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The Process of Preparing an Historical Exhibit Involving Textiles
Conservation and Mounting Techniques

Emily Kelley
Senior Honors Thesis
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This project evolved out of many different events over the past year. In June 2012 I went to Atlanta, Georgia for the national conference of the Costume Society of America and participated in the Angel's Project. The Angel's Project sponsors a museum that needs help with conservation, and takes a day full of volunteers to teach conservation techniques, perform conservation, and donate archival materials. Participating in this really sparked a passion for textile conservation. In addition, I was doing my internship at the same time, and was working on organizing and doing some preventive conservation on the historic textile collection of Western's fashion department.

When deciding on what to do for my thesis, I really wanted to combine my love of historic textiles with my Public History education, and decided to create an exhibit on how to use historic textiles in exhibits. Rather than writing a manual on conservation techniques, I aimed to show people what I was talking about and allow them to get more invested in the project. My exhibit puts focus on three different aspects of dealing with historic textiles and integrating them into exhibits, choosing objects, mounting, and conservation. In addition, the exhibit includes an interactive activity, as any effective exhibit will.

For the section on choosing objects, I decided to go with a wedding dress that had a photo accompanying it, of the bride wearing it. Although this dress is relatively plain, and there may be more extravagant or more well preserved textiles that I could have used for this section, I chose this one because of its provenance. Pieces that have a history attached are a great way to draw the attention of the audience. People want to connect to what they see in an exhibit, and a photo or

compelling story can really bring a piece to life. This goes for all objects on display, not only textiles. When deciding what to put in an exhibit, it is also important to keep in mind the theme. Textile pieces should add to the exhibit, and should always be relevant to the material being presented. The theme of this project is simply the best examples to highlight each section, so I chose the wedding dress based purely on the photo and personal story.

With the mounting section, I had a lot of choices to make. I chose the pieces I did to show several different types of mounts. The 1880s dress had a very small waist and needed a child-sized mannequin built up to support the full chest and shoulders. It also needed a bustle, which was created out of a series of bum rolls (a bum roll being a half-circle shaped pad made out of muslin and batting). When working with bustled dresses, a crinoline should not be used. Bum rolls are much softer, and won't put as much stress on the skirt as a crinoline. When mounting garments, it is important to create the shape of the garment using illusions; corsets and crinolines are simulated by bum rolls, batting, and petticoats. The purse needed little in the way of support, but was filled with batting to help keep its shape. To display it upright, I used a photo frame stand wrapped in batting to make a cushion. When mounting hats, the most important thing to bear in mind is the sweatband. Hats are designed to have the majority of their weight supported by the sweatband, and therefore, when making hat mounts, the hat sweatband should rest on the pillow of the mount. A hat mount is made using foam board cut to the size of the hat, and making a pillow out of muslin stuffed with batting (similar to the bum roll concept). The pillow's widest part should be where the sweatband rests, and the

brim of the hat should not touch the foam board, but float above it. I covered the purse and hat mounts with satin to make them more exhibit-worthy. Mounts should be supportive of the textile while also making them aesthetically pleasing. A poorly mounted textile could be damaged and will not attract positive attention.

Conservation is an important part of dealing with historic textiles. There are three basic types of conservation, which are dry cleaning, stabilization, and wet cleaning. I chose an 1860s christening gown to demonstrate the conservation processes. Dry cleaning involves vacuuming the surface to remove freestanding particles. It is important to dry clean all textiles, because it can reduce the formation of stains and mold from foreign substances on the surface. It is routine to vacuum textiles about once a year, regardless of whether or not they will be on exhibit.

When vacuuming, I made sure to have a fiberglass screen between the vacuum and the textile, and to have the vacuum on the lowest setting possible. This keeps the textile from getting sucked into the vacuum. Dry cleaning prepares textiles for additional conservation, storing, and exhibiting. Stabilization involves sewing techniques used to repair and support damaged areas. On the christening gown, there was a tear and a hole in the front that had once been patched before, but whoever had done it had not done a very good job. I removed the patch, which was too large and heavy, and was not properly supportive. I replaced it with two smaller patches, reflecting the size and shape of the damaged areas. The tear was repaired with a couching stitch, which consists of long stitches perpendicular to the tear, with smaller stitches on either end tacking down the long stitch. Couching stitches should be about a quarter-inch apart, and should blend in with the textile surface as much

