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.

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 2. An example of a spigot fixing.

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
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.

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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