COSTUME IN CONTEXT

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COSTUME IN CONTEXT

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Edited by Frances Lennard

Forum organised by Ann French

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FOREWORD

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'Costume in Context' was the fourth annual forum of the UKIC Textile Section, held in March 1996 at the Guildhall, Bath.

It aimed to explore the specific issues involved in the conservation of costume, whether these differ from those involved in the conservation of other textile items, and whether the particular context of a costume object affect the way it is conserved, studied and appreciated.

The speakers approached this subject from a variety of viewpoints. We heard from costume curators, a conservator, a costume historian and an antique dealer. I would like to thank them all for presenting such interesting papers and for contributing to a lively discussion. I would also like to thank Mary Brooks, who chaired the day's proceedings, drawing all the strands together. Thanks also to those who presented posters, some of which are printed here, although sadly without the illustrations.

Particular thanks are due to Ann French who organised the forum. I would also like to thank Bath Museums Service for allowing us to hold the forum at the Guildhall, and Jane Jeffery for typing these postprints.

COSTUME IN CONTEXT: ISSUES AND PARADOXES

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The theme of the 1996 UKIC Textile Section Forum was 'Costume in Context'. The Forum aimed to explore how the preservation, understanding and interpretation of costume may be influenced by different contexts. Costume is collected by both private individuals and institutions, such as museums and galleries, where it may be researched and preserved by costume historians, curators and conservators. Before reaching either of these contexts, costume may often pass through the hands of a dealer. How do these different contexts and - potentially - different interests, affect decisions which may be made about the future or the role of a piece of costume? How do they impact on the conservation decisions about appropriate interventive or preventive treatments? In this paper, which is a development from my introduction to the Forum, I hope to highlight some of these complex issues which require careful consideration by all involved.

The paradox of costume

From the conservator's point of view, costume presents complex three-dimensional problems. It is often multi-media and commonly extensively altered or degraded. From the costume curator's point of view, costume is highly popular - with the public at least - as it is accessible and attractive in its most glamorous form. It may be used to explore a range of aesthetic, social and technological issues. From the costume historian's point of view, acceptable access to costume and documentation in order to study cut and construction is vital - and a critical part of a museum's function.

If all this is so, why do costume collections have relatively low status in many large general museum and gallery collections? Why do relatively few costumes receive extended research and the necessary, often intensive, conservation? Why does costume rarely attract high prices at auction? Is this to do with the necessarily high cost of intervention which could make both individuals and institutions wary of expending time, money and energy on fragile items which often require complicated mounting and display to make them intelligible, in addition to specialist and generous storage space? It could be argued that other, less overt, assumptions are also operating. From a certain standpoint, costume may be perceived as of low intellectual, historical and financial 'value', which does not contribute to cultural knowledge. Costume obviously relates to paintings but it cannot easily be read within an orthodox aesthetic tradition. The domestic and intimate nature of costume, often perceived as being 'feminine', may also act to undermine serious consideration; clearly there are a range of gender assumptions to debate here. Some of the issues were examined by the exhibition 'The Subversive Stitch' held at the Whitworth Art Gallery (Harris 1988). Anonymity can also undermine the status of costume in a culture which values artefacts not only for their origin or beauty, but also for their associations. A link with an individual or event perceived as being culturally or historically important can transform attitudes to a mundane costume item and render it 'respectable' and worthy of preservation. For example, a 19th century black wool bodice and skirt conserved at the Textile Conservation Centre could be viewed as typical nineteenth century dress; it is the fact that they were worn by Florence Nightingale that lifts these garments into a different category (Eastop and Lennard).

The role of costume

A single individual rarely makes decisions about the preservation of costume. Directors, curators, conservators, designers, costume historians, dealers and individual clients and collectors all may be involved - in different combinations - and with potentially conflicting areas of interest. Discussion between any of these individuals can only be successful if there is a clear and stated agreement as to the role of the specific piece of costume in a defined context. Is it to be the dazzling centrepiece of a high profile exhibition, or the carrier of significant historical and social information, less important for its beauty than for the evidence of use, wear and tear which it embodies? Is costume to be seen as a technological construct conveying information about cut, construction, yarn, fibre and dyes, or as a pretty but frivolous piece of set dressing? It can be argued that all these interpretations and meanings are valid but they need to be overtly stated for effective decision-making regarding the acquisition and appropriate conservation of a costume item. Dinah Eastop has discussed how defining the role of the textile has both intellectual and practical consequences (Eastop forthcoming 1996).

Is costume different?

Does costume differ from other textiles? The range of attitudes discussed above could have been applied to any textile (Brooks et al. forthcoming). However, it seems true to say that a particular attitude and approach, which does include an acknowledgement of emotional feelings, is accorded to costume precisely because of its historical, social and physical nature. It is interesting to note that, despite the significance of other specialist areas such as embroidery, upholstery or rugs and carpets, only costume has a specific ICOM Committee dedicated to this study. There are also other specialist groups such as The Costume Society, as well as several specific postgraduate courses.[1]

There are particular issues which need to be considered here. Is costume different in that it often needs to make a dramatic visual impact and therefore requires sufficient structural strength to be displayed? Does the context of the costume influence the type of treatment required? Cleaning decisions may be particularly complex with costume. Should potentially destructive soils and stains be removed, hopefully 'recapturing' the original glory of the garment or revealing its 'true nature' (UKIC), or should they be left *in situ* as valuable historical evidence (Eastop and Brooks)?

Reviewing past treatments is an indication of the maturity of our profession. Such reviews can lead to modification of approaches and also re-emphasise the importance of a clear definition of role and function. Karen Finch did this when she acknowledged that she would not now wet clean a pair of sailor's trousers to remove the tar which identifies them as belonging to a 'jolly jack tar' (Finch and Putnam 1985). This shift from a stress on cleanliness to the retention of evidence is a shift in priorities from the visual to the evidential - and this does not reflect conservators' priorities alone.

The ethical issues raised by the request, familiar to conservators in both private and public practice, to prepare costume such as christening robes or wedding dresses for continued use, need to be addressed. Is costume conservation directed towards restoration or conservation? Should subsequent changes for fashionable updating or fancy dress be retained or removed (Brooks et al. 1994)? Cogram states that opening of seams to facilitate conservation treatment is a familiar dilemma facing costume conservators, though such a decision needs to be carefully considered from an ethical point of view (Cogram 1995).

The most dramatic way in which costume is different is its three-dimensional quality. It is not a flat, framed artefact which may be conveniently handled, hung or cased. It may only acquire meaning or be adequately understood when it is appropriately and safely displayed - and this requires particular co-operation between curators, conservators and designers. The need to provide an effective and sympathetic substructure demands an understanding of both the physical stresses of display and appropriate historical line and style. The fraught question of mannequins has often been discussed but truly effective and sympathetic display requires not only in-depth discussion of the physical needs and tolerances of a specific costume item, but also the required visual style for the period and the specific exhibition. Claudia Brush Kidwell (1990) described the development of figures for the National Museum of American History exhibition 'Men and Women' which involved

> "... the sculpting of a form representing a posture, an arrangement of flesh and a ratio of muscle to body fat different from what is common for modern human beings ..."

Unusually, Kidwell acknowledges the staff who dressed the mannequins. This is possibly the most stressful stage of any costume's museum career and the point at which a curator's interpretations may need to be balanced with conservation requirements. Nobuko Kajitani describes how a painted Mughal Court Robe was displayed with the exaggeratedly long sleeves tucked up to a "normal length - yielding to the request of the curatorial department" (Kajitani 1995). The display of costume often needs to achieve a balance between the sometimes contradictory imperatives of preservation and interpretation.

