

Changeable Silk Bonnet: Before and After

Museum Textile Services
Andover, Massachusetts



This delightful bonnet has a matching silk dress with a high waist and pleated sleeves typical of American women's costume from circa 1810-20. They are constructed of lavender changeable silk with additional silk and cotton fabrics. Changeable silks have one color warp and another color weft, which causes the fabric to appear to change color depending on the angle from which it is seen. This effect would have been especially noticeable in the era before electricity when candle light was the norm. After years of exhibition, the dress and bonnet were brought to Museum Textile Services for conservation. We removed soil and stains, stabilize areas of weakness, humidified the fibers to relax and realign them, and packed the dress and bonnet for archival storage.



Before Conservation

Made of changeable silk, it has one color warp and another color weft, which causes the fabric to appear to change color depending on the angle from which it is seen. This effect would have been especially noticeable in the era before electricity when candle light was the norm. The bonnet was crushed, dirty and faded when it came to our studio.



Inside of bonnet before conservation

The bonnet has suffered from light exposure, which has caused the fabrics to weaken and change color. The under side of the brim used to be a vibrant yellow-gold, as seen here.



Back of bonnet before conservation

The fine cotton thread holding the bonnet together was compromised from years of exhibition and storage, causing it to literally come apart at the seams.



Back of bonnet after conservation

The back of the bonnet was carefully gathered and re-stitched by hand the way it had been originally.



Ties before conservation

The bonnet's silk ribbons were wrinkled, torn, and had holes from insect activity.



Ties after conservation

The ties were removed, humidified, and repaired with a sheer fabric that is virtually invisible. They were then sewn back in the same location as before.



Brim of bonnet before conservation

The faded silk is so brittle that it was splitting in places, revealing the cotton batting beneath.



Brim of bonnet after conservation

The brim of the bonnet was overlaid with a sheer fabric in a matching shade of lavender, which protects the silk as it is handled over time.



Bonnet after conservation

After conservation was complete, the bonnet was gently humidified to return its proper shape. It was carefully padded out to protect it during storage.