A History of Textile Cleanliness (Bern, 28-29 May 2026)

Institute of Art History, University of Bern, Switzerland, May 28–29, 2026
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A History of Textile Cleanliness: Washing and Perfuming Fabrics from the Medieval to the Modern Period.

In 2024, the Sleeping Beauties exhibition at the MET (New York) engaged visitors in the museum experience by recreating the displayed dresses' scents – identified through chromatographic analysis – to illuminate their history and relationship to bodily senses. The analyses and interpretations published in the catalogue reveal not only the presence of perfumes but also traces of cosmetics, sebum, polluted air, and wine, among other aromas. While the poetic resonance of these sensory traces may evoke the ephemeral existence of these garments, their scents have not always been perceived as desirable. On the contrary, the history of textiles and clothing is deeply intertwined with practices of washing, stain removal, deodorisation, and perfuming, all of which were designed to ensure their longevity and reusability. This international conference seeks to explore these practices and their significance in textile history.

The historical study of textile cleaning has emerged at the intersection of cultural history, material culture studies, sensory studies, economic history, and archaeology. While textile production, trade, and consumption have been well-documented, research into the maintenance and cleaning of textiles – both as part of everyday domestic practices and in the care of symbolically significant textiles (such as liturgical garments and ceremonial fabrics) – has only recently gained scholarly attention.

Studies on hygiene underlined the role of textiles in approaches to and conceptions of bodily cleanliness, especially through the relationship between undergarments and the body. As noted by Georges Vigarello in his book Le propre et le sale, white clothing has long been associated with personal hygiene. Researchers have particularly focused on the laundering of linens and their symbolic role as indicators of health, moral, and spiritual virtues (Vigarello, 1985; Roche, 1989). Subsequently, the study of cleanliness and the purity of linens has been extended to colonial contexts, where these notions were intertwined with concepts of race and whiteness while also highlighting regional differences in perceptions of cleanliness and body care (Brown, 2009; White, 2012). Concepts connected to health, bodily hygiene, and clean textiles are also closely linked with questions of smells and techniques for scenting fabrics, an area that has been explored by historians and art historians specializing in the senses (Dospěl Williams, 2019; Schlinzig, 2021).

The inception and evolution of cleaning materials and technologies, from the use of soap to spot-

removal recipes and chemical innovations, have also attracted the interest of historians (Leed, 2006). For example, some studies have shown how cleaning methods were adapted based on fibre type and colour stability, as well as how the manufacturing of undergarments itself was conditioned by their future washing (North, 2020). These practices of cleanliness have also been addressed through the lens of social actors, particularly in relation to gendered labour. The work of laundresses, who are rarely documented in written records, has been discussed as a form of embodied knowledge and skills (Morera and Le Roux, 2018; Robinson, 2021). Advertising imagery has also served to explore the dynamic between collective perceptions of clean laundry and its commercial dimensions (Kelley 2010).

Building upon this previous research, this international conference seeks to explore textile cleaning from a global perspective and its interplay with hygiene, olfaction, social opinion, aesthetic preferences, quality expectations, ecological issues, and economic imperatives, all of which are inherent to fabrics. The conference aims to investigate these various practices and their part in the everyday experience of life in the past. Who were the people involved in the daily or extraordinary cleaning of fabrics, and which ingredients and tools were used? What knowledge about textiles and their care was shared at the time, and how was it transmitted? How did these practices evolve during the 18th and 19th centuries, a period of intense development in chemistry and industrial science?

The question of care and cleaning becomes even more significant when considering the many lives of textile objects. Cleaning and maintenance certainly varied not only by fabric type but also by purpose and context of use. Household linens and work clothes were used to the last thread – mended, transformed and repurposed. More expensive and refined garments and textile decorations were used more sparingly; some were eventually passed down – and even preserved until today. This aspect prompts an exploration of the wide variety of textiles and the differing care practices for under and outer garments, furnishings, and domestic fabrics. Were undergarments the primary focus of cleaning routines? How were sartorial and furnishing fabrics with complex patterning techniques and precious materials (from silk to metal threads) cared for? How was the shape of specific garments, such as ruffs, maintained through washing? How did the intended use of a textile – ranging from menstrual cloths to ceremonial gowns – influence the choice of cleaning methods? Additionally, given that fabric itself was often used as a cleaning tool, what were the interactions between textiles of varying value?

Conceived as a bodily experience, the cleanliness of fabrics carries significant implications tied to the senses. Indeed, integrating sensory studies with the history of cleanliness enables an exploration not only of the sensory experiences associated with washing or wearing clean linen or clothes but also of the sensory knowledge that developed around it. Thus, it becomes possible to examine which notions of pleasantness or discomfort were associated with textile washing or with specific practices such as drying laundry outdoors. How were the smells associated with cleanliness and the thresholds of sensory perception defined? How was the temperature of the washing water evaluated? In what ways were textural changes in fabric during washing assessed? Moreover, attention to sensorial experiences invites us to consider the significant tradition of perfuming laundry, whether placing sachets in linen drawers or sewing them into the hems of garments.

This conference will encompass geographical regions from the Atlantic world to Europe, Africa, the Islamic world and Asia. Adopting this approach raises numerous questions about cultural differences as well as the circulation of cleaning practices and techniques. It enables an examination of the differences and evolutions in conceptions of hygiene and their relationship to textiles across countries and cultures. Moreover, it highlights how these practices were influenced by factors such as available resources, climate, and social norms, shaping distinct traditions of textile care across different societies. Similarly, a longue durée perspective (from the medieval to the modern period) provides an opportunity to explore both changes and continuities in cleaning habits, shaped by advancements in technologies, evolving medical theories, socio-philosophical morals, and shifts in cosmetic and aesthetic preferences. This approach invites us to map out conceptions of cleanliness and identify thresholds of sensitivity: What is considered clean? What criteria are applied in making this assessment? When do clothes become unwearable? What scents are associated with cleanliness? In this regard, the study of representations – such as those found in art and fiction – can offer valuable insights into historical perceptions of cleanliness and its limits.

The conference will take place at the University of Bern's Department of History of Textile Arts (Institute of Art History) on 28-29 May 2026. We invite proposals from all researchers, particularly doctoral students and early career scholars, on topics ranging from the medieval to the modern period and across all geographical regions. Proposals (300 words), along with a short biography (150 words max), should be sent to Moïra Dato (moira.dato@unibe.ch) and Érika Wicky (erika.wicky@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr) by 30 September 2025.

International conference organized by Moïra Dato (University of Bern) and Érika Wicky (Université Grenoble-Alpes / LARHRA).

Scientific committee: Olivier David (Institut Lavoisier / Paris Saclay), Aziza Gril-Mariotte (Musée des Tissus, Lyon / Université Aix), Raphaël Morera (CNRS-EHESS), Corinne Mühlemann (University of Bern), Helen Wyld (National Museum Scotland).

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