The conservator's contribution

The complementary expertise and knowledge of all concerned - curator, costume historian, conservator and dealer - are necessary to locate, acquire, preserve and understand costume fully and present it effectively. The contribution of the conservator in academic research and analysis is being established. Conservators need to take responsibility for ensuring their contribution is accessible to a wider costume audience. The recent publication by the Metropolitan Museum of Art The Conservation of 18th Century Painted Silk Dress is an impressive example of the benefits of collaboration between conservators and curators - and incidentally to the major role played by the famous dealer, Cora Ginsburg, in developing the Metropolitan's collections (Paulocik and Flaherty 1995). The effective preservation and interpretation of costume depends on the development and exchange of expertise and knowledge. This Forum was an opportunity for the exchange of ideas on these critical and complex issues.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Nell Hoare, Director of the Textile Conservation Centre, for permission to publish. I would also like to acknowledge many discussions with my colleagues at the Centre, in particular Dinah Eastop and Alison Lister.

Footnotes

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CONSERVATION CONSIDERATIONS AT THE MUSEUM OF COSTUME

PENELOPE RUDDOCK
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Assembly Rooms and Museum of Costume
Bath

The Museum of Costume was founded in Bath in 1963. I think this museum in particular is a good example of how costume collections have changed over the last three decades, in the way curators and conservators approach collections care, documentation, display and access. I will give a brief history of the Museum of Costume and some of the constraints we work with to perhaps give a better understanding of what we are doing now in our work and why we are doing it. This has some bearing on conservation, either directly or indirectly.

The Museum of Costume is housed in Bath's 18th century Assembly Rooms, one of the major heritage sites in the city which is in fact owned by the National Trust but leased to and managed by Bath City Council. The rooms on the ground floor are open to the public when they are not hired out for a variety of functions. The rooms were restored to their original 18th century appearance after extensive damage during the last war. When they re-opened in 1963 it was with the addition of the Museum of Costume in the basement area of the building. One area of the museum has always been known as the Panorama Room as it consists of a series of dioramas or period room settings. This was very much the inspiration of the founder of the museum, Doris Langley Moore.

Doris Langley Moor saw her role as a collector, and this was of importance to her. As well as being a respected costume historian she was in fact a very gifted collector. She had an excellent eye and considerable discrimination. She was mainly interested in fashionable dress and collected the very best quality examples she could find. She had begun her collecting as a young woman in the 1920s and developed her collection at a time when few others appreciated the subject. Her knowledge of costume and her literary interests led to work in the theatre and cinema: she designed the costumes for the film 'The African Queen' which starred Katherine Hepburn. This led to friendships with many famous and titled people, many of whom she persuaded to model for her and give their clothes to her collection. Her book <u>The Woman in Fashion</u> was a first of its kind and was done with immense flair. It is not fashionable to admire this kind of project today, with famous personalities modelling original garments, but Doris Langley Moore brought the serious study of costume to a much wider audience by doing this and probably did more than anyone in her time to encourage the preservation of fashionable dress.

Her other talent, developed by her work in the theatre, was for the display of costume, and in this I believe she was a pioneer. She broke away from the hitherto rather dry and dull approach of traditional museum displays to present her costumes in a naturalistic, lively and above all enjoyable manner. Her models had arms and legs, heads, wigs and make-up and were meant to look like real people. This was the philosophy behind the displays when she set up the Museum of Costume. Her daughter, Pandora Moore, a professional artist, assisted her in creating the backdrops and room settings in the so-called Panorama Room. Some people feel these are outmoded as a display approach but I think they are almost museum items in their own right now. They are a part of the original museum which we should not sweep away. And in any case, this part of the museum has always been extremely popular with our museum visitors and the one that people still feel they can relate to. In other areas of the museum, of course we have made changes, especially in the area where we show our modern collection.

Doris Langley Moore's great strengths were in collecting and connoisseurship; there is little doubt that she, like many other collectors of her generation, was not quite so interested in documentation and conservation - although to be fair to her, she did recognise their importance and her collection was well catalogued by the standards of the time. Where conservation was concerned it was not so much a lack of interest as a lack of well established techniques for the storage and treatment of textile objects.

However, the Museum of Costume has been left with two legacies from this period which have had an effect on what we do now and our work in the future. Firstly, although everything in the collection was catalogued quite adequately, no objects were numbered. It may seem incredible now, but at one time Doris Langley Moore or her assistants knew every piece in the collection and identified them by the donor's name. Originally it was probably felt that numbers were not essential and then as time went on it seemed too much of a task to undertake. For some years now we have been working on this and the museum is still engaged on the major programme of assigning a unique number to each object and compiling a computerised database.

Secondly, in recent years the museum has been upgrading the original way in which objects were stored and cared for. Some years ago, the costumes were stored without padded hangers in plastic hanging wardrobes. These have now been replaced but in fairness to earlier staff it should be said that they were used in good faith; this system did serve a purpose and did keep the collection safe even it if was not ideal.

The other method then used was deep boxes. Acid-free tissue was used and items were sensibly stored flat but this system made them very inaccessible. The boxes made it difficult for staff to locate objects and it was time-consuming to give visitors access to them in the reserve collections. These have now been replaced but the upgrading of our storage areas to increase accessibility has been a major project which is still ongoing.

It comes as a surprise to some people that it is only in the last ten years that the museum has had its own textile conservation facilities, but again, this was part of the gradual changeover from what began as a private collection. When Doris Langley Moore set up the museum in 1963 she appointed as her assistant a very skilled needlewoman who learned on the job and devoted herself to the collection for almost thirty years. Because of this member of staff's skills and experience there had been a certain resistance to changing the status quo and to the employment of a professional conservator, but this did come about in 1985.

It became possible to create a fully equipped Textile Conservation Studio in the basement of 4 Circus, a building near the Assembly Rooms which also houses the Fashion Research Centre attached to the Museum of Costume. The studio was set up with financial support from the Museums and Galleries Commission and the Area Museum Council for the South West. Under an agency agreement with the AMCSW, Bath was able to have access to a professional conservator for a number of hours each week while the rest of her time was worked for the AMCSW.

There are a couple of other points I would briefly like to mention in the context of this particular costume collection.

We are a local authority museum so we have always been subject to certain financial constraints. However, there has always been an admission charge to the museum and it continues to generate a sizeable amount of income. While we tend to be under pressure to maximise this, it has also been important for our development and survival - because we have been perceived as paying our way, which is becoming increasingly important in the current financial climate.

Because of the nature of the museum and our location in Bath we tend to be regarded as much as a tourist attraction as as a serious museum. Unlike some other institutions we are open seven days a week all the year round, except 25th and 26th December. It can be very crowded in summer and it can also be difficult to change displays and make alterations. We are simply not allowed to close the museum even to mount a new exhibition. This sometimes limits what we are able to do.

As always, there is a balance to be struck between the needs of the visitors and the preservation of the objects. However, I would like to finish with one example which has had a positive outcome. For many years we have had the usual and understandable complaints about low light levels in the museum, and we recognised that some labels were not easy to read at 50 lux. Part of the reason for introducing our new audio guiding system last autumn was to meet this problem. It has been tremendously encouraging to find that since then we have had very few comments in our visitors' book on the lighting, but many positive comments on the displays: how much visitors have appreciated them and the condition of the costumes which they perceive to be very good.

