



Art Conservation *and history's fragile artifacts*

Along with bobbed hair, long cigarette holders and dancing till dawn, beaded silk dresses are part of the image of the fashionable flapper of the 1920s. Many of those dresses, however, have proven to be fragile mementos of the era known as the “Roaring Twenties.” Second-year Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation (WUDPAC) Fellow Emily Schuetz has had to address this fragility while treating a beaded black silk dress from the University of Delaware’s Historic Textile and Costume Collection.



Her goal is to stabilize the dress so that it can be handled and included in an exhibit called “Common Threads: History of Fashion Through a Woman’s Eyes,” scheduled for Spring, 2013 on the UD campus. The dress has a problem shared by most silk garments made in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Because silk was then sold by weight, the fabric often was soaked in solutions with metallic salts to make it heavier. Unfortunately, this practice weakened the fabric. To make matters more complicated for Emily, the weight of the hundreds of red, pink and green colored beads embroidered with metallic thread into a pattern of flowers and leaves on the front of the dress also pulled on the fabric. As a result, the dress was frayed, contained numerous small tears and ripped easily.

To minimize handling of the fragile garment, which came to her inside out, Emily first cut pieces for a polyester lining that could provide strength and support. Next, she carefully plotted a pattern for attaching the pieces to the dress, making sure some stitches would run vertically to minimize sagging and others would follow the top of the beads to add support. She pinned everything together with the fabric lying flat so that it would not bubble. Only then, working meticulously with a fine silk thread, did she begin to sew the pieces to the dress using a ¼ inch long running stitch. The lining pieces also will be attached to the dress at the shoulders, just below the seams, in order to bear more of the weight. Once she was able to turn the garment right side out, Emily began mending the tears using ‘laid and couched’ and ‘long and short,’ conservation stitches. She also planned to reattach loose beads using a beading needle and to restore the hem, which had been folded and shortened by about two inches, to its original length so the dress can be exhibited as it appeared originally.



ARTC Spotlight—April 2012

The University of Delaware Art Conservation Department educates and trains professional conservators in the treatment, analysis, documentation, and preventive conservation of individual artifacts and entire collections. Our students are powerful public spokespersons for cultural heritage and its preservation. For more news about our students and other department activities, visit us at <http://www.artcons.udel.edu>

At Winterthur, Emily Schuetz worked under the direction of Textile Conservator Joy Gardiner and Dr. Joelle Wickens, Associate Textile Conservator and Head of the Preventive Team. She also was guided by Dr. Vicki Cassman, Director of Undergraduate Studies in Art Conservation and Dr. Dilia Lopez-Gydosh, Director of UD’s Historic Textile and Costume Collection. Detail images include Emily sewing waist buttons, damaged silk in the armhole (above) and stitching a polyester lining to the inside of the dress (upper right).