as possible. The hole was contained with a technique similar to a buttonhole, where the stitches wrap around the hole and through the patch, to keep the hole from growing larger. Following stabilization, wet cleaning can be done if desired. Wet cleaning is an invasive process, and is not suitable for all textiles. Textiles with unstable dyes, fragile areas, or water-soluble material should not be wet cleaned. In addition, silk should not be wet cleaned because it breaks down when submerged in water. If the decision to wet clean has been made, extensive documentation of the textile should be done. The condition of the textile should go in a report (like discoloration, stains, fiber content), along with a cleaning proposal (what steps will be taken, what cleaning agent will be used). I did not do a report on the christening gown, because the owner already had one. Before engaging in wet cleaning, all tears and holes need to be stabilized, so they don't get larger with the stress from cleaning. The processes of wet cleaning are: rinsing, washing, rinsing, and drying. To do the wet cleaning, I used a Rubbermaid tub that was roughly the same size as the gown, a fiberglass screen to lift the garment in and out of the water, a natural sponge, *All Free and Clear*, and room temperature water. The initial rinse is important to get rid of some of the soil from the surface that couldn't be removed with dry cleaning. The next step is washing, and I used a fresh tub of water with one half-cup of detergent. *All Free and Clear* is accepted as an effective and gentle detergent, because it has both ions and anti-ions, which remove several different types of stains. If the stains are particularly dark or hard to remove, hydrogen peroxide can also be added to the wash bath. I washed the christening gown once, because it got pretty clean the first time, but textiles often need to be washed more

than once. To try and get out the stains, gentle agitation with my hands and blotting with a natural sponge were the most effective methods, as well as the least damaging. Rubbing or heavy agitation can tear or fray fibers. After washing, the garment was removed from the tub once again to refill the water. Rinsing is very important, because soap particles left on a textile can be very harmful and grow mold. I rinsed the christening gown three times to make sure that the water ran clear, but denser textiles often require many more rinses. Once the textile is sufficiently rinsed, it can be dried. Begin by patting the textile with clean towels to soak up a lot of the water. Then, to dry it more quickly, I used a blow dryer on low and cool settings. A fan can also be used. Getting textiles dry quickly is important because the longer it is left wet, the higher the risk of mold formation. When finished drying, the textile will be ready for storage or display.

The last section of this exhibit is an interactive activity. The interactive involves the visitors taking what they learned about shaping mannequins in the mounting section and using it to stuff a mannequin to the dimensions appropriate for an accompanying garment. Visitors are invited to try the dress on the mannequin, identify the areas that need more shape, and stuff batting into rib knit in order to control the shape and fit it to the size of the dress. Exhibit designers should try to incorporate interactive activities into their exhibits because they get visitors involved, allows them to learn without having to read, and can also reinforce something that they learned previously in the exhibit.

This project was a great learning experience and really helped to confirm my interest in historic textiles. Other than what was directly involved in my exhibit, I

also learned how to work with the materials given to me, how to write an effective section panel and object label, and also some things about cinematography with the making of the short film. This project was a great starting point for my career and is a first step into working with textiles in an academic medium, which is preparation for my graduate studies in textile conservation. The foci of this exhibit—choosing objects, mounting, and conservation—are a combination of textile conservation and museum studies/exhibit design, and add to my knowledge of the ways museums and historical societies work.

Appendix A- Choosing an Object



Anne and Bob Hardin on their wedding day, June 1954



"Wedding Dress, 1954

Eleanor Egan made this dress for her daughter, Ann Hardin. The casual, floral style befitted her June wedding. The condition is excellent, except for some deterioration under the arms. Pictured are Ann and her new husband Bob at their wedding.

On loan from Jean Simpson."

Appendix B- Mounting



"Silk Dress, 1880s

This dress has a very small waist, and needed to be mounted on a child size five mannequin. The torso was too short for the bodice, so batting was added to the chest, shoulders, and back to fill out the shape. Under the skirt is a series of bum rolls, which creates the bustle effect.

On loan from the Historic Textile Collection at Western Michigan University."



"Bum Roll and Display Arm

These are examples of materials used when exhibiting historic garments. Bum rolls are used to create bustles, because they are soft and malleable, where a crinoline is not. Display arms are made from knee-high nylons, batting, and a wire. They are great for under long sleeves, because they are bendable."



"Evening Clutch, 1950s

This bag features a metal clasp and a hard body. The inside is stuffed with batting to help the bag keep its shape. A photo frame stand wrapped in batting, and then in satin, is propping up this clutch.

On loan from Jean Simpson."