A MUSEUM VIEW

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Assembly Rooms and Museum of Costume, Bath

Penelope has written about the wider context, the 'big picture', in which the Museum of Costume operates. I shall look at what determines our decisions on a practical level.

By way of an introduction, I should say that most things about my work come in pairs. The Museum of Costume also includes the Fashion Research Centre; my job entails looking after collections, and making them accessible to people. I am going to use this collections / people polarity as a framework and have decided to talk numbers.

To take collecting first, the Museum of Costume by repute has 20,000 objects. This number was, at best, an informed guess as no single inventory including every object had previously been compiled. We are currently involved in a three-part project (spurred on by Museums and Galleries Commission Registration) to give every single object an inventory number. At the same time we are compiling an inventory using a database. There are currently 13,551 records on that database and we have numbered the underwear, the menswear, children's clothes and some 18th century and wedding dresses. The guess is, therefore, that 20,000 is probably an inaccurate figure and that the collection totals in excess of 30,000 objects. The third part of the project is to store each object correctly, that is to minimise any risk of harm and to ensure that the object is accessible.

Now to look at the second part of the collection: the Fashion Research Centre. The Centre includes a Study Collection of about 5,000 pieces and a Reference Library. The Library includes about 50,000 works on paper (patterns, photographs, fashion plates and ephemera). Again all these objects are being numbered, listed and correctly stored. Thus the collections at the Museum of Costume and Fashion Research Centre number somewhere in the region of 85,000 objects.

How do we make these collections available to people? Firstly, by the displays at the Museum of Costume. There are about 200 figures on display in the Museum at any time and probably somewhere in the region of 2,000 objects. We have rationalised the display space so that there are three major chronological areas (the 18th century, the 19th century in the Panorama Room, and the Modern Galleries) and two (to be three in 1998) temporary display areas where dress can be looked at in a more thematic way.

Many people do need much closer access to objects than that afforded by display and we have two systems to cope with this steadily increasing demand. Many enquiries come from school students (particularly at A Level). These students are not taught how to note the evidence they need for their projects from primary sources. We have therefore developed an accompanied appointment service at the Fashion Research Centre which encourages skills-based learning such as observation and analysis of material culture as well as giving children access, for example, to a real late 19th century corset. Last year about 750 students used this service. We also offer sessions to KS1 and 2 pupils: 200 used the service last year.

Many people have specific research needs at a higher level; these visitors are routed through the main collection. In 1995 we saw 100 such students at the Museum of Costume.

These are the traditional ways of giving access to a collection. Our third method of access falls within the area of training. We have a thriving group of volunteers, many of whom go on to train to work in the profession. We have had about thirty helpers over three years and they have made 3,334 padded hangers. We also have a commitment to offering work experience placements for the same reason; last year we welcomed twenty people to work with us.

One final method of access to the collection is work in progress on a catalogue to the collection. As you may imagine, this is a daunting task. However, we have been fortunate in securing a Pilgrim Trust grant to develop a catalogue prototype using the 18th century collection as a 'guinea pig'. We have about 1,000 18th century objects in the collection and are planning that these objects should be available on-line by Spring 1997.

These are the numbers which condition my day-to-day work and the decisions I make about the management of the collections.

THE GRAVES CLOTHES OF FERDINAND I OF HAPSBURG, 1564

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When Dr Milena Bravermanova first invited me to investigate the restored graves clothes of Ferdinand I of Hapsburg, dating from 1564, she sent photographs of all four garments.[1] The inner ones consisted of a doublet with puffed sleeves, and upper hose or breeches; the latter appeared to be a modern replacement. Above them was worn a widely cut, loose garment, also with puffed sleeves, which would probably have been described as a cassock, or frock, in England at that time.[2]

The outer garment was a short gown with pieces of material hanging at the back of the armholes, a style for which Dr Bravermanova had been unable to trace any iconographic source. We realised that these long strips of material were intended to represent hanging sleeves, but I had never seen any cut in this way. By August 1995, when I was able to study the garments at Prague Castle, the gown had been unpicked from the modern backing, the fragments placed flat on stiff mounting boards and covered with crepeline, by Marcela Brachova. The pattern shapes could be seen clearly. By a fortunate chance I had just visited the Staatliche Kunstammlungen, Dresden, and Dr Jutta Baurnel had kindly arranged for me to take a pattern of the yellow satin short gown decorated with black velvet guards, with puffed hanging sleeves, part of a suit which had been worn by Kurfursten Moritz von Sachsen around 1550-55.[3] This was also to help in understanding the gowns, doublets, frocks and cassocks listed in the 1547 inventory of Henry VIII.[4]

Pattern diagrams were made of all the fragments of Ferdinand I's gown and it was possible to recognise the sleeve shapes by comparison with those of Moritz von Sachsen's gown. Although large areas of Ferdinand's gown were missing over the shoulders, conjectural shapes were made from the gown worn by Moritz and the cloak with sleeves worn by Don Garzia de'Medici dating from 1562.[5] A full-size toile of the gown was made in calico and the sleeve puffs, which had been used as hanging strips in the first restoration, were set into the armholes. The lower parts of the sleeves were assembled as tubes and could be worn on the arm or used as hanging sleeves: there were three slits through which the arm in the doublet sleeve might emerge. Among the few photographs taken of the gown before restoration are two which show the arrangement of two sets of cross-cut black velvet guards at the front, with those on the inner edge continuing round the edge of the collar.

The photographs of the frock, or cassock, before and during restoration show the original velvet bands to contain the fullness at the lower edge of the short puffed sleeves. These have been replaced with modern velvet. Most of the shoulder area had disintegrated in the grave, and the garment was assembled through guesswork rather than by comparison with other surviving examples or with sixteenth century pattern books.[6] The sash confining the waist of the frock, or cassock, has disappeared and there are no written descriptions in the restoration records to indicate the colour or material, although it would appear to have been silk taffeta. A pattern diagram was made from the fragments of the garment stitched to the modern cotton foundation, and it would probably be best if these fragments were treated in the same way as the cloak.

The sleeves of Ferdinand's doublet, as Dr Bravermanova suspected, should not be arranged in this way. The photographs taken before and during restoration show that they were probably shaped in a similar way to those from an Italian tailor's book of c.1555-80.[7] They also show that originally there were thirteen buttons and buttonholes to close the front, including one on the collar, and now there are only twelve. The bottom button and button hole, and the worked eyelet holes at the front waist, are now missing. The skirts of the doublet are lifted up in the photograph to reveal worked eyelet holes and ribbon points with metal aglets for lacing the upper hose, or breeches, to the waist of the doublet. None of this remains. The skirts are now attached to a new level, well above their original position.

At the present time it seems unlikely that anything can be done to restore the upper hose, or breeches, to their original appearance. Some of the original velvet guards have been preserved, but all the original silk foundation was discarded by the restorer. The guards are now mounted on a modern foundation of cotton sateen in a way which has little to do with the evidence still visible in the photographs taken before restoration.

Drawings, to be published at a later date, now show the conjectured appearance of gown, cassock or frock, and doublet, based on evidence still surviving in the fragments, and from the photographs taken before restoration.

Footnotes

1. A series of 34 black and white photographs of the four garments was taken before and after conservation, between 1976 and 1982. No other documentation appears to have been made.

