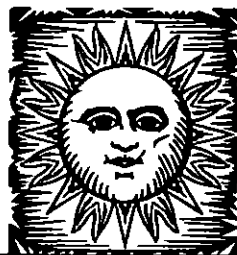


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TEXTILE CONSERVATION NEWSLETTER

SOME RECENT SUCCESSES  
IN  
DISPLAYING COSTUME

By  
Eva Burnham

## **Biography**

Eva Burnham received her training in Textile Conservation at the Abegg-Stiftung in Switzerland. She was in charge of the textile division at CCI (Canadian Conservation Institute) from 1976-91. Prior to starting her own business she was responsible for costume & textile conservation at the McCord Museum in Montreal.

## **Introduction**

Most costume curators and conservators are aware of the difficulties in mounting and displaying dress. Theoretically we know that if a collection is sizable and diverse, it is advisable to have as large a number of mannequins available as can be safely stored. This will give you the greatest flexibility when you are faced with mounting an exhibition. Museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York have, literally, hundreds and hundreds of mannequins in many styles and sizes. However most museums have limited budgets and have learned to “make-do” with varying degrees of success.

Traditionally mannequins used for the display of costume or fashion fall into two natural divisions. Those made specifically for period costumes and those commercially made store mannequins for post WW1 clothing.

The type of mannequin required to display historic costumes are generally expensive and difficult to find. If there are funds available to purchase mannequins to mount historic costumes there are specialized companies who offer figures designed for the fashionable period silhouette in a variety of sizes. As so many surviving garments are of diminutive proportion, the range of figure sizes begins with quite small examples, they are often available with an articulated head, waist, a hipline that pivots, that allows the altering of posture. These professionally made fiberglass mannequins are sturdy and come with custom made hardware, often they have different arm and hand poses. While these mannequins represent a major capital expense, they can be reused for many years.

Specialized museum mannequins are usually stylized and refined with certain fashionable exaggerations. As previously mentioned, they are often or partially or fully articulated to accommodate a variety of positions. This is most important when dealing with period garments as the stance of the figure changed quite quickly from period to period, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They have removable arms, legs and torsos and are mounted on a sturdy, adjustable stand. To purchase this type of mannequin could require an expenditure of hundreds of dollars each. In the best of all worlds, this type of mannequin is an ideal solution for the museum professional. Unfortunately, the museum world is in the throes of budget cutbacks and dwindling revenues. Therefore creative solutions to standard problems associated with the display of costume must be found.

The majority of commercial mannequins available today are geared to the high fashion industry. Most of these mannequins are not suitable for historic displays as they often have twisted torsos or exaggerated poses. The greatest disadvantage of these store mannequins is that they are often the wrong size and nearly always are in a pose or position which is unsuitable for the garment. If this is the case severe stress can be placed on seams and result in damage to fragile and important costume items which have been placed in the care of a particular museum or institution. If a store mannequin or dressmakers bust-form is used, precautions should be taken to make certain the costume fits properly and can be safely displayed. This is only possible if the costume is larger than the mannequin upon which it is to be displayed. There are various techniques to enlarge the mannequin to the correct proportion which allows the proper support for the garment and maintains the correct silhouette without causing any undue strain upon the costume itself.

The purpose of this article is to report on some of the recent methods developed and carried out at the McCord Museum of Canadian History in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Of course, it is impossible to even consider such creative solutions unless those responsible are completely versed in the chronological development of the fashion silhouette within the time period of surviving costumes. Added to this is the important element of safety which requires that the final display in no way endangers the garments through incorrect fitting or by using materials that are not chemically stable.

The three areas discussed are:

- 1) modifying commercially available mannequins;
- 2) a support system for individual garments;
- 3) the use of a new, inert material and technique of application for period hair styles.

#### **1) Modifying commercially available (new/used) mannequins.**

Commercial mannequins, although designed for hard use, are often damaged in the course of moving, being dressed and undressed. As they go out of fashion they are replaced and older models are either discarded or sold, often for very little money. It is sometimes possible to find examples from the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s and certainly the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in flea markets or through companies dealing with used store fixtures. Museums have a history of obtaining such mannequins from local department stores at no cost through the simple act of a thank you on the exhibition credit wall.

The politics involved may require the conservator to graciously accept what is offered, even if the pieces are not exactly what is needed. It is far better to make a friend of the department store display section than alienate them by being rigid and exclusive. In other words, "don't look a gift horse in the mouth." Lack of storage space, shortage of staff and limited funds should not be an excuse for being ungrateful. But of course every situation has its own pluses and minuses. Sometimes the least likely mannequin will spark the most creative solution.

Depending on the material from which the mannequin is made, various tools will be necessary to modify or alter the figure. In the case of papier-mâché, a saber saw is most effective in cutting away the sides of rib cages, shoulders or oversized bosoms.

