2.3 Dressing a mannequin

Displaying a dress on a properly fitted mannequin not only presents it to the public. The process of display also reveals details about the garment’s style, shape and history that might not be apparent when it is lying flat in a box.

The display process can tell us how a garment was cut, how it was made and when, whether it has been altered, what undergarments might have been used and many more interesting facts. There is also personal information such as the size of the wearer, the glass of Madeira that she spilt and how she had to move the buttons — could this signal pregnancy or growing older?

Examination

- Firstly the garment should be placed on a clean table in a good light. Careful study will be rewarding.
- Check the seams — are they hand or machine sewn?
- Is whalebone or other materials inserted in channels around the waist or at the neck?
- Is the garment lined (this will make it stronger for display)?
- Check for stains, alterations and signs of weak areas.
- Study trimmings, piping, lace etc.

When the details have been exhausted and if the garment is found to be strong enough, dressing it carefully on a mannequin will reveal features that assist in dating. This is best done by two people with clean hands or wearing cotton gloves. Each person can have one hand on the hem of the garment and one hand at the top.

As you carefully handle the garment the hem length will tell you how the skirt should drape. The garment will, in a way, speak for itself.

Recommended materials

- Pantyhose (white, skin tone or black)
- A soft cotton petticoat
- Polyester wadding
- Cotton tape
- Scissors, needle and thread
- Washed cotton jersey
- Tape measure
- A tulle petticoat with cotton waistband secured in place with velcro on each end
- Tulle and scrunched acid free tissue can be used for extra padding

Preparation

1. Measure dress dimensions to make sure it can fit onto the mannequin.
2. Make a petticoat by machine sewing 2–3 metres of tulle onto a cotton tape waistband. Sew hook side of Velcro to one end of the cotton waistband. Sew the fluffy side of Velcro to the other end of the waistband.
3. Sew small jersey cushions and pads with polyester wadding. Attach cotton ties to secure pads to mannequin where necessary.
4. Breast inserts can be made by cutting off a pantyhose at the knee. Place polyester wadding into the toe section of the pantyhose. Twist the pantyhose, then pull the pantyhose over the breast. Twist the pantyhose again and pull the pantyhose over again. Inserts can then be sewn in place.
5. To make the arms, stuff a pantyhose leg with a roll of polyester wadding. Twist at the top and sew onto the top of the shoulder area.

Some rough dating guidelines

| 1850s     | Very full skirt (crinoline) and drooping shoulders. |
| 1865      | The skirt drapes towards the back with a train and sits flatter at the front. If the skirt is set too far to the front you will find the hem drags on the ground. |
| 1870      | The skirt is straight at the front with a very large high bustle at the back and train. |
| 1880      | Shoulders are higher, the skirt front is narrow, with a small low bustle and train. |
| 1890s     | Shoulders squarer with raised sleeve head, skirt flaring out at the hem. |
1. Use a clean workspace and place a freshly laundered fabric cover onto a tailor-style mannequin. Adjust the height of the mannequin to fit the dress.

2. Stitch polyester wadding to mannequin to form correct silhouette for that period and garment size.

3. Cover the wadding on the torso with pantihose. This helps to provide a smooth surface and keeps the wadding in place.

4. Start to layer the petticoat(s).
5. Layering petticoats.

6. Velcro fastening simplifies the work as waistband of petticoat is adjustable.

7. Cover the coarse tulle petticoats with a soft cotton petticoat.

8. Add bustle pads and extra padding if needed.

10. Carefully place the skirt over the petticoat.


12. Front view of mannequin.
13. Gently fasten the bodice/dress up, taking care not to cause any tension to the fabric, garment or fastenings.

14. Front view completed.

Day dress, 1885. Powerhouse Museum collection, purchased 1985. 85/440-1:2

For a video demonstration, go online.
http://www.australianadressregister.org/resources/video/how-to-dress-a-mannequin/