"Sun Hat, 1960s

This hat features a tall crown and wide brim. A pillow was created out of muslin and batting to hold up the hat. The sweatband sits on the widest part of the pillow. The pillow is tall, to accommodate the floppy brim.

On loan from Emily Kelley."

Appendix C- Conservation



"Christening Gown, 1860s

Christening gowns are important to Catholic and some Protestant cultures. Babies would be baptized in special gowns like this one. Most are family heirlooms and used for many babies. This christening gown features machine embroidery, which is special because embroidery machines were brand new in the 1860s.

On loan from Patti Borrello."



Close-up of tear and hole in the gown before any conservation work

Appendix D- Choosing an Object Section Panel

"Choosing an Object

When choosing what textiles to exhibit, there are many factors to take into consideration. Some key questions to address are:

- Does this piece fit the exhibit theme?
- Is the piece in good physical condition and stable enough to exhibit?
- What is the history behind this piece—does it have significance?

The theme of the exhibit will greatly influence the textiles displayed in it. An exhibit on a certain time period or person will be confined to specific types of pieces, while an exhibit on a type of clothing or accessory (like handbags) would have more freedom over selection.

Once potential objects have been selected, the condition must be assessed. Some textiles are too fragile to exhibit, and could be greatly damaged or destroyed by being displayed. Another reason to choose stable pieces is that the best examples should be on display—impressive objects are what the public wants to see most.

Another important aspect of choosing objects is their provenance, or history of origin. Objects that have a personal story relevant to the exhibit are almost always more interesting than something without a story. Having a photo or painting of the owner wearing or using an object is also a great way to capture the audience's interest."

Appendix E- Mounting Section Panel

"Mounting

There are many ways to mount textiles, for the simple reason that there are numerous types of textiles and each needs to be treated differently. Clothing can either be put on a mannequin or hung on a hanger or T-stand, if there is not much space. If using a mannequin, the shape must fit the clothing without being too tight or too loose. This will provide the best support. Mannequins can be stuffed with batting to make them larger, or carved down with a knife to make them smaller. People from different time periods had bodies shaped different than modern bodies. This is due to evolution, fitness level, and manipulation (like corsets). Hangers and T-stands should be padded and wrapped with muslin to avoid sharp edges, and the ends should sit right at the shoulder seam, which will both eliminate stress on weaker areas of the garment, and it will be more aesthetically pleasing.

To mount hats and purses, a simple method can be used for both storing and display. Stuff purses with either unbleached muslin, or acid-free tissue paper. Purses will need to be propped up for display, which can be done with foam, batting, or a picture stand. Make sure it is not overstuffed, but is that the stuffing is helping the purse maintain its shape. For hats, the best thing to do is make a flat display board with a supportive pillow made from batting and unbleached muslin. To convert these to exhibit displays, drape satin over the mount and replace the object."

Appendix F- Conservation Section Panel

"Conservation

The focus here is on cleaning and stabilization. There are two types of cleaning, dry and wet. Dry cleaning consists of vacuuming the object with a low-power vacuum. Make sure to use a fiberglass or nylon screen overtop the object to protect it from getting sucked into the vacuum.

After dry cleaning, stabilization can be done. There are many techniques to stabilize and repair rips or holes, one of which is couching. Supplies needed are lightweight cotton or polyester in a matching color to the object, scissors, a fine needle, and very fine thread also in a matching color. For all techniques, loose stitches should be used, to reduce stress on the area, and they should blend in as much as possible.

Wet cleaning is an optional process. The object must be stable enough to handle the stress of being washed and dried. Wet cleaning is very effective in removing stains and overall discoloration of textiles. A large, clean tub and detergent are required for wet cleaning. Some conservationists create their own detergents, but All Free and Clear was used in this project (approved by Dr. Margaret Ordonez of the University of Rhode Island).

The conservation processes performed in this project are illustrated in the accompanying video."

Appendix G- Interactive



"Play with Me!

The waist on this dress is too small for adult female mannequins, so we must improvise with a child's mannequin. However, the chest and hips of this dress have a woman's shape.

Stuff the chest and hip areas with batting to give this dress proper support! Shove the batting underneath the stocking that covers the mannequin, and keep trying the dress on until it looks right.

(This dress is not a historic garment, so feel free to play around!)"

Appendix H- Special Thanks

Special Thanks To:

Dr. Amanda Sikarskie, for being my thesis committee mentor, and all her guidance throughout this long and stressful process.

Patti Borrello, for serving on my thesis committee, loaning me a piece from her collection, and getting me hooked on textile conservation.

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