



HARRY RANSOM
CENTER

P.O. DRAWER 7219 AUSTIN, TX 78713-7219
www.hrc.utexas.edu

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Gown of a different feather: Conservators investigate feathers on the burgundy gown from "Gone With The Wind"

The burgundy ball gown Scarlett wears to Ashley's birthday party in *Gone With The Wind* is meant to be provocative ("not modest or matronly," Rhett snarls) yet glamorous. But when the gown arrived at the Ransom Center in the early 1980s, something wasn't quite right.

"It looked more like a dance-hall girl, a cartoon character, as opposed to how beautiful this dress really was," says Cara Varnell, an independent art conservator who is conserving the five *Gone With The Wind* dresses housed at the Ransom Center.

Varnell quickly realized that the discrepancy was due to unoriginal feathers that someone added to the dress at some point between the film's production and the dress's arrival at the Ransom Center. Varnell says that the film provides an essential clue verifying that someone did, in fact, add feathers: jewels decorating the feathers on Scarlett's sleeve are visible in the film, but replacement feathers block these jewels today.

Several clues led Varnell to distinguish the original ostrich feathers from the unoriginal ostrich feathers. The biggest clue was that the original feathers curl at the ends but the replacements do not. Varnell discovered that threads attached to each feather's shaft created a slight bend, curling the feather. A second clue was color: the original feathers are blue burgundy, whereas the replacement feathers are red burgundy. Texture was a third clue: the original feathers are thicker and fluffier than the replacements. Lastly, the sewing thread affixing the replacement feathers doesn't match the thread used for the original feathers.

All of these unoriginal feathers raise the question: why were replacement feathers added in the first place? Since the elastic straps had stretched out over time, Varnell posits that someone added feathers because it seemed like the straps were missing more feathers than they actually were. Another possibility is that someone added feathers to cover up original feathers that weren't "perky" anymore.

Upon examination, Varnell determined that one such feather lost its perk because it broke at the point where it was sewn to the gown. After six hours mending the feather with three layers of Japanese tissue, acrylic archival adhesive, and polyester filament, Varnell will be able to reattach the feather to the gown.

So far, Varnell has removed seven unoriginal feathers because they were damaging the gown. One such feather was covering a stitch placed much higher than it should have been, making the bustle almost asymmetrical. Once Varnell removed the feather, it was clear where the stitch should be placed instead to fix the bustle.



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As they stabilize the gown, the conservation team is discussing future options, including the fate of the feathers.