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Conservation Treatment Record
1850s Barège Rural Wedding Dress
Fairlynch Museum

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Client: Fairlynch Museum
Contact: Betty Hebditch
Object name: Rural wedding dress
Accession number: 1998.145.1

Description

A cream barège (silk warp and wool weft) dress printed with red and blue flowers and reddish brown floral and zigzag motifs. There are three deep flounces for the skirt, pagoda sleeves trimmed with little silk tassels, from about 1850. It appears to have been altered during the 19th century, as there was a centre back opening with hook and eyes and the bodice was silk lined before the subsequent linen lining was put into the bodice. The neckline may also have been lower. The bodice was also taken in as there is significant excess at the side seams between the silk and linen linings. It was worn again for a family wedding in 1973 when some repairs were made. These include re-use of the original fabric to patch damaged or altered areas. The stitching at this time is fairly crude.

Condition

- Major structural damage: there are large splits, holes and loss, particularly at the waist as the bodice and top of skirt cannot bear the weight of the full, flounced skirt. There is a patch repair at the front of the right (proper) side of the bodice where no attempt has been made to match the orientation of the fabric. The piped neckline border has largely lost its outer fabric.
- Minor structural damage: there are also smaller splits and holes in the upper sleeves and throughout much of the bodice, especially concentrated in the underarms. The lining fabrics at the underarms are also in poor condition.
- Disfigurement: the splits and loss are distracting and there is yellowing of the ground fabric and lining.
- Chemical deterioration: the yellowing, in part induced by perspiration and stains from use, indicates chemical deterioration which is consistent with the physical damage. Many of the splits are between the wool wefts as the silk warps have become embrittled and fragmentary in places of physical wear or chemical deterioration (perspiration).
- Damaging old repairs: the stitched repairs are inadequate and causing localised distortion. A hook has been placed at the waistline on the left hip which doesn't correspond to an obvious loop fastener and is catching on the fabric. Many of the patch repairs have not been aligned with the original fabric. The tapes stitched to the waist band do not adequately fasten and cover the small pocket. The dark brown flounces appear to have been supported onto nylon stocking material.
- Accretions: there is generalised loose particulate and more ingrained soiling

Proposed conservation treatment

- Documentation and photography
- Surface cleaning to reduce loose particulate soiling, using low powered vacuum suction and soft artists' brushes
- Removal of damaging/ disfiguring stitched repairs
- Humidification to reduce creasing
- Dyeing support fabric: silk habutai and fine nylon bobbin net or silk crepeline overlay

- Stitched support to sleeves, bodice back and front, skirt front and back, bottom right (proper) flounce and front waistband

Conservation Treatment

The dress was photographed and then dye recipes developed for silk crepe and fine nylon bobbin net to support the fragile barège fabric. The support fabrics were colour matched with Ciba Geigy Lanaset dyes (1:2 metal complex and reactive dyes).

The dress was surface cleaned using a Dental Vac with low-powered vacuum suction and very soft artists' brushes.

Patches of dyed fine nylon net were cut to overlay weakened areas of the bodice and silk crepe patches were cut to insert below areas of loss. The raw edges of the silk crepe were sealed with 5% sodium carboxymethyl cellulose to prevent fraying. The damaged and weakened areas of the front bodice were conserved first. The patch at the bottom of the right front panel was removed as it was crudely applied, misaligned and causing bulk on the inside where two metal hook fasteners had been re-stitched. The patch was humidified and it was discussed with the museum whether the patch should be cut and reapplied in the correct orientation. However, as it would not fully cover the area of loss it was agreed to support the area of loss with the new crepe and net instead. Where the support fabrics had to cover areas with the metal hook fasteners they were cut to either fit around the fasteners or to enable the fasteners to continue to be used to secure the dress.

The underarms and tops of the sleeves were given the same support treatment. An attempt was made to minimise the amount of net used as it does obscure the printed fabric design to some extent. It was only applied to areas that are likely to receive handling during mounting and demounting and those that were clearly weakened. The piped neckline was encased in the nylon net, as were the fragmentary areas of the armhole linings. The splitting at the top of the sleeves was extensive so the long strips of the dyed fine nylon were cut and the narrow band at the top fully covered, following the pleat folds.

When the 1970s stitching was removed from the back the 19th century alterations were uncovered. The two panels making up the high necked back of the altered bodice were misaligned and damaged in places. However, as they made up a substantial part of the bodice and may date from the 19th century they were conserved in situ and not removed. Creases were eased out through humidification using 'Goretex' (semi-permeable membrane) as an intermediate layer between archival blotting paper brushed with deionised water and the textile. Once the creases were eased out they were covered with glass weights to dry. The centre back opening was restitched using fine polyester thread.

The splits in the flounces, along the hem and the top of the skirt were supported with a combination of crepe support fabric and nylon net overlays. Previous repairs although not ideal were left in situ as it would have caused significant damage and excessive handling to remove them and replace them with conservation methods and materials.

The inadequate knotted tape at the waistband was removed as was the hook on the left hip as it did not correspond to a loop and was catching on the fragile barège fabric. New, scoured cotton twill tapes were stitched in place along a substantial part of the front and back of the waistband. The front one was stitched under the small pocket so as not to obscure it. The skirt can now be fastened by tying the tapes at the left front.

The dress was surface cleaned as before to remove dislodged soiling before being photographed and packed.

Recommendations for future care

The dress should only be placed on short term display and stored in an archival costume box lined with unbuffered acid-free at all other times. The folds should be interleaved with unbuffered acid free tissue, including 'puffs'.

On display the dress should either be laid flat on an acid free fabric or covered board. If mounted on a mannequin the mannequin should be prepared with the correct underpinnings (crinoline, petticoats and sleeve supports) to provide the appropriate silhouette and support to the dress. This will provide physical support and encourage the correct interpretation of the dress. All the mounting materials, underpinnings and mannequins should be made from archival materials.

All UV radiation must be excluded (less than $10\mu\text{W}/\text{lumen}$) from the display area and light levels maintained at below 100 lux during open hours (50 lux if the display is longer than 6 months) and excluded during closed hours. In both the gallery and the store the relative humidity must be stable below 65% (with fluctuations of less than +/- 5%).

Photo-documentation



Front before conservation (BT)



Back BT



Detail of printed fabric with silk warps (running horizontally in this image) and wool wefts



Front neckline with exposed piping and soiling through wear on lining



Front waist with damage to bottom of bodice and splits in top of skirt



Original silk lined bodice back with lower neckline opened to reveal later linen lining



Waist lining and tie which covers small front pocket



Humidification of second from top patch where damaged, possibly by insects, in progress (IP)



Top back bodice with two panels at the top which do not align with the rest of the fabric and may date from a 19th century alteration BT



Detail of horizontal splits in top of back skirt



Right back underarm BT



Damage around underarm, exposing piping cord and past stitched repairs



Encasing piping in net



Patch in bottom of front right bodice which does not align with the pattern, IP



New cotton tape ties being applied to waist



Net applied to flounce hem with earlier repairs above



Removed patch leaving lining exposed



Front after conservation



Applying net overlay at bodice shoulder



Front open showing linings and new cotton tape ties and small pocket



Previous tape removed from waist, revealing small pocket



Back after conservation



Hook removed from left hip area of waist



Back waist after conservation



Back bodice and sleeves after conservation