

Wrong Century, Wrong Place - The Conservation of a 'Robe a la Francaise'

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ABSTRACT

In 2007 during the re-housing of the Queensland Museum's costume and textile collection, a strange silk brocade costume was discovered hanging in an old wooden cupboard at the back of the Social History Store. On further examination the costume was identified as an eighteenth century 'Robe a la Francaise', circa 1770 - 1775, a garment which initially seemed totally out of context as the state of Queensland was not established until 1859. The original records indicated that the dress had arrived in Brisbane in 1961 and was donated together with two embroidered waistcoats in 1964. The dress originated in Scotland and eventually found its way to Miss Jenny Eggett of Kent.

Following her death part of her estate which included the dress was shipped to a branch of the family in Brisbane. The donor was a distant relative of the first Major of Brisbane, William Jolly. As a result of the enormous interest generated by this dress, a conservation fund was established which enabled the purchase of an eighteenth-century Kyoto mannequin and 190 hours of conservation work. This paper will discuss the conservation work carried out.

INTRODUCTION

In 2007 during the rehousing of the Queensland Museum's costume and textile collection the oldest costume in the collection was discovered hanging in an old wooden cupboard at the back of the Social History Store. On further examination the gown was identified as an eighteenth century 'Robe a la Francaise', a garment which initially seemed totally out of context as the state of Queensland was not established until 1859. This object also referred to as a 'Sack Dress' originated in Scotland and belonged to Katherine Carmichael, the daughter of Bishop Robert Keith and Isabel Cameron of Edinburgh. Katherine died in 1793 (1).

The gown eventually passed down to Miss Jenny Eggett of Kent, a distant relative of William Alfred Jolly, the first Lord Mayor of the Greater Brisbane City Council. Following the death of Miss Eggett part of her estate which included the gown was sent to her maternal ancestors living in Brisbane. These included the Jolly and Rollo families, both originally from Scotland. The dress and two eighteenth century male waistcoats were donated to the Queensland Museum in 1964.

The Robe a la Francaise features a fitted front and a pleated back bodice, in contrast to the Robe a l'Aglaise which has a fitted front and back. The pleats at the back on the latter style are usually stitched flat. The front of the Robe a la Francaise is laced from the low cut neckline to just below the waistline join. The front skirt section is worn open to reveal the matching petticoat. The fit of the bodice is enhanced by lacing incorporated in the back of the bodice lining. The bodice also features elbow length sleeves with double gathered flounces.

The neckline, sleeve and the centre front sections of the skirt are embellished with silk gauze, braid, and clusters of silk floss, and glass beads. The fabric used in the construction of the back bodice is triple pleated from the neckline to the waistline and then the full width of the fabric is released to form the back skirt. Approximately eight, twenty inch widths of silk have been used in the construction of the dress.

1. Information provided to the Queensland Museum in 2006 by a distant relative.

The fabric was analysed by Kay Faulkner, a master weaver based in Brisbane. The following description was provided:

Fabric structure - complex weave structure with brocade, woven on a draw loom. Single warp, one colour with even sett (spacing of threads), single weft (multifilament) one colour background plus brocade (discontinuous weft where several colours are laid in the same pick and used as required). Natural dyes used include: blue (2), brown/olive, cream, olive and red (3). Basic fabric structure is satin with twill line on reverse (5 end satin often called satin twill) Basic fabric structure is used in the following manner; the main background consists of two elements to create a stripe. The second element is a narrow stripe in tabby weave ground with a weft float width of stripe. Different structures result in raised stripes. There are four brocade motifs, two large and two small. One of the larger and one of the smaller motifs appear to be a mirror repeat to achieve the second. The small motif has unpatterned surround (that is no stripe) in the main element. The large motif has unpatterned surround in the main structure with weft patterning to create a garland effect. The brocade is made up of a discontinuous weft in eight colours. Pattern repeat: width has three motifs across the fabric. Woven width including selvages is twenty inches. Twill selvedge uses some of the red brocade yarn in stripes (2).

The petticoat worn with the dress was originally made up of five widths of twenty inch wide fabric which were pleated to fit the waist. At some stage it was reduced by half a width and the majority of pleats were replaced with a casing and a linen drawstring. The front panels are heavily embellished with draped silk gauze, braid and clusters of silk floss and glass beads. The hem is faced with a very fine silk lining similar to Jap silk.

CONDITION

Dress: the silk gauze, braid, floss and bead trims (See Figure 1) have either unravelled or broken away in various places on the bodice, sleeves, and skirt panels. On the proper left side of the front skirt there are two missing beaded embellishments, and one wrongly positioned. On the proper right side there are six missing embellishments, and three wrongly positioned. There are a number of small stains on each of these components.