2. Frocks are listed separately from cassocks in the 1547 inventory of Henry VIII's goods, British Library, Harley MS 1419B, f.405 r and v, for 'frockes', and f.406v for 'cassackes'. It would seem that the garments were similar in shape as there is 'one frocke or cassocke' of cloth of silver used by King Edward VI at some time between 1547 and 1552 listed in BL, Stowe 557, f.5v[5], printed in Janet Arnold, Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd, Leeds, 1988, p 252.

3. Illustrated in Eva Nienholdt, Kostume des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts, Braunschweig, 1962, plate 1; Erika Thiel, Geschichte der Mode, Berlin, 1990, plate 313; and Jutta Baumel, 'Der Kleider-Nachlass des Kurfursten Moritz von Sachsen: Das inventar von 1553', in Waffen und Kostukunde, 1993, Heft 1 and 2.

4. A transcript with commentaries on the 1547 inventory of Henry VIII is in preparation for the Society of Antiquaries of London: BL, Add. MS.46,348, Harley MS 1419, and Society of Antiquaries of London MS 129.

5. This garment might have been described as a 'Dutch cloak with sleeves' in England, and is seen in paintings from many other countries, in the mid-sixteenth century. See Moda alla carte dei Medici: gli abiti restaurati di Cosimo, Eleonora e don Garzia, Florence, 1993, pp 51, 52, 63 and 64; and J. Arnold, Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd, op.cit. p 136, fig 214.

6. Several patterns are given in Ingeborg Petrascheck-Heim, Figurinen nach alten Schnittbuchern, Linz, 1968; Juan de Alcega, Tailor's Pattern Book, Carlton, Bedford, 1979, and Janet Arnold, Patterns of Fashion: cut and construction of clothes for men and women, c. 1560-1620, London, 1985.

7. Illustrated in J. Arnold, Patterns of Fashion c. 1560-1620, op.cit., figs 20, 24 and 25.

VICIOUS CIRCLES, OR JUST RUNNING IN CIRCLES

PHILIP SYKAS
Assistant Curator of Costume, Chertsey Museum

Introduction
Recently the Evening Standard reported "They look almost identical, but don't understand each other's language, don't sleep together, and avoid each other wherever possible". [1] The article was of course not about museum curators and conservators, but about the discovery that Yorkshire bats and Lancashire bats are actually different species. In the light of this astonishing news, I would like to report on my own recent discovery that, although they may speak on different wavelengths, costume curators and conservators are, in fact, members of the same species!

Change and continuity: career moves
Two years ago, frustration with my conservation post at Manchester City Art Galleries finally convinced me of the need for a career change. Much of my frustration was due to being promoted to a managerial position as Head of Conservation. The overwhelming demands of leaking roofs, vandalised windows, large and frequent collection movements, and a relentless international programme of fine art loans, made finding time for costume conservation difficult nearing impossible. I began to realise that I would never have the time to work on the costume storage projects which were so urgent, and which meant so much to me.

The curatorial agenda added yet another set of stresses and time demands to the situation. Despite the incumbent costume curators' strong respect and consideration for the conservation needs of the collections, new displays were the most urgent need if Platt Hall was going to continue to attract enough visitors to justify its keep. And Platt Hall is a big space for a staff of three to turn around with costume displays, especially if high conservation standards in mounting are sought.

Given that conservation had to be exhibition-led, I would ideally have wanted exhibitions which present a single object type in historical sequence. This type of exhibition gives the conservator a chance to survey one discrete area of a collection and to attend to its preventive care needs alongside the initial curatorial selection of objects for display. The result is a well-planned programme of remedial conservation, often with the bonus of remedial conservation making objects exhibitable for the first time. Unfortunately, from the curatorial point of view, single-object type exhibitions while useful, are not wanted as a steady diet. Chronological surveys of fashion are demanded by students and teachers, and the desire to attract new audiences demands ambitious themes taking in social history, ethnic communities, and youth-oriented issues. Selection of the widely varying objects for this type of exhibition from a large costume collection unfailingly turns up a range of urgent conservation problems to be dealt with on a crisis basis, and the possibility of gaining a broad overview of one part of the collection is lost. For me, this ensured that there was always a large body of remedial conservation work building up as individual emergencies as well as from exhibition-led priorities.

And of course the accession of new items into the collections continued unabated. By the end of my first year at Platt, even before my promotion to a managerial role, it was clear that I would never be able to see to the preventive care of all new acquisitions, even at a modest growth rate of 100 items per year, if I was to keep up with the work required for exhibitions and loans. In my previous job at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art the textile conservation staff felt quite justified in believing that the costume curator should stop collecting while the large backlog of unfinished work was dealt with. The procedure for new acquisitions involved formal presentation by the curator before other Heads of Department, and a large estimate of conservation time given to an object by the assigned conservator could easily prevent a proposed acquisition from being approved. Now, on the surface this system is logical and seems fair. But in an institution already weighted by tradition in favour of the 'fine arts', conservation estimates simply tend to further prejudice textiles because of the labour-intensive nature of textile conservation work. In practice, this served to exacerbate existing tensions between conservation and curatorial staff and to ensure periodic eruptions of 'warfare'. Working at Platt Hall, I gained some sympathy with my Angelino colleagues when it came home to me how a curatorial decision taking a matter of minutes to transact, might easily commit me to many weeks of conservation work, even though I had little voice in the matter.

To those who work with museum collections, I am sure this sounds familiar. New acquisitions, loans and exhibition work getting in the way of the advancement of the overall preventive care of collections is probably the issue at the heart of most conservator vs. curator friction. I was finally led to the belief that if I was ever to be able to look after the preventive care needs of a costume collection in the way that I wanted, I would be better placed to do so as a curator rather than as a conservator. Eventually, I made the career move that resulted in my present post as Assistant Curator of Costume at Chertsey Museum.

Chief risks faced by costume collections
Now that I have had a chance to view life from the other side of 'the crepeline curtain', I feel that the basic problems leading to this internecine friction between curators and conservators do not arise from their separate disciplines. Yes, both groups can each find characteristics of the 'other side' to criticise, but other than to let off a bit of steam occasionally, this serves little purpose. Taken further, this infighting can only harm the collections we mutually promote. In fact in larger institutions higher level managers may delight in these employee squabbles which serve to form a screen between themselves and the real problems.

The real risks to our collections, and the underlying causes of our mutual discontents, come from three sources, namely:

1. Poorly maintained buildings
2. Unsympathetic governing bodies, and
3. Insufficient resources.[2]

The three risks are often interlinked, and usually beyond our individual power to control. These are the factors which create the vicious circle that forms the title of this paper. A badly maintained building can lead to an insect infestation, which then makes further demands on strained resources, and can lead a governing body to view costume collections as a liability. A Director who sees costume as a low priority will not allocate it the space it needs, leading to poor storage accessibility that in turn demands additional time from an already overburdened schedule. It will not take many minutes to think of more variations to this circular dilemma. As I have said, these problems are usually beyond our individual control, but they may not always be beyond our collective power to change. This is why it really is essential that we, costume curators and conservators, settle our personal differences in the professional arena and begin to work more strongly together.

The recent years have seen unprecedented institutional 'attack' on costume collections, with the loss of senior staff and the non-filling of posts (including my own former post at Manchester). Retained posts have sometimes been only partially filled. I understand the costume post at Brighton is now worked on a one day a week basis. Other posts have been downgraded by restructuring (including my part-time post at Chertsey which was once full-time). More worrying is the fate of the Castle Howard collection. But this may only be a taste of what is to come. Witnessing events on the other side of the Atlantic in major institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum, the Brooklyn Museum and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, we should realise that we cannot be complacent. As push comes to shove, costume collections are seen as troublesome and therefore expendable.

