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Making the Most of Mounts: Expanding the Role of Display Mounts in the Preservation and Interpretation of Historic Textiles (1997)

Introduction

The mounting of an historic textile for display aims to provide it with a secure and attractive presentation device. It is frequently the case that objects are conserved specifically in order that they are in a sufficiently stable and "complete" condition to withstand being mounted for display. Mount design and production, therefore, often are considered important but essentially separate and additional processes to those concerned with actually conserving the object. As awareness increases concerning the benefits of taking a less interventive approach to the treatment of objects, it is clear that this view of mount making may become inappropriate. A different approach is required: one that combines the safe display of objects that have received limited treatment and ensures they continue to fulfil their role in the museum context.

Minimum Intervention

Minimum intervention can be defined as doing no more in the way of treatment to an object than is absolutely necessary (Lister 1995: 12). It is a principle that acknowledges that important information relating to the physical nature and context of an object can be irreversibly altered or removed by certain interventive treatments. In textile conservation it is an approach

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traditionally considered most appropriate for archaeological artefacts, but its use is being extended to other types of textiles. Although the concept of minimum intervention is receiving widespread support amongst conservators and curators, it is becoming clear that in the area of display it can create both physical and conceptual problems. There is a need for practical solutions to be found that address these problems. If these are not forthcoming, there is a real danger of minimum intervention being viewed only as an impediment to the use of historic objects as sources of information and enjoyment, and not as an approach that has tangible benefits for all.

It is the author's opinion that the problems created by minimum intervention fall into two categories. The first concerns the physical demands made of objects whilst on display. Objects that have received limited treatment may be unable to withstand the physical rigours of certain display systems without further damage, deterioration or loss occurring to the objects or the very features of evidential value that minimum intervention aims to preserve. In the display of textiles these problems are exacerbated by the nature of the objects and the contextual material often found in association with them. The materials and construction mechanisms used to create textiles make them highly vulnerable to unsuitable handling and display, and this susceptibility is greatly increased if the textiles retain features of evidential value, for example, soils, creases, repairs and alterations. The fragility and vulnerability to permanent change, reduction or loss of these features, as well as the objects themselves, must also be acknowledged (Brooks et al. 1996: 16).

The second problem concerns the way in which these objects may be perceived by the museum visitor. The display of objects that have received little interventive treatment could generate negative or confused responses from an audience used to seeing objects presented in a clean and "complete" state. If minimum intervention merely results in objects that are at best confusing and at worst totally incomprehensible to the average museum visitor, then the use of historic objects as primary sources of information is undermined. It is this aspect of display that is of the greatest interest in terms of the proposed use of mounts, and as such it requires further explanation. The concept of the "meaningfulness" of objects is one that features strongly in recent debates about the role of museums and collections in, for example, education. Loomis' discussion of learning in museums states that psychologists, such as himself, have "known for a long time that if something is meaningful to the individual it is easier to learn and more apt to be remembered" (Loomis 1996: 12). In his view, objects themselves can convey meaning but that museum visitors often require help in understanding this. Other commentators, although supportive of the idea that the meaning of objects must be communicated, dispute the assumption that objects can "speak for

themselves." Weil (1992) considers this notion to be one that "carries genuine and potentially negative consequences," and argues that by relying on the objects to communicate for themselves, museums run the risk of excluding some visitors and inhibiting the development of a common understanding about objects between the public and the individuals responsible for their preservation. He cites another commentator on this issue who believes that meaning can only arise through the interaction of object and observer, and that rather than being inherent in the objects themselves meaning is contextual (Weil 1992: 6/7). Pearce (1994: 26) believes that the meaning of objects in a museum setting lies somewhere between the object and the viewer's response to it. This very brief account of the debate about the interpretation of objects serves to illustrate the importance of ensuring that objects are displayed in accessible and meaningful ways.

