

Supports for Textile Display: Overview and Strategies for Flat Objects

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Most textiles and other three-dimensional objects made from organic materials require support mounts for safe storage and display. A good mount design provides the necessary foundation while presenting the object to its full advantage, and allows for a safe, minimally invasive, and re-treatable method of attachment. Support mounts play an important part in an object's preservation; if well-designed, they slow down the damage gravity exacts and can serve both storage and display, thereby reducing unnecessary handling and its associated risks. Display supports aid in the viewer's understanding of an object, preserving the intended form or shape in as inconspicuous a manner as possible. As part of an exhibition, the manner of display can significantly complement curatorial research and interpretation.

Costumes and similar textile or fabric objects pose unique concerns for support and display, compounded by their complex structure and range of use. The object must first be assessed for structural stability. An object's main support point during its useful life (e.g., the shoulder seam of a garment) can become weakened or compromised with time and wear, and a different mount design and/or stabilization treatment may be necessary to prevent further damage. A well-designed mount will distribute the weight of an object safely and evenly.

Commercially made mannequins are ill-suited to support historic garments. They are made of unstable materials that may react chemically with the object. The shape of a mannequin is often too modern for a historic silhouette, resulting in a poor and possibly dangerous fit. It is usually not possible to safely fit a rigid arm form into a fitted historic garment, since the manipulation and force necessary to do so can cause significant stress on fabrics and result in serious damage. An appropriate mount will be made of archival materials, using barrier layers to prevent chemical interactions where needed; provide the right amount of rigid support and soft cushioning where needed to respond to the varied structure of garments; and have a cover that will not abrade or otherwise damage the object while providing gentle nap-bond friction to help secure it in the desired orientation.

Each object requires individual assessment to design a successful mount or support. One can often begin with standardized support designs, but customization of the support to meet the object's specific needs is critical to preventing damage. A wide range of stable materials, along with techniques and equipment to work with them, provides the mount maker with the ability to safely support an object for exhibition and storage.

What follows are case studies of treatments that describe and illustrate specific challenges and solutions in support mount design and use.



Figure 1

Woman's hide dress

This young woman's dress [Fig. 1], of Tsistsistas Suhtai (Cheyenne) origin, was made of semi-tanned animal hide with carved bone ornaments and glass beadwork. The support consists of two four-inch-thick planks of Ethafoam, intersected at right angles along the axis and carved to form a torso with measurements taken from the garment. A layer of needle-punched polyester provides light padding and a smooth surface for the rough-cut Ethafoam (2.2 lb. density). An undyed cotton stockinette cover was scoured to remove manufacturer oils and soil, then custom dyed with fiber-reactive dyes to achieve a visually appealing color. This fabric has a smooth surface that forms a nap bond with gentle friction against the hide, preventing slipping or shifting without abrading the garment.



Figure 2

Silk taffeta dress

This silk taffeta dress [Fig. 2] was owned in the 1880s by Kate Stoneman, first woman graduate of Albany Law School. Structured undergarments were worn under dresses such as this to create a very specific shape, or silhouette, following the fashion of the period. Corsets would cinch the waist, conform the bust, and encourage a straight posture with shoulders held back. A custom Ethafoam¹ form was made to mimic these effects and support the dress on display. Two planks of Ethafoam were cut in an outline of the desired form and intersected, then the form was rounded and filled as needed to recreate the shape of the historic posture inherent in the dress design. Needle-punched polyester and a scoured cotton stockinette protect the stiff, lightweight silk from abrasion. The sleeves were filled with a lightweight, acid-free tissue; fitting a rigid arm form into the sleeve of the bodice would likely cause damage.



Figure 3

Woman's hair piece

This nineteenth-century woman's hair piece [Fig. 3] has a series of symmetrical ringlets that were retained in perfect order with minimal need for maintenance. Silk ties were used to secure the hairpiece on the wearer's head, out of sight behind the neck. After consultation, it was decided that display on a full head form would compete visually with the object itself. A less intrusive solution was favored, involving a narrow support made of a crescent of Ethafoam covered by a scoured cotton broadcloth. Alternately, a shaped support made of clear, heat-moldable Vivak² could have been used, faced on the top with needle-punched polyester for a nap-bond grip to prevent the hair piece from sliding or shifting. The silk ties were humidified to relax creases, and loosely retied to prevent further damage.