How we can work together
Mirjam Foot, Director of Collections and Preservation at the British Library, recently stated that "no single library can take on the preservation of its own entire stock successfully".[3] This is something museums might begin to contemplate. Are we trying to do the impossible? Libraries are

increasingly working co-operatively to reduce the duplication of services. While there are important differences between libraries and museums, there are still lessons we can draw from each other. Might there not be areas in which costume museums could provide co-operative services with overall savings of time and expenditure? It is time to seriously think about the development of a national strategy for costume that embraces collecting, access and preservation. Co-operation between institutions would also help to convince funding bodies that the costume sector is responsible and is working to provide the best value for money. A national strategy does not mean just national museums; hand-in-hand with this co-operation goes the recognition of the national importance of local collections.

Collecting

Are separate museum collecting activities sufficient to ensure that we will preserve a representational selection of costume for the future? Equally important, can we really deal with the vast conservation difficulties posed by problematic materials on anything less than a national basis? Take the example of fur and fur-trimmed garments. Most costume museums strenuously avoid collecting furs because of both real and imagined fear of infestation. Thus there is a strong likelihood that the constitution of museum fur collections on a national basis will not be adequate to record either the social or industrial history of furs in Britain. A collective approach to the problem, including the setting up of regional cold-storage centres, might be one means of tackling the problem. With their current political incorrectitude, historic furs may have to wait before finding a persuasive advocate, but the area of contemporary collecting of modern synthetic materials is perhaps even more fraught with problems. The average life span of rubber and rubberised materials is quite short. What will conservators do in twenty years' time with all that rotting knicker elastic? Museums are already experiencing the problems of oozing plasticisers and brittle plastics in costume from the late 1960s. Research has found at least one temporary solution: that is, sealing problematic garments in air-tight bags with oxygen absorbers. However, to make this a practicable reality, shared facilities or equipment to carry this out cheaply and efficiently would be necessary.

Access

One area of burgeoning demand on museum staff time is that of education. Students at all levels are increasingly needing to access primary source materials for study. There are serious implications for both curators and conservators if museums are to satisfy this increased demand which means increased handling as well as increased time spent on storage, access and retrieval. Could not a collectively agreed procedure to direct researchers first to their local resources and regional specialist collections help to spread the burden? Answering written enquiries alone, I find I am now spending as much as 20% of my paid time, time that is urgently needed for the preventive care of collections. Museums have become the victims of their own success as good replies generate more inquiries, leading to the running in circles referred to in the title of this paper. A co-operative strategy might be one way out of the dilemma.

Preservation

It was recently put to me that there is only a fairly small amount of costume conservation actually being carried out at the present time. I began to think about what services costume museums need conservators to provide, and whether these services are on offer. Curators probably want most help with the following activities:

1. identification of materials
2. disinfestation
3. surface soil and crease removal, especially for display and preventive care
4. minor repairs, especially when part of a garment has come loose
5. construction of exhibition mounts, and
6. packing for loan and transport.

These are not areas in which independent conservators can easily market an economical service, as much of this work is best carried out on site. On the other hand, in-house conservators may not be asked to do these jobs because of the pressure of remedial conservation work. Curators of small museums with conservation budgets in the £100-500 range probably spend this on acid-free tissue and boxes and make do without conservation skills. However, there is still hope. New galleries and exhibitions often generate conservation funding which could go further if spent on more modest conservation work. Most conservators enjoy the more challenging jobs, but this should not make them disdain the more basic work.

One area in particular need of development is that of solvent dry cleaning. I would guess that as much as 50% of new costume acquisitions are reasonably strong and in good condition apart from surface soiling. Many of these items would benefit enormously from dry cleaning. Commercial facilities cannot be used with confidence because correct individual handling and the use of clean solvent are paramount concerns for museum work. The environmental problem with CFCs has been a setback, but we now need to move forward again in investigating alternatives and improvements. If the real needs of costume museums are to be met, the aim might be to set up regional centres for conservation dry cleaning.

Curatorial initiatives

It is important that curators are not simply complacent about their small conservation budgets. Risking derision, I will throw out one idea for discussion. Would it be possible to calculate a cost value for conservation for each new acquisition based on an averaged estimate of preventive care needs? This cost could be made known to potential donors along with the benefits that preventive care can bring to ensure the maximum slowing down of degradation. Perhaps a well designed brochure with a tear off section for credit card payment might produce some healthy donations. Curators probably do not do enough to make donors aware of the costs that are implicit in each acquisition. In the same area, acquisition funding bodies should be lobbied to allow the costing in of preventive care for purchases made using grant aid. It is obvious that no matter how poor our allocated budgets, we cannot responsibly go on collecting without adequate boxes, shelving and storage units.

Another area where curators might take the initiative is in training in the use of scientific equipment. For some reason, the microscope has been falsely seen as the tool of the conservator. Few curators are adept at simple fibre identification, or aware of the great advantages of low powered microscopes for close viewing of textile structures. Observation and interpretation of magnified images is well within the scope of everyone, and skills develop easily with practice. The work of CIETA on weave analysis, or Milton Sonday's exploration of lace techniques,[4] show the important curatorial discoveries which can be made using low powered microscopes.

Conclusion

In a discussion about the potential loss of historic evidence in the field of book conservation,[5] Mirjam Foot discusses the shared responsibilities of historians - read curators - and conservators.

> "The lack of knowledge, the lack of care and the lack of communication on both sides is still staggering. I can count the book conservators who know enough about the history of binding not to fall into the obvious traps on the fingers of both hands, and the number of librarians who know about and understand binding and restoration techniques is not much, if at all, larger. This would not matter so much if each side were prepared to listen to and to talk to the other."

Ultimately, the legitimate differences between curators and conservators can only be solved on an individual basis by good communication. Perhaps good avenues of communication will only be opened up when conservators and curators are trained together. In my ideal vision of the future, I see curators and conservators working side by side. After all, both activities require similar facilities: clean, well-lit surfaces for examination and photography, and computer equipment for recording and documentation. One of my greatest shocks in taking on a curatorial post was the 'down-grading' of my working environment. Gone is my spacious and clean conservation studio. What little space I am allocated must be shared with other, sometimes incompatible, activities. The provision of a dress-sized clean, clear surface can be difficult at the best of times in a small museum. But this is not right; curators are not simply glorified office workers in need of a desk and a telephone. We handle precious objects that we mean to preserve. This requires quality space and quality lighting. I can remember the changeover from old tungsten light bulbs to colour matching fluorescent tubes in the curatorial office at Platt Hall. From that point on, we all began to see the same dirt and staining, and fading. In new museum planning we should be looking toward examples like the Abegg Stifftung or the Ratti Centre at the Metropolitan Museum, where space is designed for storage, conservation and research to operate together. Working together in well furnished surroundings, curators and conservators might begin to discover a common vision.

Footnotes

1. Geraint Smith, The New War of the Roses, 5 March 1996, p 7.
2. John Feather, Paper Conservation News, No 76, Dec 1995, p 15.
3. Paper Conservation News, No 76, Dec 1995, p 15.
4. Milton Sonday, Natural forces and their effect on basic lace laws. In: Kant, Proc Textiledag, 25 April 1985. Textiel Commissie Musea; Amsterdam, 1987, pp 61-73.
5. The Paper Conservator, Vol 8, 1984, p 83.