The Role of the Conservator in Display

As someone who is involved in the education of textile conservators, the issues discussed above are of interest for a number of reasons. It is essential that students do not perceive the concept of minimum intervention as "doing less" but rather as "doing differently." A conservator's involvement with an object is changed rather than lessened: the reduction in intervention in one area (the object) is offset by increased intervention in another (for example, interpretation). Developing students' understanding of what constitutes the "true nature" of an object (United Kingdom Institute for Conservation 1990: 8), and the impact conservation can have on this is therefore a key educational objective. Raising students' awareness and appreciation of contextual issues relevant to textiles forms an important element of their professional education. It is essential that conservators realise that in fulfilling their professional role they are also uniquely placed to extract and record information from objects. The conservation process automatically involves them in the methods identified as being of use in the investigation of material culture (Prown 1994: 134). Contrary to the view expressed by Cannon-Brookes that "evidence [provided by the physical condition of an object] is best read by the scholar-curator whose task it is to accumulate a much deeper, specific knowledge of related material than the technological familiarity based on representative examples which forms part of the training of conservators" (1994: 48), it is the author's opinion that conservators can and should contribute to the debate about the meaning of objects. Conservators must see themselves, and be seen by others, as active participants in the processes that determine the presentation and interpretation of objects. Students are therefore encouraged to take a wider view of their responsibility to objects and to develop the necessary skills to enable them to use the

knowledge and insights gained through the conservation process to "communicate meaningfully with colleagues specializing in the other disciplines" (Cannon-Brookes 1994: 48).

Perspectives on Mounts

Returning to the problems related to the display of objects that have received limited conservation treatment. One possible solution is to consider using mounts in more significant ways: not just as "coat hangers" on which to show an object, but as active contributors to their long-term support, stabilisation and interpretation. The benefits of creating supportive, physically stable and chemically inert mounts for artefact storage are well known, and a considerable amount of information and expertise already exists on this topic. The greater availability of "conservation grade" mounting materials has significantly increased the possibilities for conservators to create high quality, precision mounts that are safe, durable and attractive. Much of the knowledge and experience generated by preventive conservation research is being made use of by some conservators in the area of display, but there still remains a need for mount making to be more widely viewed as a proactive rather than a reactive measure. It is the author's belief that mount design and production should be seen as integral parts of the conservation strategy defined for an object, rather than processes that are additional to it. An appropriately designed and skilfully crafted mount can assume a substantial part of the supportive and stabilising role currently provided by more interventive treatments. It can enhance or even replace more conventional conservation support techniques, and can be designed to accommodate every feature of an object, regardless of whether it is stiffened by dirt, distorted through use or burial, or is fragmentary. In essence, a "bespoke" design can be created that directly responds to the unique needs of an object including the features of evidential value it contains. In the area of interpretation, mounts can be used to "animate" a static object, give it "body" and form, set it at an angle that suggests its original function, and reduce the visual disturbance of areas of loss so that it regains a "complete" and coherent appearance if this is required. Informed choices can be made concerning the style, form and even colour of the mount with the specific purpose of creating an image that is easily recognisable and meaningful even if the object itself is unfamiliar or in a soiled, distorted or incomplete state. None of the skills required to create such mounts should be beyond the capabilities of conservators experienced in dealing with the vagaries of many historic objects. What may be needed is more extensive research into the context of objects, and the identification of issues and problems relevant to their conservation *and* interpretation.

Case Studies

The following two case studies are presented as instances where the provision of a mount was an integral part of a conservation strategy, and one that had the specific purposes of providing the object with physical support and enhancing its understanding. The first illustrates the potential for using mounts as substitutes for certain interventive treatments, while the second demonstrates how the provision of a mount can extend the physical and interpretative consequences of intervention.

Case Study 1: Cap from a Genizah

This case study concerns a cap retrieved from a genizah[1] in a synagogue in Southern Germany, a region that was inhabited by German Jewish communities until the 1930s. The cap represents a rare example of the costume worn by rural people of the "small, forgotten Jewish communities of whose artefacts almost nothing remains" (Friedlander 1992: 11). It is to be included in future travelling exhibitions featuring genizah material organised by The Hidden Legacy Foundation.[2] The purpose of these exhibitions is to "gain public recognition of the outstanding importance of these 'concealed finds,' and of their value to historical, bibliographical and theological research" (Friedlander 1992: 11).

