

Standing Up To Travel

The Victoria and Albert Museum has been travelling multiple dressed ensembles on their display figures since *Art Deco 1914 - 1939* went out on tour over ten years ago. This exhibition featured approximately twenty four couture ensembles of the 1930s and toured seven venues internationally. It became one of the most highly visited shows in the Museum's history of temporary exhibitions.

Most of the figures used in *Art Deco* were simple dress torsos on a solid central pole with a balanced centre of gravity. These figures were headless and armless and although some pieces were delicate, they were sufficiently robust to trial this method of transporting dresses for a large touring exhibition. A group of six tight fitting bias cut dresses were selected for dressed vertical travel. The decision to adopt this approach was initially taken in order to reduce the handling of garments at multiple venues as well as to save on the time and cost involved with dressing and undressing figures.

As is now established practice for dressed torsos, each of the six *Art Deco* ensembles had its own wooden crate to which the flat metal base of the dress stand was secured at the bottom (Fig 1). A baton with a cut-out for the neck held the torso upright inside the crate and was screwed into position from the outside. This allowed the torso to be securely fixed inside the crate without any pressure on the garments and various layers of silk padding helped to control any movement of the pieces. (Flecker, Haldane, Ashbridge 2005)

Fig 1. Mounted bias cut dresses packed inside individual wooden crates.



Temporary exhibitions with a large amount of costume or fashion have continued to be a popular draw for audiences, and V&A dress exhibitions are much in demand internationally. The V&A textile conservation studio has needed to be increasingly creative in the production of mounts and soft packing in order to safely crate and transport more ambitiously displayed ensembles.

Fig 2. An example of a spigot fixing.



Increasing curatorial and designer requests for full figure mannequins with heads, arms and legs have necessitated further development in the packing and crating. With limbs that easily detach and exaggerated poses that are often unstable, full figure mannequins are less straightforward to transport. In addition the spigot fixings (Fig 2) that hold these mannequins upright were identified as too weak to withstand the rigours of travel.

In 2005, a high water mark was reached with the packing and crating of a costume

featured in the exhibition *Surreal Things*. The ensemble, which was a fragile head to toe knitted leotard, needed full bespoke padded protection. The figure was packed horizontally to bypass the use of the spigot stand, and in order to keep the mannequin from moving and limbs detaching inside the leotard, a complex system of supports were fixed inside the crate (Fig 3). (Haldane, Flecker, Ashbridge, Monaghan 2007)

Fig 3. Packing a dressed mannequin from 'Surreal Things' horizontally.



Although successful, the amount of work required to produce this sophisticated packing was not sustainable, particularly for shows that included large numbers of mounted costumes. We began to look at the possibility of requesting certain adaptations to mannequins at the point of

purchase that would allow us to transport dressed ensembles on full figures more easily and safely.

The first specific travel adaptation was carried out in collaboration with H&H Sculptors whilst producing mannequins for the *Wedding Dress* exhibition. The arm fixing was changed from the classic key, lock down style to a large bolt and wing nut (Figs 4a & b).

Fig 4a. Classic key lock arm Fig 4b. Bolt and wing nut arm fixing.



This alteration prevented arms from ‘jumping’ out of position in transit without being braced inside the crate. This type of bolt fixing required a removable head in order to secure the wing nuts. This was later recognised as a desirable feature because a headless upright mannequin could comply with air freight height restrictions when crated.

The V&A continued to travel full figure mannequins lying down due to the weakness of the spigot fixing. However by 2010 the exhibition programme included two major costume shows, *Hollywood Costume* and *David Bowie Is ...* Both of these ambitious exhibitions included huge numbers of mannequins scheduled for long international tours, and the need for change became increasingly important.

Fig 5. A David Bowie mannequin with extended internal metal work, packed vertically in a protective Tyvek bag.



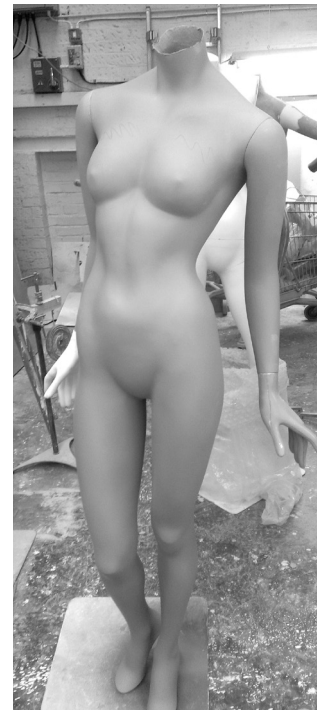
Working with Proportion London Ltd, the weakness of the spigot fixing was discussed by V&A technicians, conservators, and costume mounters. We reached the conclusion that the fragility was caused by the short length of the internal ankle rod into which the metal spigot fits. The obvious solution was to extend the internal rod up the leg and into the waist, therefore lessening the weakness in the ankle and distributing the stress.

Mannequins for these two exhibitions were therefore made with this extended internal metal work and have successfully travelled around the world in a vertical position (Fig 5). This in turn reduced the amount of soft packing required, cutting costs and handling at each new venue.

As the difficulties of transporting full figure mannequins have been resolved, their use has become a popular choice amongst V&A curators, particularly for fashion and performance exhibitions. However, mannequins come with additional snags. Their contemporary sizing can be problematic as they are frequently found to be too large for both catwalk and historical garments.

The most significant adaptations that Proportion have made for us is to reduce the overall circumference dimensions of some ranges of full figure mannequins. For example, the Fluid mannequin is now available in a petite size which helps us tour a larger quantity of ensembles more safely because the fit is better and fastening secure. The V&A team have also requested that the petite Fluid is available in a single body piece (Fig 6). This one piece figure (with removable arms) means that we no longer need to secure the body to prevent the torso twisting away from the legs during transit. This was a labour intensive but crucial step that has now been partially eradicated.

Fig 6. The one piece petite Fluid mannequin made by Proportion London.



All of these small but significant adaptations have been possible due to the innovative approach of the exhibition teams and the good working relationships with our mannequin suppliers, particularly Proportion London Ltd. We look forward to the future challenges coming our way!

References

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