THE QUEEN OF OUDH - CONSERVATION AND RESEARCH

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From the late 18th century the Muslim regional court of Oudh or Awadh centred at Lucknow in North East India became renowned for its opulence and extravagance. It was the centre of an extraordinary culture which reached its heights under the last King of Oudh, Wajid Ali Shah. As the most prominent and wealthy of the regional courts of Northern India, Oudh was of great strategic importance to the East India Company who saw increasing influence over Oudh as a way of undermining the diminishing power of the Mughal empire. After the siege of Lucknow in 1857, the British annexed Oudh and Wajid Ali Shah was exiled to Calcutta.

In 1994 the highlight of the rotation programme of light sensitive material in the Nehru Gallery of Indian Art in the Victoria and Albert Museum was a magnificent costume consisting of paijama or exaggerated culottes and a gown. The complete set of clothes also includes a short bodice or angia (literally something worn next to the body), and a dupatta or shawl constructed in the same way as the gown. The costume came into the old India Museum in 1855 and it is possible that it came to Europe via the Paris exhibition of that year. No registered description of the costume now exists except one which reads 'as worn by a Queen of Oudh'. There has always been a myth in the museum that she had been a nautch or dancing girl. The term nautch does little to convey the importance of these women in the Lucknow courts. The whole culture of the courts was totally oriented towards the zenanas or women's quarters. Many nautch girls were outstanding artists and singers excelling in sung poetry or ghazals and it was not uncommon for a ruler to marry a favourite nautch girl in a formal or informal marriage agreement. Some accounts credit Wajid Ali Shah with 120 wives, while others quote a mere 50.

The costume is constructed almost entirely of gota (literally edging) or ribbons made from high quality gold and silver and formed into a variety of different shapes. All four parts of the costume have an overall design of narrow pinched gold ribbons (a technique known as chutki) formed into a pattern of fish-scales known as mahi-pusht. The fish is one of the main characteristic motifs of the Oudh court. The ribbons would have been pinched together by hand and are held by a cotton gathering stitch. Each scale is decorated by a gold tinsel rosette known as chameli or jasmine. On the gown and the dupatta the gota is applied to a transparent plain weave green silk, on the angia to a red transparent gauze and on the paijama to a heavier plain weave red silk. Each component of the costume is edged with wider and more elaborate gold sections of gota which incorporate pearl filaments, twisted flat gold ribbons, sequins, check or square shaped filaments and tinsel fringes. On the inside of the costume an edging made of silver tissue is embellished with a pressed design of flowers and geometric shapes. The variety of the metal thread decoration creates numerous facets from which light can be reflected, particularly in movement.

The garments would have been made by a special group of women called mughalanis who were hired by the Begums or Queens of the Muslim courts as ladies in waiting and wardrobe mistresses. Part of the life of the zenanas or women's quarters would be the making of clothes.

Only two parts of the set are on display: the gown and the paijama; the gown is mounted over the paijama. It is important to appreciate the context of any costume in order to understand how it should be conserved and displayed but in this case it was absolutely vital. Research into the context of the costume confirmed that certain assumptions had been made about its display. It also confirmed doubts about the combination of gown and paijama which had been raised in the conservation studio. Familiarity with both the structure and the form of a costume can give the conservator a vitally important visual insight. In this case our hunches proved to be right.

The costume came into the conservation department in 1990 in very poor condition. The weight of the metal thread decoration had caused the transparent silk ground of the gown, angia, and dupatta to disintegrate. The silk on the bodice of the gown was almost completely missing and the pinched ribbons which formed the sleeves had lost all semblance of their original pattern. The remaining silk was dirty with a grey and slightly greasy appearance resulting from poor storage. Where the gold ribbons had been protected from atmospheric pollution they remained in excellent condition, but where they had been exposed the gold was darkened and dull. The weight of the gold ribbons and the fragility of the silk ground presented difficulties both in the conservation and in the mounting of the gown. Handling of the costume was a major problem. There was much loose fibre, the remaining silk ground split easily and the tinsel rosettes fell away readily.

The conservation of the gown involved three main areas. A method had to be found to remove the greasy and acidic soiling from the fragmentary silk ground. The fish-scale pattern of gold ribbons which formed the construction of the bodice and sleeves of the gown had to be reconstructed. Finally, the weight of the gold ribbons needed to be supported on a new transparent ground replacing the original silk which had almost totally disintegrated.

Any wetting of the silk caused further deterioration. However, a paper pulp poultice worked well and was applied to each skirt panel of the gown in turn. By capillary action a dramatic amount of dirt was released. A template of the fish-scale pattern was made from one of the intact panels of the skirt and the original dimensions of the bodice and sleeves were reconstructed. The gown was then completely supported onto polyester stabiltex dyed to complement the original silk ground. The result was a rare case of the conservation forming a satisfying full restoration and giving a very clear impression of the original appearance of the dress.

Research was undertaken both in the Victoria and Albert Museum and in India to unravel the mystery of the Oudh costume. There were two aims to this research: we needed to know what kind of costume it was and secondly, whether the gown and paijama were indeed worn together.

Women in the Muslim courts were in purdah. No married woman could be seen except by her husband and by other women in the zenana. For this reason, many paintings and contemporary photographs from the 19th century feature only nautch girls. Other sources include the diaries of remarkable Victorian women who had access to the zenanas and wrote descriptions of the type of clothes worn both by Begums and nautch girls. These contemporary sources can be further augmented by examining the continuity of tradition in modern day India. The royal families of India still possess and even wear costumes which are a valuable source of evidence.

Two types of wide culottes or gharara were commonly worn in the Oudh courts in the 19th century. The farshi (literally floor) was an extraordinary and exaggerated garment. Each leg spread out onto the floor like a train and for ease of movement the excess material was pulled through the legs and carried over one arm. The farshi was worn with a short jacket or a type of blouse (kurti) over an angia and the whole outfit enveloped in a huge veil or dupatta. Mrs Meer Husain Ali, an English woman married to a nobleman of the Oudh court, wrote in the 1840s "the upper portion of the form half-hidden, half-revealed by its gauze-like coverings, the lower concealed by the brilliant coloured paijamas". A simpler type of garment was the kallidah paijama (from the Hindi kalli meaning a panel). This garment reached the floor and was often worn with a peshwaj or front opening dress, particularly by nautch girls. Thus the silhouette of dress over a wide gharara is commonly seen in contemporary paintings of nautch girls. The gharara on display in the V&A is a typical kallidah paijama. It is likely that the whole set of clothes is part of a trousseau. Its tiny size indicates that it was worn by a pre-adolescent girl. Twelve was the common age of marriage in the Oudh court and one of the most common colour combinations for Muslim weddings is red and green. In a contemporary description of a betrothal ceremony, Mrs Meer Husain Ali writes "a sort of gown is worn, made of silver tissue or some equally expensive article, about the walking length of an English dress; the skirt is open in front and contains about twenty breadths of the material, a tight body and long sleeves. The whole dress is trimmed very richly with embroidered trimming and silver riband; the dupatta (drapery) is made to correspond". This describes the gown on display in the V&A exactly. It would have been worn with straight legged trousers or paijama and not as it is currently displayed. Mrs Meer Husain Ali describes this type of gown as one which is often a gift from the King or Nawab. This may explain the registered description 'as worn by a queen of Oudh'.

A fuller and illustrated account of the conservation and research associated with this costume will be published in Hali in 1996.

