

The Body-dress Symbiosis of Eighteenth-century Menswear: Demonstrating the Need for Digital Technology via George Washington Artifacts

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THE PROBLEM: From early works on costume mounting until today, what to do with artifacts and how to draw and share knowledge from these objects has been discussed at length. In 1977, the Smithsonian's Karyn Jean Harris explained in *Costume Display Techniques* how dress artifacts "can be studied and examined by students and scholars for construction and other design details; or they can be placed on exhibit to be viewed and appreciated by the general public."ⁱ Harris, like many others, reminded her reader that the safety of the object is paramount and often determines the outcome.ⁱⁱ Do no harm is sound advice but textiles are intrinsically fragile and many garments have survived in poor condition. "Exhibitability" can affect their ability to be collected and displayed.ⁱⁱⁱ Mary M. Brooks, conservator and curator, and Dinah. D. Eastop, conservator, have discussed the use of digital surrogates and how digital technology is "enabling new forms of collecting and conserving [...] and dissemination."^{iv} With the rise of the digital humanities, new forms of artifact research and presentation allow us to rethink some museum practices and push boundaries of knowledge.

This paper explores dress artifacts as well as body surrogates as, to accurately display items of dress, one must understand "the relationship of clothing to the body."^v The research is based on the study of fragile clothing artifacts linked to George Washington (1732-1799), some having survived without all the suit's components. Most were examined, photographed, drawn and measured to create patterns that could illustrate 1780s-1790s menswear. When attempting to mount such garments, the proper fit puts too much stress on artifacts and museum mannequins fail us: they cannot "manifest the appropriate body ideal and posture" needed to safeguard objects and can actively damage them.^{vi} Virtual approaches can help. Using an array of primary and secondary sources, including Washington clothing artifacts, I demonstrate the presence of a body-dress symbiosis at play in eighteenth-century menswear and the difficulty of conveying dress practices accurately unless this is done using digital technology.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: The paper focuses on several Washington-centric artifacts to demonstrate the discrepancy between mounts of eighteenth-century menswear and what posture and fit they should have. It discusses how Washington as a young boy, like other children in his days, would have worn a pair of stays (i.e. a stiffened and laced underbodice).^{vii} This object aimed to bring his shoulders back and down to provide a posture that accentuated "the inward curve in the lower vertebral spine" even after stays were no longer worn.^{viii} The research focuses on three artifacts to explain the discrepancies that occur in a museum environment: 1) Washington's surviving regimental attire (1789-1799 coat and 1780-1785 waistcoat and knee breeches) from the Smithsonian collection.^{ix} (Figure 1); 2) a Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741-1828) statue of him created from life and careful observations in 1785^x (Figure 2); and 3) a 1784 portrait of him by Charles Wilson Peale (1741-1827).^{xi} Lastly, I focus on a ca. 1780-1799 coat from the Mount Vernon collection (Figures 3 and 4).^{xii} The paper addresses "what happens when the dress is present without the body that once wore it."^{xiii} It explores the potential of digital surrogates to increase our understanding of dress practices in history.

PURPOSE: I aim to reveal how, through in-depth research, a lone Washington coat, and other similar artifacts separated from a suit's multiple components, can be virtually presented in a full ensemble following the period's proper posture and tight fit.

METHOD AND ANTICIPATED RESULTS: This is a conceptual paper that does not create 3D simulations but examines the potential of the digital humanities to expand museum practices. I review the literature, propose avenues of research, and hope to spark interest in the subject.

ⁱ Karyn Jean Harris, *Costume Display Techniques* (Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1977), 1.

ⁱⁱ See Harris, *Costume Display Techniques*, 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sarah Scaturro and Joyce Fung, "A Delicate Balance: Ethics and Aesthetics at the Costume Institute, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York," in *Refashioning and redress: Conserving and displaying dress*, eds. Mary M. Brooks and Dinah D. Eastop (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2016), 161.

^{iv} Dinah D. Eastop and Mary M. Brooks, "Introduction | Interactions of Meaning and Matter," in *Refashioning and redress: Conserving and displaying dress*, eds. Mary M. Brooks and Dinah D. Eastop (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2016), 3.

^v Michelin Ford and Roger Leong, "Fashion is Art: Dressed to Kill: 100 Years of Fashion," in *Refashioning and redress: Conserving and displaying dress*, eds. Mary M. Brooks and Dinah D. Eastop (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2016), 173.

^{vi} For ideal and posture, see Sarah Scaturro and Joyce Fung, "A Delicate Balance," 168. For damage potential, see Jeremy S. Uden, Heather M. Richardson, and Rachel E. Lee, "The Conservation and Display of the Tahitian Mourner's Costume at The Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford," in *Refashioning and redress: Conserving and displaying dress*, eds. Mary M. Brooks and Dinah D. Eastop (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2016), 98.

^{vii} See for example the surviving ca. 1764 stays worn by Prince George, later George IV of England, in the collection of the Historic Royal Palaces on display in the exhibition *Style & Society: Dressing the Georgians* (2023) at Buckingham Palace in London.

^{viii} Jeffrey H. Schwartz, "Getting to Know George Washington," *Western Pennsylvania History* 93, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 59, <https://journals.psu.edu/wph/article/view/59157/58882>.

^{ix} "George Washington's Uniform," Smithsonian National Museum of American History Behring Center website, https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_434863.

^x Schwartz, "Getting to Know George Washington," 55.

^{xi} "1943.144: George Washington (1732-1799)," Harvard Art Museums website, <https://harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/230340?position=2>.

^{xii} "Coat," George Washington's Mount Vernon website, <https://emuseum.mountvernon.org/objects/8133/coat?ctx=f006145da57f7a79a91389edef2889c07da42e43&idx=2>.

^{xiii} Mary M. Brooks, "Reflecting Absence and Presence: Displaying Dress of Known Individual," in *Refashioning and redress: Conserving and displaying dress*, eds. Mary M. Brooks and Dinah D. Eastop (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2016), 19.