

MANUAL: MOUNTING DRESSES FOR PHOTOGRAPHY AND DISPLAY

PREPARATION

Make sure you have plenty of uncluttered space for working. Some dresses of the 1870s and 80s have an immense amount of train, and you need to be able to move around them easily.

Two people are needed if mounting delicate dresses or heavy ones with trains, so that one can support the weight while the other eases the dress on the stand.

Cover the floor with clean cotton sheets, or paper from wide rolls such as those sold for covering banqueting tables.

Have all supplies to hand, including:

- several dress stands of different sizes; make sure they are clean, including bases.
- a selection of display petticoats – these should include some 19th century “period” white cotton petticoats (preferably unaccessioned), or modern reproduction 19th century waist petticoats if originals not available.
- Pleated lengths of stiff nylon/polyester net mounted on tape are useful.
- Crinoline frames (genuine or reproduction) for dresses 1855-1866, also bustles and bum pads.
- Acid-free tissue paper.
- Polyester wadding
- Pins, needle and cotton, lengths of cotton tape, tape measure.

Wash hands, and take shoes off when working on the clean sheet/paper.

EXAMINATION

Examine dress carefully.

- Are bodice and skirt separate, or joined?
- Where and how are they fastened?
- Are the buttons, hooks etc in good enough condition to handle? (some fabric buttons on 1860s bodices can be badly frayed).
- Are there any particularly weak points? Shoulders, underarms, areas around fastenings are the usual suspects. It will be important not to put strain on these places.
- Check the skirt. How full is it, and how is the fullness distributed?
- Look for evidence in dress as to how it should look.

Are there sewn-in steel hoops or bustle pads?

- Are there tapes in the back of the skirt to tie pleats in place, or to loop overskirts up in a polonaise?

Are there overskirts, extra drapes, or fitted belts with big bows that indicate a bustle effect at the back? (These bows were always worn at the back, not front)



Image 1: the inside of an overskirt of a dress of the early 1870s, showing tapes to control fullness.



Image 2: the bustle effect created when the tapes are tied and the skirt correctly mounted.

RESEARCH SILHOUETTE

Each fashion shape will need a different structure under the skirt to give the right silhouette.

1800-1815: waist just under bust, tubular shaped skirt, small “bum pad” at centre back waist.

1815-1830: slightly lower but still high waist, fullness at back waist, increasing fullness at hem needing supporting flounces on petticoat.

1830s – 1850s: fullness usually all round, with a bit extra at the centre back. Natural waistline. These skirts need several layers of petticoats, and/or a crinoline frame for late 1850s. They need to stand out crisply from the waist, and not droop

1860 – 67: skirts straight in front, but considerable fullness and length at back. These need correct crinoline frame of period, or correctly shaped petticoats plus extra supports of tissue paper or stiff net to hold out the back

1867 – 70: bodice and skirt usually joined, skirt straight to the floor in front, back supported by full petticoats, no crinoline.

1870 – 77: Straight front, back very full and sometimes trained, needs crinolette, bustle pads, or lots of extra wadding/tissue. Dresses of this date usually have an overskirt or sash with a huge bow with trailing ends that helps achieve the bustle effect.

1877 – 1882: very slim fitting princess line, petticoats to match, avoiding any bumps/bulges on hips. If skirts are trained, they need extra support at the back from knee level downwards.

1883 – 1889: straight front, very prominent and angular bustle shape at back. Skirts often have their own built-in steel hoops to form bustle.

1890s: skirts form a stiff cone shape, with extra fullness at the centre back, especially c.1895. They are often heavily interlined.

It is useful to consult fashion plates of the period to get a feel of the fashionable “line” of that particular date that the dressmaker was trying to create.

MEASURING AND CHECKING SIZE

The crucial measurements are: circumference of bust, waist, around the ribcage below bust, and the length from the nape of the neck to the waist.

Bust and waist measurements can give an indication of size of dress stand required, though actual measurements can be misleading. Go for a smaller stand and pad out if necessary, rather than strain a dress onto a stand it does not easily fit.

Try a preliminary fit of bodice on chosen stand, and especially check waist level. (1860s dresses can have extraordinarily high waists). If the torso of the stand is long, you may have to build up a new waist with wadding.

The size of the ribcage is crucial: most 20th century dress stands are too large in this area for 19th century dresses, and need radical surgery. The best results are usually obtained using a specially constructed dress stand reproducing the shape of the corseted figure.

MOUNTING THE DRESS

Decide where waistline needs to be (by fitting bodice) and create a new, higher waist on the dummy if necessary, by pinning/sewing rolls of wadding to dummy below new “waist”.



Image 3: waistline of dummy too low, padding is attached to create raised waistline for 1860s bodice.