Figure 1: Embellishment made up of silk floss and glass beads. (Photograph by author)

The staining on the bodice lining, proper left side, has not transferred through to the silk brocade.

The flounces on the right sleeve, proper right, are also discoloured. An old watermark is evident on the right hand side of the upper flounce. When examining the inside of the dress the degree of staining is far more wide spread, however at this stage it has not transferred to the right side. Both flounces on the left sleeve have pronounced creases running lengthwise. There are seven holes in the skirt area, four of which appear to have caused through 'wear and tear' and three by insects (See Figure 2).



Figure 2: Examples of the holes scattered throughout the petticoat. (Photograph by author)

Petticoat

Two of the pleats along the waistline, proper right side have been released (*see figure 3*). This was probably occurred during the latter part of the nineteenth century when the dress was worn to a ball by another member of the family. The ribbon tie which also finishes the front waistline edge has shredded along its entire length. There are four tears along the waistline casing and small holes scattered throughout. Several of the braid and beaded embellishments are no longer attached to the front of the petticoat. The reverse side of the fabric is covered in small age spots which have not as yet transferred to the right side.



Figure 3: Petticoat, back proper right, two of the original pleats have been released. (Photograph by author)

TREATMENT

Dress

All the small holes were stabilised using circles of silk organza and ivory organza yarn as the couching thread. The free floating trims were re-attached to the dress using the same yarn. The silk gauze trims were lightly steamed to soften the creases; the splits were stabilised using ivory silk tulle. The incorrectly positioned beaded embellishments were repositioned based on old stitch holes and old sewing thread which was still in place. Silk thread was used for this task.

Petticoat

As the front waistline ribbon ties had shredded over time, the remaining fragments were removed and replaced with an 18mm wide 100% cotton ribbon. Before applying the ribbon it was soaked in

distilled water for 10 minutes, rinsed, partially dried and then ironed. The slits through which the back waistline drawstrings passed were reinforced with beige nylon net. The two holes in the left side panel, the hole in the right front panel and the hole in the right back panel were all stabilised using silk organza as the support fabric. The largest hole was also covered with silk tulle to protect the surface from future damage. The detached beaded embellishments were re-attached to the centre front panel using silk thread.

The upper embellishment on the proper right side was also re-enforced with a patch of silk tulle on the reverse side, as the silk fabric in this area was quite weak. All the waistline facings were lightly pressed using a heated spatula. The raw edges of the two centre front facings were finished with nylon net, similar to a net bound seam finish. The edges of the back drawstring casing were strengthened using a 7mm wide silk ribbon (*see figure 4*). Using silk thread, the two pleats which had been released on the proper right side were re-stitched back into position. The dress and petticoat was then lightly vacuumed prior to storage.



Figure 4: Petticoat, reverse side. Silk ribbon and tulle were used to finish raw edges. (Photograph by author)

CONCLUSION

The stabilisation methods although simple and taking 190 hours to complete, proved to be successful and non-invasive. It was decided not to return the sack dress to the large wooden cupboard it had been housed in for more than twenty years; instead it was now to be stored flat. The petticoat was placed in a large textile box. A mattress made from polyester wadding and covered with silk satin was inserted into the petticoat.

Folds not supported by the mattress were softened by crumpled, unbuffered tissue paper. Ethafoam tubing was used to roll the petticoat waistline ties. The dress was placed in a textile box to which an extension was added. Unbuffered tissue paper was used to support the dress until custom made supports could be made.

To protect the dress from the beaded embellishments, each beaded strand was encased by tube of Jap silk which was then loosely tied into position with cotton tape. For future display an eighteenth century Kyoto mannequin was purchased following a donation made to the Museum for this purpose. A hooped petticoat, a cotton petticoat and a silk petticoat were also made to provide support and protection during display. These supports were based on extant garments.

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Dr Michael Marendy has been associated with the Queensland Museum since 1993. He has been employed as a textile conservator, collection manager and curator. Prior to this association Michael taught in the TAFE and University sectors, as well as working as a clothing designer and textile conservator. Since the 2011 textile symposium he has curated and carried out the conservation work on the garments featured in the Queensland Museum exhibition, *Dressed by the Best: Fashion, Glamour and Gwen Gillam*. He has also worked as the consulting textile conservator for *Quilts, 1700-1945* at the Queensland Art Gallery; for *Future Beauty: Thirty Years of Japanese Fashion* and *Threads: Contemporary Textiles and the Social Fabric* at the Gallery of Modern Art; and for *Undressed: 350 years of Underwear in Fashion* at the Queensland Museum.