Male dress torsos for use in commercial store advertising are now often made of injected foam with a cotton knit jersey cover. They are supported on an adjustable pole which fits into a stable, weighted base or stand. The example seen in the illustration has had the shoulders cut away in order to accommodate a man's period suit coat. In the 18th century men's coats were cut in such a way that the shoulder was de-emphasized, therefore the broad-shouldered look of the 20th century must be adapted.



*Illustration 1*

A note about the relationship between arms and sleeves for both male and female mannequins: If existing arms are either too large or there are no arms at all, quilt batting wrapped around a core of heavy copper or aluminum wire can be used. Once formed, they can be covered with the same washed cotton jersey or tubular stockinette. They can be attached to the shoulders with Velcro®. Sleeves made of very fine, fragile or transparent fabrics can be filled with crumpled up extra fine unbuffered Abaca tissue paper, known for its soft non-abrasive properties.

The child's dress form, composed of the same materials was also cut down in the area of the waist and ribcage. In this case underpinnings such as the side-hoops shown here were necessary to expand the figure to the fashionable silhouette and to support the gown which would have originally been constructed over such an arrangement.



*Illustration 2*



*Illustration 3*

A note of caution: These commercial mannequin are often made of materials that can cause volatile emission or migration of some of the materials components, it is important to cover the modified shape with a barrier of Marvelseal®, or other inert material which is in turn covered with a washed cotton jersey, to avoid any direct contact with the garment. The jersey creates a surface which helps support the garment once it is in place through the physical act of friction.

Breast reduction as an art form: It is well known that nature has never managed to place breasts where fashion insists they be. Therefore the female form has been changed through the use of corsets, bras, girdles and other devices to accommodate the current shape and style required by the fashionable. This was particularly true in the 18th and 19th centuries when the placement of the bosom changed as frequently as the boundaries of warring nations.

The example shown here is a polyurethane foam dress form with exaggerated breasts. It is intended to be the understructure over which is stretched a densely woven cotton cover which has been seamed and adjusted to the correct shape, after it was wrapped with Mylar®. The purchased cover must be at least one size smaller than the foam form. The cover forces the form into the desired shape. The commercial heavy cotton cover seen here, was re-tailored into the proper shape for the 18th century film costume it was to support. However, it was necessary to make a washed cotton jersey cover which was placed over the commercial cover to become an inert and stable surface upon which to place the reproduction gown. The foam breasts were not reduced but were

compacted to form a firm and substantial base upon which to drape the garment. The dress in the illustration is a reproduction which was made for a film set in 18th century French Canada. Therefore, the shape of the obligatory corset was approximated in the modification of the heavy cotton cover.



*Illustration 4*

## **2) A support system for individual garments**

A complete figure is not always required. Sometimes the display of a single item of clothing such as a vest, will enable the curator to interpret the material for the public. A boy's black wool vest of the late 19th century was shown on a three dimensional buckram form which was cut away at the center back to allow the viewer access to the unusual striped lining. In the past such a garment would probably have been displayed suspended from a hanger of some sort. Not only would such a display technique cause possible damage to the garment by concentrating all the strain on the shoulders, but it would not properly indicate the shape and style of this kind of vest. By recreating

the correct shape, the strain upon the garment is distributed throughout the piece.

A support system must provide adequate strength and firmness and must be dimensionally stable so that the garments own physical nature will not cause distortion. Milliner's buckram, has replaced the traditional materials of papier-mâché, brown paper tape and plaster soaked gauze (such as is used for casts on broken legs).

The method of production is as follows: The first step is to locate a suitable mannequin to be used as a base for the form. When the choice must be made, it is advisable to use a slightly smaller model as the finished form can either be cut and spread or simply padded to the appropriate size. It is wrapped with two or three layers of plastic wrap to form a barrier between the mannequin and the buckram form. Medium weight milliner's buckram is cut into pieces as large as possible to cover the surface needed. It is then dipped into tepid water, allowing the excess to drip off, and then, as it softens, is placed on the plastic wrapped figure. Through experience we have found that it is best to start from the shoulders and work your way down. If appropriate, a bias cut strip of about two inches of soaked buckram can be placed around the arm opening and along the lower edge for added support. We have even placed copper wire into a folded piece of buckram before it was applied for flexibility in shaping the finished form. The buckram should be allowed to dry for at least 12 to 24 hours. If the structure is to be used for a garment which will apply pressure, such as a corset or a heavy garment, additional layers should be used. Do not allow the layers to dry between applications. Do them all at the same time and extend the drying time to as long as necessary to be certain that the structure is free of moisture.



*Illustration 5*

Buckram shapes are a particularly good solution for temporary exhibitions. Recently this was successfully used in the new exhibition "Simply Montreal" at the McCord Museum of Canadian History.

The designer wanted a look that was off the beaten track, one which was unusual. The approach was to be "contemporary." For the designer, that meant that there were to be no heads, hands or legs. The costumes were presented on buckram constructed torsos with polished silver-colored metal armatures, modernistic in style. Minimal padding was used for these headless supports. For example, a rich 19th century evening gown included a period silver teapot in place of a head. In another display, 1930s dresses were supported on buckram forms and small lamp shades were used as substitute heads. The designer wished the object to be attached to a polished silver metal rod so that it would appear, almost miraculously from the neck opening of the garment. The inside of the shaped support was painted black so it would disappear and only the silver rod would be seen.