CONSERVATION AND THE ANTIQUE DEALER

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Conservation plays an important role in the marketplace in that it is essential to present a textile not only looking good, but also in good health, and with decent life expectancy. Clients are not impressed with crumpled, dirty, torn, faded or stained pieces.

When intending to offer a piece to a museum or major collection it is sometimes wiser, from the dealer's point of view, to leave any ambitious conservation, such as reweaving, to the institution concerned. They will probably have their own conservation team and their own set of practices. The condition of the piece will inevitably be reflected in the asking price. Nonetheless one should not offer a piece that is grubby or that will respond to simple conservation. And of course nothing should be done that cannot be undone, such as recolouring.

I had a specialist textile shop for twelve years and we were often asked for help and advice from members of the public. These days I keep a very low profile and prefer to deal only with specialists and museums when I can feel reassured that, with a moderate amount of good luck, precious textiles will be looked after in a responsible manner so that their life will be as long as possible. (I have never forgotten Finch and Putnam's opening remark "The life of a textile begins to diminish the moment it comes off the loom.")[1] But from my years of trying to help and to educate the public during my shop days, these few observations may be of some interest.

When selling to the public there are several perspectives to bear in mind.

It may be that the dealer has a textile professionally cleaned or mended before showing it, in a shop or gallery or at a fair, and bears the cost himself. The cost is then included in the selling price. Obviously there is a point at which the cost of extensive conservation will push up the selling price beyond a reasonable level, and in this case it would be foolish to buy a piece in lamentable condition.

Alternatively, a textile may be offered to the client and then be treated in accordance with the client's wishes, for esample, mounted and stretched, lined or backed, framed etc. The client bears the cost. The dealer may add on a percentage if a lot of time and trouble has been involved. It is sometimes easier to put conservator and client together; however, not all conservators welcome the sort of person who can waste a dealer's time in the shop, and bearing in mind future dealer / conservator relationships, it is often the dealer's lot to weed out the time wasters rather than upset a valued conservator. Many dealers are extremely reluctant to pass on their conservators to both trade friends and private clients: it is infuriating that when one needs something done one's conservator is booked up for weeks ahead working on a piece belonging to another dealer. Some of us, though, are generous in handing on contacts, and this usually works both ways.

Again, clients may bring to the dealer a piece of their own which has suffered damage from, for example, wine or food stains, tears, moth or fading, or is falling to pieces. In this case the dealer will assess the piece to see if it is feasible to have it conserved before sending it off for the conservator's estimate. Several criteria apply here:

- Is it physically possible or has the piece gone beyond restoration?

- Should the dealer point out that what is being looked at is not a 15th century piece of Flemish millefleurs tapestry worth thousands of pounds but a piece of late 19th century mechanically produced Belgian reproduction not worth forty pounds?

- Where does the dealer draw the line to try to persuade a useful and valued client not to have her 18th century Spitalfields dress turned into cushions?

- Sometimes with lace, uninformed people want it to be really white, as in the washing power advertisements.

Conservation for the dealer
Wet or solvent cleaning, if safe, is almost always worth doing (bearing in mind the cost). If not safe, some magic 'freshening' (presumably vacuuming), is usually beneficial to presentation. Dirt is not only unattractive but also damaging.

Support of weak areas is essential as deterioration will follow as night follows day, leading to an unhappy customer. Prettifying is beneficial, such as the replacement of missing bits of fringe, re stitching loose parts, darning or patching where necessary.

I don't carry out major changes, such as framing. Textiles are tactile but, alas, perishable. Here there is the tightrope of 'hands-on' versus 'behind glass'. Potential light damage should always be stressed to the client who wants a piece to hang on the wall or put on the bed.

I never ever turn things into other things, eg. shawls into waistcoats into curtains, toile de Jouy into lampshades or bookbindings, or anything into a cushion. Ostensibly there is no reason why damaged and mass-produced old textiles should not be recycled, when all that remains of them is beyond conservation, such as things with large parts missing; but in my personal view this is the beginning of a slippery slope. Many dealers with high overheads disagree with me, however.

What I require from the conservator
Reliability:
Reliable assessment ("the colours will run"; "it's too fragile and must be supported"; "I may not be able to get that stain out").

Reliable estimates, or if that is not possible, then a regular progress report with suggestions and an idea of how long the work will take. A quoted hourly rate is very helpful as it enables one to keep an eye on the future resale price - which the dealer must not lose sight of. With people I trust I can say "go up to such and such a price and then let me know how you are getting on" or "my absolute maximum is 'X' ".

Reliable insurance so that if a piece gets stolen out of the back of the restorer's car I am not the one who has to pay.

Reliable delivery or at the very least a cast-iron reason why it has taken three months instead of the three weeks originally proposed. I know all jobs are different and some just will not go easily and I am quite prepared to accept unforeseen hazards, but I wish to be kept informed. Prompt acknowledgement, even a hasty postcard, is always appreciated.

Reliable paperwork which details what has been done and provides an acceptable VAT breakdown where necessary.

In sum: an efficient and professionally-run business.

Honesty:
"I am not good at this technique. However, so-and-so may be the right person for this particular problem."

"There is a new material / technique which may help, but I cannot promise - would you like me to try it?"

"I am terribly sorry but I fell down the stairs and wrecked it. I will mend the damage at my own expense."

"I am absolutely up to my eyes in work at the moment; you will not get it this side of Christmas."

"This is going to cost a bomb."

Personal relationships
No-one wants to drop in on the conservator to be met with a Monday morning face and a blow-by-blow account of medical history.

No-one wants to speak only to the answering machine, especially to find that someone is on holiday when a client has just called to collect her piece. Of course this cuts both ways - the conservator, peacefully stitching to the accompaniment of Radio 3, does not need a detailed account of the traffic jams on the M25.

For my part I try firstly, at all times to preserve the textile and to put its well-being, both present and future, above other considerations.

Secondly, to take an interest in the conservator's work, and to appreciate the patience, skills, research, eyestrain, sore fingers, professional expertise and hard work which go into many pieces.

Thirdly, to remember that conservators are also human beings and have a right to life outside conservation.

And lastly, to pay on time.

Footnotes

1. Finch, K and Putnam, G, 1985. The Care and Preservation of Textiles. London, Batsford (2nd ed).

THE CONSERVATION OF A STRAW AND HORSEHAIR BONNET

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Introduction

This poster illustrates the conservation of a very fragile and mis-shapen 19th century straw and horsehair bonnet and an equally deteriorated posy of artificial flowers attached to one side of the bonnet.

The requirement of the treatment was to make the bonnet, an important part of the Luton Museum and Art Gallery's collection of hats, safe for storage, display and study. The aim of the treatment was to stabilise the condition of the bonnet, thus reducing the likelihood of further distortion, damage and loss. The main objectives were to reduce areas of stress and the degree of distortion of the bonnet and the posy, in order to assist in re-establishing their original appearance.

The bonnet's construction and condition, and the combination of materials, reduced the number of treatment options. The most restricting factor was the amount of mechanical action the bonnet could safely withstand. This limited the amount of cleaning, the extent of the support stitching required to stabilise failing seams and the degree of reshaping of the wire brim.

The provision of a custom-made support to stabilise the bonnet and minimise handling during storage, display and study was a priority.

Description

The bonnet is constructed from woven bands of horsehair and straw with a lining of stiffened cotton muslin, and a neck frill of cotton net beneath a gathered silk ribbon. The overall shape of the bonnet is largely controlled by lengths of heavy gauge wire attached to the edges of the brim and neck.