Image 4: the padding helps the “sit” of the bodice.

If the torso needs extra padding, this is done by attaching layers of polyester wadding to the form.

Keep the padding as smooth and firm as possible, it is better to use several thin layers than thick chunks.

Keep padding even on both sides of the figure by cutting out duplicate pieces of wadding.



Image 5: building up shoulder blades with wadding, keeping both sides even.

Use the softest quality of wadding, some of the thicker weights can be quite harsh and scratchy.

Tack layers in place with needle and thread.

Ideally the padded torso should be covered by some sort of stretchy cover, the easiest is a tube made from clean old tights.



Image 6: upper part of torso padded, dress band fastened, folded tissue paper forms infill for low square neck.



Image 7: mounting completed.

Mount skirt first, if bodice and skirt are separate.

Choose petticoats to suit desired shape and silhouette of skirt, and crinoline, bustle pads etc if needed.

Start mounting skirt, (or dress, if bodice/skirt are joined), over petticoats/supports.



Image 8: skirt mounted, before tackling bodice.



Image 9: three substantial cotton petticoats have been used, with pleated stiff net to give extra fullness centre back



Image 10: dress mounted



Image 11: pads of tissue used to make a bustle for an 1870s dress (short term only, as tissue crushes quickly)



Image 12: 1870s dress mounted.

Check length of skirt.

Make sure you have it on the right way round!

Where it is shortest is usually the front, the longest the back.

N. B. Skirts very rarely fasten at the centre back before the 1890s, the usual place for the opening is at the side front, left of centre.

Look at the inside of the waistband; dressmakers often indicated the centre front by stitching a large X or XX.

There is sometimes a discrepancy in the size of bodice and skirt waistlines.

As (usually) the bodice overlaps the skirt, the bodice measurement will dictate the size of the dummy.

To shorten the skirt waistband if necessary, lightly tack a length of cotton tape to one end, the waistband then can be overlapped and the overlapping end secured by winding the tape round the waist and tucking the end inside the waistband.

You can prevent unsightly gaps between bodice edge and skirt waistband by raising the skirt with temporary tape "braces" over the shoulders.

Ease bodice on stand.

Do not tug or pull at shoulders from neck edge, as the shoulders are often weakened from light damage.

Ease the shoulders onto the stand, supporting the weight and helping to counteract friction between bodice and stand by holding the bodice at the shoulder seam.

If the shoulders need to be built up, and if the tops of the sleeves need more support, this can be done with further pieces of polyester wadding, simply folded and tacked to torso.

If there is a dress band (a length of tape or petersham ribbon, secured to the centre back waist of bodice, in higher-quality garments this also carries the dressmaker's name) fasten this carefully in the front, before trying to fasten bodice.

This pulls in the centre back of the garment for a better fit, and makes it easier to do up buttons etc.

Ease fronts of bodice into place and do up fastenings. For techniques for fastening bodices by lacing, see Appendix 1.

See Image 6 for illustration of dress band.

Check shoulders and neckline, is there is more padding needed to give a smooth line? Victorian bodices were meant to look as if they fitted tightly, without bagginess or wrinkles.

If the neckline is low, you can probably carefully insert extra pieces of polyester wadding with the bodice fastened, if not, you will have to undo it again, and pin/stitch pads of wadding to the dummy.

The sleeves will probably be improved by inserting loosely-rolled cylinders of tissue paper to give them body, but avoid the highly-stuffed sausage look!

See Image 10 for padding of sleeves of 1860s dress.

To hold up a high neck, especially the 1880s – 1890s stand collar, make a shallow ring or cylinder of folded tissue paper and gently insert it to give support.



Image 13: circle formed from folded tissue paper forms support for high neck.

Check the back waist, does it fit snugly?

Are there gaps between bodice and skirt that need adjusting?

It is possible that the back skirt needs more padding to give correct bustle shape. Improvised bustle shapes can be made from wads of tissue or wadding (may need to be pinned to petticoats to prevent slipping out of place), or layers of stiff pleated net.

See Image 11 for use of tissue paper pads.

Do not underestimate amount of petticoats and padding needed to support the skirts of 1860s – 1880s dresses properly.

At least three very full cotton petticoats will be required (except for the princess line dresses of the late 1870s) plus either original bustles and bustle pads, or their equivalent made of tissue or wadding.

COMPLETING THE DISPLAY

Does the dress or outfit need accessories to complete it?

Dresses of the 1850s with full, open sleeves would have been worn with undersleeves, covering the arm from elbow to wrist, and should be displayed with these if possible.

Daywear bodices of the 1850s and 1860s with high necks finished with a narrow band would have been worn with collars of white embroidered muslin or linen or lace, lightly tacked in place.