Buckram forms are supported with horizontal, plywood disks, usually centered in the waist area of the form. This disk should have a hole in the center to accommodate an upright adjustable pole for the display, which is set into a heavy plywood base for support and stability. The disk should be painted with latex paint and then stapled into place using rust free Monel staples before the buckram form is painted and finished.

The type of surface finishing will depend on how the buckram form is to be used. For example, a bodice with a deep décolleté, or a sleeveless bodice where you can actually look inside the form, would require a painted surface using black latex paint or another appropriate color. The outside of the shaped form is padded with a thick layer of polyester fiberfill and covered with washed cotton jersey in the correct color. Any dyed jersey must be color-fast and stable.

For temporary displays where undergarments are either unavailable, too fragile and precious or cannot be used for aesthetic reasons known only to the designer, satisfactory substitutes can often be made of materials called Reemay® or Cerex®. These are non-woven, spunbond inert polyester or nylon materials that come in different weights. They are not difficult to work with and can easily be sewn by machine or hand and made into petticoats, chemises or other underpinnings. They do not unravel and maintain a certain level of firmness, depending on the weight used.

### **3) The use of a new, inert material and technique of application for period hair styles.**

One of the most difficult problems in the display of period costumes is the decision to include accessories such as hats and jewelry. Hats require a complimentary and correct period hair style in order to be aesthetically successful. In the past the choices have been: human, animal or synthetic hair, yarn or string mops, curled strips of paper, papier-mâché, fun fur or even spray painted steel wool. Recently some experiments with a new material were performed, these resulted in stylized art-deco hairstyles that complimented the costumes.

The material used was "Model Magic®," an inert, non-toxic sculpting material originally designed to be used in schools for art projects, it is manufactured by the same company that brought us Crayola Crayons, and can be used in an enclosed environment. It is not expensive (the cost would be about \$5-\$10/wig) and can be shaped with various kinds of modeling tools, such as paint brush handles and popsicle sticks. However, the best tool is, and it was ever thus, your fingers. This material comes only in white but it can be painted after it is dry when it forms into a Styrofoam type of material. There is no special preparation for the surface to which it is applied and after has been used in an exhibition, it can be quite easily removed. It must be remembered that the wig will come off in pieces and cannot be reused.





*Illustration 6*



*Illustration 7*

## **Conclusions**

As textile conservators we are often called up on to work with the most complex forms of textiles, costume. How to present these three-dimensional objects to the public in a safe and historically correct way and still maintain the object's integrity, continues to be a challenge. It is hoped that the information in this article will be helpful to both the novice as well as the conservator with many years of experience. Working in times of budget restraints we are constantly having to meet new challenges, to create, develop and refine our techniques for handling textiles and costumes. In the safe and effective display of these treasured works of art we are preserving the past for future generations.

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## **Museum Mannequins**

<b>"Kyoto" Mannequins</b>	Wacol Crop. Jun Kanai 115 East 30 <sup>th</sup> Street New York, NY 10016 Fax: 212-575-7730
<b>Victorian &amp; Edwardian Art Deco Styles</b>	Goldsmith Inc. 109 43 <sup>rd</sup> Avenue Long Island City, NY 11101 Tel: 718-937-8476 Fax: 718-9374525
<b>18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century</b>	Adel Rootstein 205 West 19 <sup>th</sup> Street New York City, NY 10011 Tel: 212-645-2020 Fax: 212-929-0342
<b>Dressforms Female, male &amp; children</b>	Displetech Corp. 225 Chabanel West, Room 105 Montreal, Qc H2N 1C9 Tel: 514-381-2396 Fax: 514-381-9127
<b>Dressmakers Forms</b>	Dressmaker Inc. 2186 Ste-Catherine W Montreal, Qc H3H 1M7 Tel: 514-935-7421 Fax: 514-939-5569

## **Suppliers**

Quilt Batting  
Polyester Fiberfill  
Velcro  
Cotton Jersey

Local Fabric and Dressmaking Supply  
Stores

Abaca Tissue Paper  
Monel Staples

Gaylord Archival Storage Materials  
& Conservation Supplies  
Tel: 1-800-428-3631  
Fax: 1-800-615-3779

Mavelseal  
Mylar  
Reemay  
Cerex

Carr McLean Ltd.  
461 Horner Ave.  
Toronto, Ont.  
M8W 4X2  
Tel: 1-800-268-2123  
Fax: 1-800-871-2397

Crayola Model Magic

Local Art Supply Stores  
or  
La Maison Scholarex  
1415 Boul. Pitfield  
Montreal, Qc.  
H4S 1G3  
Tel: 514-333-0742  
Fax: 514-333-1112

Buckram

Elyse de Lafontaine  
4305 d'Iberville Buro 209  
Montreal, Qc.  
H2H 2L5  
Tel: 514-522-6279  
or

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