The bonnet is decorated with a posy of artificial flowers, comprising two roses and two leaf stems. The rose petals of painted silk are attached to fibre cores. The leaves are of sized cotton supported on wire stems, the main leaf stem being wrapped in cotton and coated with a green waxy substance.

Condition

The bonnet was very fragile, mis-shapen and soiled. The wire edging of the brim was severely distorted. Some of the stitching holding the woven bands to each other and to the wire had failed. Several warp threads and some sections of straw in the front band of the brim had broken.

The posy was in poor condition. The leaves and petals were crushed, partially detached and soiled. The fibre cores were soiled. In addition the petals were weak, split and fraying, and deposits of adhesive had stiffened and stained them brown.

Treatment

The bonnet

Surface cleaning with vacuum suction and a soft sable brush removed loose particulate soiling.

The horsehair was swabbed with cotton wool moistened with IMS and also IMS and de-ionised water to evaluate their effectiveness in removing ingrained soiling. Neither solvent was considered sufficiently effective in terms of soil removal to undertake further cleaning.

Where possible, failed seams were restitched and splits were couched with polyester multi-filament thread.

The degree of reshaping the bonnet brim was limited because the amount of manipulation and force required to smooth out distortions in the heavy wire would have damaged the surrounding brittle band of straw and horsehair. Since reshaping was not possible, the extremely vulnerable detached areas of the band could not be re-attached since this would have exerted too much pressure on the brim.

The support form

Deformities in the main structure of the bonnet were lessened by mounting the treated bonnet on a custom-made support form which could be used for display, storage and study. The objectives in the form design were to provide overall support, without obscuring too much of the inner parts of the bonnet, and to minimise handling. Therefore a Perspex (polymethyl methacrylate) armature, to which a covering of Melinex (polyester film) was stitched, was selected to provide the brim support. The rear section, which supported the crown and provided a point into which the Perspex stand and armature could be affixed, comprised a cloth-covered carved block of Ethafoam (expanded polyethylene).

The covering of napped fabric stitched over the Ethafoam holds the bonnet securely to the support form, eliminating the need for more intrusive methods of attachment.

The posy

To achieve an effective treatment it was necessary to gain access to all parts of the posy. This required its removal from the bonnet.

Every component of the posy was surface cleaned using low powered vacuum suction and a soft sable brush to remove loose particulate soiling. This was followed by three contact humidity treatments of petals and leaves using layers of moistened blotting paper. Gentle finger pressure and small glass weights assisted in the process of crease relaxation.

As a result of this humidification treatment the creases were considerably more relaxed and the adhesive and ingrained soils had been successfully removed.

The inner face of the petals were given a full support of degummed adhesive coated silk crepeline of similar weight. The adhesive Klucel G (hydroxypropyl cellulose) was chosen since it could be prepared on the support fabric as a dry film and later re-activated with acetone, the preferred solvent in this application because of its quick rate of evaporation. Once the adhesive had dried, the excess crepeline was cut away.

The petals were gently humidified to assist in easing them around the fibre cores of the flower heads. They were further supported at the base of each flower head with a narrow band of nylon net, held in place with stitches.

The conserved posy was re-attached to the bonnet, stitching through all layers including a patch of nylon net to protect the bonnet's original lining from the stitches.

Conclusion

This case study highlights the vulnerability of such costume accessories. The treatment is considered successful in that it has met the overall aims and objectives. Effective integration of minimally intrusive support and interventive conservation treatments has been achieved.

COSTUME DISPLAY IN THE MUSEUM OF SCOTLAND

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The Museum of Scotland (MoS) will be a new national museum built to display the Scottish collections. It is due to open in 1988 and is being built adjoining the existing Royal Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. This is the first new National Museum to be built in Scotland for over a century.

Conservation at the National Museums of Scotland

The conservation department at NMS is committed to spending the majority of its time on projects for the Museum of Scotland. There are approximately 14,000 objects to conserve and prepare for display in the new museum, of which about 400 are textiles. While many have been conserved in the past the requirements for their future display is changing in order to fit into a museum for the twenty-first century.

The Gunnister costume

The Gunnister costume, which dates to the late 17th century, was last displayed in the Museum of Antiquities for a considerable time. The Gunnister costume, along with similar examples, is now required for display in the MoS, and will be used here to illustrate some of the challenges being experienced.

The fully clothed body of a man was discovered in a peat bog near Gunnister, Shetland in 1951. He was wearing a shirt, long coat and wide legged breeches, as well as a ragged jacked and the left of a pair of gauntlets. The right gauntlet was also found. He wore long knitted stockings, the feet of which were heavily patched and reinforced. He also wore a knitted cap with a brim. A plainer knitted cap was at his right side, inside the clothing as if it had been in a pocket. Other finds included a knitted purse and a silk ribbon. All the clothing is woollen in varying shades of brown. The position of slits in the breeches and coat, along with the discovery of items at these points, suggests there were pockets, possibly of linen, which have not survived.

It is recorded that the clothing gives contradictory evidence about the wearer's status - the quality and cut of the coat and breeches compared to the very patched stockings and ragged outer jacket.

Little information remains about the period after excavation and the costume's entry into the museum. The flexibility and softness of the wool, along with the lack of soiling, indicating that the garments have been cleaned. It is known that it was at one time a practice at NMS to use lanolin to treat woollen objects. Records also indicate that textiles were washed in a solution of 50% Glycerin and de-ionised water as a fibre lubricant and for soil release during initial stages of the wet treatment. However, as no records remain it can only be assumed that this is what happened to the Gunnister costume.

Treatment

The decision was made in discussion with the curator to further intervene as little as possible, as the garments represent an excellent record of clothing of the period. All pieces were generally in fairly good condition. The main requirements were surface cleaning and support of holes and worn areas of the shirt, stockings and gauntlets. Where possible, the repairs were made using nylon net so as not to obscure information or detract from the worn and patched feel of some of the garments. It was also important that the treatment not be confused with the old repairs.

The future - displays in MoS
Working on a long term, large scale project like the MoS presents a number of challenges for the textile conservator.

It is important that we keep up with the programme of conserving objects in order to complete the work in time. However, due to the nature of the project, working to plans and timetables for an as yet unbuilt museum, many jobs cannot be completed. Decisions regarding mounting, colours and so on cannot be made at the moment. Therefore almost all conserved textiles, including the Gunnister costume, are returned to storage after treatment, only to be brought back into the workroom at a later date for mounting. It is envisaged that storage will increasingly become a problem as more objects are completed, as a conserved object often cannot be returned to its original storage space.

There are a number or parties involved in any decision about display of the costume. There are the curators of the costume, who ensure that an accurate representation is made of the outfit, as well as the curator co-ordinator for that section of the new museum. The MoS architect and designer deal with the appearance of the display itself. Textile conservation is responsible for the conservation treatment and safety of the object, and for mounting the costume with the help of museum assistants.

The conservation section is now investigating the options open for display of the Gunnister costume and other similar textiles, in order to present the most useful and widest range of options to all concerned. Our responsibility lies in ensuring that the figure chosen is safe in terms of materials and that it can be adapted to provide the most adequate support for the costume. We aim to provide the maximum information to those with whom the final decision rests as to the range and suitability of figures currently available. It is important to all that the costume, as will all objects in the MoS, be displayed in context as well as to its full advantage and in a conservationally sound manner.