The cap consists of a crown made of numerous shaped strips of wool fabric joined to create a complex spiral pattern, a headband made of the same fabric and stiffened with paper and leather, and a wide leather peak stitched to the headband. Prior to conservation, the cap was heavily soiled and stained with surface and ingrained dirt (from the genizah site and possibly from use), and was severely distorted and flattened. The back seam of the headband was torn and the peak was almost completely detached.

Following extensive research into the object, its condition, historical/cultural context and future role as part of a travelling exhibition, it was determined that intervention should be kept to the minimum necessary to preserve the object and evidence of its use, but enable its construction and original profile to be revealed (Javér 1996). Following detailed examination and documentation of the cap before treatment, the loose surface dirt was removed (and retained), and the distorted leather stiffening of the headband was humidified. A patch of nylon net was placed across the torn seam of the headband to reduce the stress on this area. A two-part mount was prepared. The upper part, designed to accommodate the fullness of the crown, consists of a flexible, fabric-covered ring of wadding that can be inserted without putting strain on the headband. The lower part of the mount, designed to support and align the heavy and still partially detached peak and protect the lower edges of the headband from stress and abrasion, is constructed from

Ethafoam (expanded [closed-cell] polyethylene foam) carved to the appropriate shape, padded and covered with fabric. A rigid baseboard with a mount-shaped recess was also prepared to protect the cap during transportation.

Case Study 2: Bead-Net Dress

This case study concerns a rare Fifth Dynasty (c. 2456–2323 BC) Egyptian bead-net dress. The dress, from the collection of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London, is believed to be a garment that was worn (possibly without undergarments) by a young female dancer (Janssen 1995: 5). It is composed of a threaded network of faience beads, two faience "cups" (thought to be breast coverings), and a shell and bead fringe. The history of its excavation and partial rethreading in the 1950s, and an explanation of the conservation strategy devised and implemented for its subsequent partial reconstruction have been recorded elsewhere (Seth-Smith and Lister 1995), but the making of the form is outlined below.

The Petrie Museum defines itself as "a teaching, research and study collection, not an art museum" in which the aim is to "illustrate the development of Egyptian culture, technology and daily life" (Anon. 1977: 1). In accordance with this institutional aim, the curator who initiated the reassessment and retreatment of the artefact felt it was extremely important that the original use of the bead network as a dress be made explicit to the Museum's visitors. As the dress was believed to be a garment worn in life, as opposed to one used exclusively for burial, its presentation in a manner that specifically indicated this was considered essential. The objectives of the mounting element of the conservation strategy were to preserve the surviving components, assist the stabilising and supportive effect of the reconstruction process, and present the bead network in such a way that its original function would be fully and clearly communicated. As the project progressed it became apparent that displaying the dress mounted in a flat (horizontal or vertical) orientation would not be appropriate because this mode of display would not clearly indicate its function nor enhance the remarkable physical and visual characteristics of the bead network. Although only the front half of the dress was reconstructed, it was decided that a fully three-dimensional form would be provided as this would give a more life-like effect than one limited to the dimensions of the reconstructed part.

The mount took the form of an upright, headless torso. It was created from Ethafoam supported by a stainless steel pole. Ethafoam was chosen for its rigidity, inertness and ease of shaping. Using the dimensions of the reconstructed dress front, measurements taken from a colleague's daughter, and a knowledge of anatomy and modelling from life (acquired by the author at art school), the form was sculpted into the required shape. Considerable

Figure 1
A side view of the reconstructed dress mounted on the form. © Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London No. UCI 7743.

attention was given to producing a shapely, even sensuous, human-like form, but one that was not overtly erotic. The anatomical features of the lower part of the human body therefore were not reproduced. Selecting a suitable colour for the outer fabric proved crucial to the success of the form. It was essential that the chosen colour, when viewed under the lighting conditions of the museum, had a flesh-like appearance and complemented the colours of the beads and shells. Reproductions of ancient Egyptian wall paintings of women (men are usually shown as having skin of a darker shade) were viewed in the area of the museum where the dress was to be displayed. The selected colour was a pale pinkish orange. The resulting form provided the reconstructed dress with additional physical support to enable it to withstand permanent upright display, and gave it a visually pleasing and lifelike appearance (Figure 1).

