



Sending Clam Shells across the Atlantic: Preparing the Alexander McQueen Razor Clam Dress for Loan

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INTRODUCTION

In 2011, The Costume Institute at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York put on the immensely popular exhibition, *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*, curated by Andrew Bolton. When the Victoria and Albert Museum in London decided to mount their own version of the show, they asked to borrow the iconic razor clam dress currently in The Costume Institute's collection.

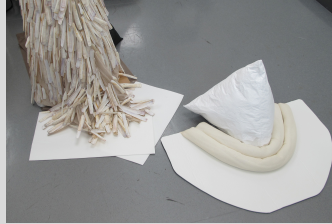
The dress, from McQueen's spring/summer 2001 collection, entitled "Voss," is covered in approximately 1,200 razor clam shells that have been stripped, varnished, drilled and sewn to the dress fabric along diagonal lines with monofilament. The shells are fragile and make the dress heavy and difficult to handle. The monofilament often fails, dropping shells any time the dress is manipulated. Due to the difficulty encountered in mounting the object (the process required 5 people), it was decided to ship the dress to the V&A dressed on a mannequin. This made installation easier, but packing much more challenging.

PACKING METHODOLOGY

A custom crate was made for the dressed mannequin, but careful internal packing was required to keep the shells from crashing against themselves and the fiberglass mannequin. Custom pads made from Tyvek and polyester batting, as well as Volara foam, stiff and soft tissue, and other archival materials were used to protect the shells and keep the dress safe for travel.



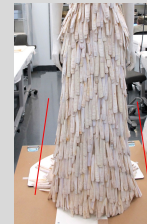
1. A sturdy metal base was used for shipping; the ankle was wrapped with twill tape to further stabilize the flange (not pictured)



2. In order to prevent the shells from collapsing the dress around the mannequin legs, a padded board with pillows attached was used to pad out the train



3. With the train padded out, the shells became accessible and were ready to be protected with layers of soft lens tissue (see fig. 5)



4. Stiff tissue was inserted vertically into the skirt to provide padding between the skirt and the mannequin legs. Volara inside the front hem of the dress held the tissue stuffing in place, and prevented the dress from collapsing around the feet



5. Soft lens tissue was folded and interwoven among the shells



6. The lens tissue was basted into place with thread, only catching the tissue layers, not the dress



7. Custom shoulder pads made from stockinette and batting were pinned to the dress to prevent shells from hitting the mannequin's shoulders



8. Three custom padded covers made from Tyvek and polyester batting with hook and loop closures were wrapped around the mannequin, slightly overlapping each other



9. A crescent shaped padded train cover was attached with hook and loop; a silk habotai bib stitched to a padded neck roll was tied around the mannequin's neck



10. The mannequin was packed in its crate; the metal base was drilled into place on a heavy duty board, with handles, that slid into the bottom of the crate



THE JOURNEY

Due to its oversize height of 92", the crate had to travel to London via cargo plane and ferry. Upon leaving The Met, the dress traveled via truck to JFK airport, cargo plane to Amsterdam, truck to Hook of Holland, ferry to Harwich, and truck again to London. The journey spanned two nights, and the dress in its crate was subjected to road vibrations, air turbulence, several inclines and declines, as well as the motion of the ocean.

RESULTS & CONCLUSION

The packing strategy was ultimately successful. The dress arrived in London intact, and made it back to New York safely after the exhibition. Through this experience, it was determined that when shipping dressed garments in the future, it would be preferable to use dress forms rather than mannequins. A dress form could be packed in a shorter crate that would not require a cargo plane to accommodate its height. Dress forms also have more sturdy bases where the weight is distributed evenly, unlike mannequins which have just one point where the metal flange is inserted into the fiberglass. While the mannequin's ankle held up fine for this loan, it was identified as a stress point that could potentially cause problems during travel.

REPRODUCTION SHELLS

Prior to the loan, reproduction shells were made out of paper so that distracting bald spots on the dress could be filled in if necessary. The reproductions were created by taking photos of the original shells, printing the images on archival photo paper, cutting them out, punching a small hole at the top, and curving the paper with a dowel to mimic the shells' natural shape.



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