Chilkat robe

A support form can be a critical element in the interpretation of an object. Rather than being displayed flat, this Chilkat robe [Fig. 4] made of wool and cedar bark appears to be draped over a man's shoulders, as it would have been worn during traditional dance ceremonies. A core torso of Ethafoam consists of two intersecting planks, carved and then rounded to create a male form. Since the blanket-like garment is not fitted, exact dimensions were neither evident from the garment nor critical and an approximation of the wearer's size sufficed. Several layers of needle-punched polyester placed at the sides of the torso provide extra dimension to suggest arms that are held slightly away from the body. The cotton stockinette cover allows a gentle nap bond friction grip with the object to help secure it in place.



Figure 4

Plains Indian vest

A solid torso form underneath this intricately beaded Plains American Indian vest [Fig. 5] would be highly visible through the arm and neck openings. This clear support was made from sheets of heat-moldable Vivak and attached to a clear cast acrylic rod that slips over a stand. Vivak is available in a range of thicknesses, and the thinner varieties allow for heat forming and shaping at relatively low temperatures. A thickness was selected that was easily worked while being rigid enough to support the weight of the vest, which is made of semi-tanned hide and glass beads. This clear support allows the viewer to see the lining material and other construction details. A precise fit of the vest on the form is critical in this case to prevent slipping on the smooth surface of the Vivak.



Figure 5

Japanese suit of armor

The mount for this seventeenth-century Japanese suit of armor [Fig. 6] incorporated the storage chest in a traditional method of display. Inspired by such tradition, the simple wooden support was fabricated with modifications to be more archival. The shoulders are rounded and softened by adding carved Ethafoam inserts with scoured fabric covers to distribute weight and alleviate pressure points on the shoulder elements. The armor rests on the padded shoulders and does not directly contact the interior wood frame of the mount. The frame was treated with several applications of an approved polyurethane, tested to help block the wood's natural acids, along with a chemically stable colorant. This coating smoothed the wood surface to prevent abrasion during any incidental contact, provided protection for the armor against the acidic wood stand, and created a visually unobtrusive appearance for the mount, which can be seen through the armor from certain angles. A custom-bent brass rod was attached to the mount to support the menpo, or mask, with padding at the points of contact. Freestanding Ethafoam inserts support the shin guards and shoe covers, which stand in front of the suit seated on its storage chest.



Figure 6

Caribou fur parka

This Inuit boy's caribou fur parka [Fig. 7] has stiffened and requires a gentle support to return it to form. Storage had flattened the parka and left rigid folds along the sides and sleeves. Controlled humidification allowed for some reshaping. The hood insert was attached to the torso form, but the soft-form arms were inserted separately to limit the manipulation needed to place the parka on the support mount. The torso size was determined by the shoulder measurement of the garment, but in this instance extra padding was added, since the wearer had multiple bulky layers under the parka.

Bandolier bag

This Potawatomi bandolier bag [Fig. 8] has wide straps with heavy glass beadwork. To give the viewer a sense of how the bag was worn, it is presented on a support that shows the intricately beaded straps in the round, rather than folded flat. Areas of the support that are not visible were faced with needle-punched polyester to provide gentle friction from a nap bond to prevent sliding or shifting. A custom-curved strap support was attached to a slanted display panel (also following the contours of the bandolier bag) made by the owning institution.

1. Ethafoam is a closed-cell polyethylene micro foam from Sealed Air Corp.

2. Vivak is a clear transparent thermoplastic sheet composed of polyester terephthalate glycol from Bayer Material Science AG.



Figure 7



Figure 8



Allison McCloskey, Assistant Conservator of Objects and Textiles, has been at WACC since 2007, treating artwork and working with clients to help preserve their collections. She studied Art History and Museum Studies at Rutgers University (1998), followed by the MA programs in Art History and Museum Studies at Syracuse University (2001). She specialized in textiles with a concentration in preventive conservation at the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (2006) and completed internships at the National Museum of the American Indian and with the New York State Bureau of Historic Sites at Peebles Island Resource Center (PIRC). She is a Professional Associate of the American Institute for Conservation.