categories of natural textile fibres.
49. **Synthetic Fibres:** Man-made textile materials with various properties.
50. **Mixed-Media Artworks:** Art pieces incorporating different materials, including textiles.