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CONSERVATION BEFORE CONSERVATION AT THE SHELBURNE MUSEUM: THE DOLL COLLECTION

Nancie Ravenel

From 1998 to 2003, 237 dolls and their costumes from the collection of the Shelburne Museum were examined and repaired in preparation for a catalog and reinstallation of the exhibition. The 500 dolls in the collection date from about 1740 to 1930. They run the gamut of types and materials, including painted wood, papier mâché, ceramics, glass, leather, cloth, rubber, metals, and the ill-defined material referred to as 'composition'. In contrast to the material of that name used to ornament picture frames, a putty made of resins, linseed oil, and whiting, the doll maker’s ‘composition’ is lighter in weight, more fibrous, and browner in color. The material has not been subject to scientific analysis.

Photodocumentation was to some extent a part of operating practice at the Museum well before professional conservators arrived on the scene in 1982. It was a regular part of the job for larger projects undertaken by Museum craftsmen. In the late 1940's and early 1950's the carpenters and the masons began disassembling and moving buildings acquired by founder Electra Havemeyer Webb to the grounds of the Shelburne Museum. Photodocumentation was undertaken while the buildings were taken downs to assist those who would be reassembling the structure at a later date. Work done on the paneling in the Museum’s Stencil House, particularly the additions made to the panels, was documented, as was the movement of a large painted wood figure of Justice which was lifted through a second floor window of the Museum’s Stagecoach Inn.

A museum employee named Marta Mengis repaired many of the dolls at the Shelburne Museum in the 1960’s. This paper will describe the techniques used by Mrs. Mengis. Some of these reflect the accepted practice of her day, but others presage current accepted practice in conservation.

Marta Mengis was a Latvian refugee working as a seamstress and house cleaner in Burlington, Vermont. She found work at the Shelburne Museum in 1953 after her son Einars became the photographer at the Museum. Mrs. Mengis’ husband Janis was a cabinetmaker and restorer, and he, too, was employed at the Museum.

In the early days of the Shelburne Museum (1947-1956), researching and caring for the textiles and doll collections fell to Marthe Gianonni, formerly the governess to Mrs. Webb’s children, and consistently referred to as Mademoiselle (or Mlle.) In Museum records. With regard to the dolls, Mlle. took her cues from Mary Whichelow, a dealer of antique dolls in Boston. As Mlle.'s health failed, responsibility for these collections fell to Marta Mengis.

In 1957, Mrs. Mengis began keeping track of the work she undertook in the winter when the museum was closed for the season. She recorded what objects she worked on and wrote brief summaries of what she did. What we know about her work at the museum is in those notebooks, and it is this written documentation that sets her work apart from that of the rest of the staff.

In 1962, Museum director Sterling Emerson sent Marta Mengis to choose which dolls would become part of Shelburne’s collection from a larger collection in Ohio that had been offered to the Museum. When this addition of approximately 100 dolls came to Shelburne, researcher Alice Marvin was hired to write a catalog of the entire collection. As part of the catalog initiative, Mrs. Mengis and her son worked together to photograph each doll dressed and undressed on black and
white 4x5 format film. Photos were occasionally taken before repairs were made and when new costumes were made.

Mrs. Mengis also wrote rudimentary, color-coded treatment reports with a description of the doll, an indication of condition and what work was undertaken, repeating information she included in her notebook. In the treatment reports, the dolls’ descriptions are in black, condition notes are in red, and the extent of work undertaken is indicated in green. Sources of textiles used in the fabrication or repair of doll garments are indicated in her notebooks. At times indications of what she did are also found in notes on the artifacts themselves. On a china headed doll, for example, a medical tape label with “Bandaged 1962” in Mrs. Mengis’s distinctive handwriting was found at the end of a ‘mummy wrap’ of gauze bandages designed to prevent sawdust leaking from tears in the knees of the doll.

The more typical repair technique for this kind of damage on the body of a cloth doll was the application of a sewn patch or slipcover. A slipcover remains an option of last resort when the cloth is so deteriorated that it cannot be patched in any other way. The disadvantage of the slipcover is that the original fabric and stitching is hidden from view and inaccessible to scholars. During the recent conservation initiative, mummy-wrapped bodies were unwrapped and damages were assessed. If the fabric was strong enough, breaks were patched, usually using Reemay or Japanese paper backed with BEVA® film which was then set with heat using a hot spatula.