Discussion

The advantages of using mounts in more active ways have been described and illustrated. In discussing any conservation approach, however, there is a need to consider the disadvantages that may arise from it. Possible drawbacks of using mounts in the ways described are therefore considered below.

The deterioration or removal of the mount will result in partial or complete loss or reduction of support to the object.
There is a widely held and justifiable belief that the process of support should be separate from that of mounting. The underlying concern here is that unless independently supported the object will be put at risk should the mount fail or be removed. This is a very real possibility with objects that move frequently between storage and display. It could be argued, however, that this risk of failure could apply to some interventive support treatments, and that the implications for the object, should this occur, are likely to be more dramatic than those resulting from the loss of a mount. A deteriorated, damaged or missing mount is easier to spot by even an untrained eye than a similarly affected support treatment, and much easier and less hazardous to the object to replace. It seems more appropriate and efficient to guard against deterioration by ensuring that mounts are well made from durable materials, and prevent removal by creating effective operational systems, including labelling and documentation, than to resort to more interventive treatments.

The mount and the artefact become, in effect, "the object."
If an artefact is heavily dependent on its mount for physical support and interpretation, there is a danger that artefact and mount will become "fused" in the perception of the viewer. Although the potential for this problem must

be acknowledged, again it is important to recognise that it is one that also can occur with certain interventive treatments. As with such treatments the conservator has a responsibility to ensure that the mount remains distinguishable from the artefact whilst at the same time unobtrusive, and it should be possible to achieve this through a judicial choice of style, shape, colour and texture of the mount, and through information given in labels and catalogue entries.

The mount creates an impression of the physical form and/or interpretation of the object that is later found to be inappropriate/incorrect.
This is a problem, but it is not exclusive to mounts. Labels, themed displays and other interpretative data are all subject to the effects of fashion, misinformation and misunderstanding. The interpretation of an object, in whatever form, can only reflect current knowledge and thinking, just as all conservation treatments must reflect the ethical frameworks in place at the time of their implementation. One of the main advantages of taking a less interventive approach is that the potential for reinterpretation is greater. It would seem preferable to simply change a mount in response to new information or an alternative interpretation than to reverse (if this is possible) a more interventive treatment.

The disadvantages discussed above illustrate that conservation is never able to achieve ideal results. For every successful action there are often actual or potential drawbacks. The advantages and disadvantages of any treatment approach should not be viewed in isolation from the alternatives or from the defined aims and objectives of treatment. The success of an approach should be determined by the degree to which it meets the defined aims and minimises the need for inappropriate compromise both now and in the future.

Conclusions

The safe display and effective interpretation of objects that have received little or no interventive treatment requires a radical rethink of the design and function of the systems used to exhibit them. If objects and the information they contain are to be protected and preserved greater emphasis must be given to devising display approaches and methods that specifically ensure the survival of both these aspects. If objects are to continue to have value and meaning to all those who desire to see them it is imperative that they are presented in accessible and understandable ways. In this paper, the use of mounts as one way of responding to these issues has been considered. There are others: for example, the use of replicas and computer generated

images, and the potential of these techniques should be explored further. The benefits of extending the role of conservators in the area of display have also been highlighted, along with the need for better informed dialogue between conservators, curators, educators and exhibition designers. As illustrated by the theme of this conference the value of interdisciplinary exchange of information and ideas is increasingly being recognised. Such collaborative efforts suggest that the issues raised in this paper merit further debate.

Notes

1 In Talmudic literature a "genizah" is defined as a room "in which something is hidden or placed for safekeeping." Among rural German Jews, the attics of synagogues were used to store or ritually inter old or obsolete objects connected with the practice of religion (Wiesemann 1992: 16/17).

2 The Hidden Legacy Foundation was established in 1988 to salvage and preserve the genizah material from the small village synagogues in Southern Germany, and make it available for scholarly research and display to the public (publicity leaflet, The Hidden Legacy Foundation).

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