The one-piece dresses of the later 1860s were often worn with narrow ribbon belts or sashes to cover up the rather unsightly waistband, and these are usually missing.

Be wary of using a length of modern ribbon or fabric as a substitute, it would have to be very carefully chosen and probably “distressed” to look right and not an obvious anachronism.

It is probably better to leave the waistband uncovered than use something unsuitable that draws attention to itself.

It is often possible to “borrow” an accessory or trimming from another dress, to complete an ensemble for a display.

If done, it is essential to document this borrowing thoroughly, as it is all too easy to forget when the display is dismantled where the component parts came from, especially if the staff involved are different from those who mounted it.

APPENDIX 1: LACING

Lacing was often used as a means of fastening women’s bodices, especially low-necked evening bodices, and generally for corsets.

The original laces are often broken or missing, and even if present may not be strong enough to be pulled as tightly as the closure needs. Replacement laces may be purchased from John Lewis, or a substitute used such as narrow cotton tape or polyester satin ribbon, especially in cases where the lacing will not show. Visible lacing was usually the same colour as the fabric of the garment, so any substitute should be dyed to match. Cotton laces or tape will dye much more satisfactorily than synthetics.

17th and 18th century lacing. Before the mid 19th century the eyelet holes for lacing were placed alternately, not side by side, and one end of the lace was threaded through the holes, spiraling from side to side. It is easiest to secure the lace at the bottom, to start, and work upwards, finishing off at the neckline.

19th and 20th century lacing. The eyelet holes are generally in pairs, opposite each other, and can be fastened using both ends of the lace. The lace should be pulled through both bottom holes with an equal length on each side, then each end passed through the hole diagonally opposite, from the inside out. Pull up the lacing in stages so that the edges meet, and finish off the lacing at the top with a bow, which can be tucked inside the neckline.

BOOK LIST

Flecker, Lara, *A Practical Guide to Costume Mounting*, Elsevier Ltd/V&A Museum, 2007
The ultimate guide to the subject.

Hunnisett, Jean, *Period Costume for Stage and Screen, Patterns for Women's Dress 1500-1800*, Players Press, Studio City, CA, 1991.

Hunnisett, Jean, *Period Costume for Stage and Screen, Patterns for Women's Dress, 1800-1909*, Unwin Hyman Limited, 1988.

Excellent for patterns for making reproduction petticoats, bustles, crinolines, corsets etc.

Waugh, Norah, *Corsets and Crinolines*, Routledge/Theatre Arts Books, 1993.

FABRIC AND HABERDASHERY SUPPLIERS

Whaleys (Bradford) Ltd., Harris Court, Great Horton, Bradford, West Yorkshire.

Tel: 01274 576718. www.whaleys-bradford.ltd.uk

For polyester wadding, calico, buckram, net and a variety of useful fabrics.

Branches of John Lewis and Abakhan Fabrics

For polyester wadding, tape, and other sewing materials

MacCulloch and Wallis, 25-26 Dering Street, London W1S 1AT.

Tel: 020 76290311. www.macculloch-wallis.co.uk

For silks, general haberdashery, boning for corsets and crinolines, millinery supplies.

Vena Cava Design, PO Box 3597, Poole, Dorset, BH14 9ZL

www.venacavadesign.co.uk

Mail order sewing supplies business specializing in corset making equipment, including boning, busks and laces, also historical sewing patterns.

SUPPLIERS OF DRESS STANDS AND MANNEQUINS

Proportion London, 9 Dallington Street, London EC1V 0LN.

Tel: 020 72501798. www.proportionlondon.com

The former Siegel and Stockman, this firm has supplied calico-covered dress forms since the 1880s, and now offer a wide range of display forms, as well as reproductions of their 1880s and Edwardian forms, which are excellent (though expensive).

Gems Studio, Unit 2, The Acorn Centre, 30-34 Gorst Road, London NW10 6LE.

Tel: 01923 855858. www.gems-studio.com

H&H Sculptors Ltd., Unit 2, Sherwood Court, London SE13 7SD.

Tel: 020 82971474.

Adel Rootstein Ltd., Shawfield House, Shawfield Street, London SW3 4BB

Tel: 020 73511247. www.rootstein.com

Suppliers of mannequins for display of clothes post 1960.

Morplan Ltd., PO Box 54, Harlow, Essex CM20 2TS

Tel: 01279 435 333. www.morplan.com

Suppliers of shop fittings, including mannequins, busts and forms. Reputed to supply budget price polystyrene forms that can be carved to the shape of individual dresses. (These would need to be covered with several barrier layers if required for long-term display of accessioned material). Online catalogue available.