The mummy wrap technique appears to have been specifically applied to dolls with cloth bodies. The repairs to leather bodies were more typically undertaken with leather skiver (tanned skin that has been pared down in thickness so that just the top grain remains) with a scalloped edge, adhered with what appears to be animal glue. While the materials used were compatible, the thickness of the skiver caused breaks along the edges of the patches. Removal of the patches was undertaken mechanically with a scalpel since the bond between the kidskin body and the leather repair remained quite strong. It was found that the Reemay and BEVA® film repair technique was as appropriate for kidskin bodies as for cloth bodies. The resulting repair is also transparent enough that the original colored paper and leather bands around the knees (common on papier mâché dolls with unjointed kidskin ‘milliner’s’ bodies) could be seen through the repairs.

To consolidate cracking varnished and painted papier mâché, Mrs. Mengis applied what appears to be a white emulsion adhesive over the crack and the surrounding surfaces. Although the appearance was satisfactory in 1963, by 1998 the adhesive had turned grey. Fortunately, it could be removed with alternating applications of deionized water and xylene to alternately swell and dissolve the adhesive.

Although complete repainting was commonly undertaken in doll repair, Mrs. Mengis inpainted papier mâché and wood heads when necessary, usually using a water-soluble medium. Her inpainting could generally be removed using saliva on a cotton swab. In contrast to dolls with heads made of organic materials which were mended by Mrs. Mengis at the Museum, broken ceramic-headed dolls were sent to doll hospitals for repair. While records indicate that some of the dolls in the collection had been to doll hospitals prior to their acquisition, Mrs. Mengis indicated in her notebooks that she packed a number of dolls from the Shelburne collection to be sent to an unspecified doll hospital in New York City. There, breaks in china heads were re-glued, often backed with plaster and occasionally stapled. Edges of misaligned breaks were found to have been ground into plane. Large areas of the heads and their shoulder-plates were overpainted with a medium that could be removed only with difficulty, usually reduced initially with a scalpel and then removed with acetone on cotton swabs.
The revitalized permanent doll exhibition will open to the public in the Variety Unit of the Shelburne Museum in June, 2004. A catalog written by Curator Jean Burk will be available for the opening. This catalog will be the first publication about the dolls at Shelburne, as the catalogue started by Alice Marvin in the 1960’s was never completed. Following the lead of Mrs. Webb, the installation will be akin to open storage, with all of the best dolls displayed. Lighting and mounts have been designed to minimize damage to the fragile materials.

Damage to the dolls since 1965 appears to be primarily due to light from fluorescent fixtures within the cases. The Variety Unit structure was constructed about 1835. Gallery ceilings are too low to accommodate lighting external to the cases. A light emitting diode (LED) lighting system produced by Prolume has been found to produce negligible heat and acceptable color temperature and light levels and will be used within the cases. Xenon lamp and fiber-optic systems were considered as well. However, the color temperature of the Prolume LED system is superior to that of the xenon lamps, and they generate less heat. Fiber-optic systems proved to be unacceptable due to both the cost and the high heat levels produced by the light source that would have to be hidden in the walls of the building.

A secondary cause of damage has been the metal stands used to keep the dolls erect. These stands
consist of a harp and a base (Fig. 1). The harp is a steel rod bent so that the center curves downward so that it can be inserted into the base, and the ends cradle each side of the doll’s torso or upper waist. Damage was caused when the fit around the doll’s body was too tight, creating a groove in the doll’s body, or when the weight of the doll caused the harp to slide further down the fitting, putting undue stress on the knees of the doll. Sometimes the uncoated metal rusted against the garments. Although alternatives were actively sought, these traditional harp-style stands were found to be the most adjustable and adaptable. A stand was customized for each doll so that it held the doll appropriately. Stops made of Coroplast® corrugated board (polypropylene and polyethylene copolymer) or acid-free corrugated paperboard were inserted into the bases so that the harps could not slide downward. The arms of the harp were padded with a sueded polyethylene fabric, which provides a slight cushion and protects the doll and its garments from the metal surfaces. It is hoped that these measures will ensure that the dolls will not need extensive intervention 50 years from now.

Figure 1. Traditional harp-style doll stands. The stand on the right has a stop added to keep the harp at the proper height, and sueded polyethylene padding on the arms.
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Suppliers

Stabiltex, Crepeline, Reemay, Lascaux 360 HV, Lascaux 498 HV: Talas, 568 Broadway, New York, NY 10012

BEVA® film: Conservator’s Products Co., PO Box 601, Flanders, NJ 07836

Thin silk thread (“hair silk”): Silke Annet, Dorthesvej 2, 3250 Farnum, Denmark

Low Emission Diode lights: Prolume, 525 Fan Hill Rd., Monroe, CT 06468

Doll Stands: Dollspart Supply Co., PO Box 266, Midland Park, NJ 07432

Sueded polyethylene with an acrylic adhesive backing: Benchmark, PO Box 214, Rosemont, NJ 08556

Coroplast® and acid free corrugated paperboard: University Products, 517 Main St. PO Box 101, Holyoke, MA 0104-0101

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