

From fall 2010 to spring 2012, more than 180 hours of conservation work was conducted on the green curtain dress, the burgundy ball gown, and the green velvet dressing gown from *Gone With The Wind*. This description highlights some of the work conducted on these original costumes.

This description reveals that conservation work is careful, detailed, and time-consuming. Although much of the work may not be visible to someone viewing the costume on a mannequin, the meticulous efforts that have occurred on the underside will stabilize these costumes for the future.

### **Burgundy ball gown**

The burgundy ball gown is made from silk velvet that is in generally good condition. The biggest challenge with this costume was the unconventional construction of the bustle drape at the back and rectifying previous attempts to stabilize the costume.

The bustle at the skirt back is made by gathering and pulling up the skirt in a way that is unique to this dress and not typical of nineteenth-century dresses. Additionally, the back drape had been previously repaired on more than one occasion prior to the dress's arrival at the Ransom Center, with stitches removed and then replaced several times, especially along the waistline. This repeated mending left the fabric weak. Each time a needle is put into a fabric it makes a tiny hole. If a single area is repeatedly stitched and re-stitched, it can weaken over time, and the threads will eventually split and give out. The weakest area of the dress was at the waistline, which had to support the weight of the bustle drape.

Because of the weakened condition of the fabric, it was critical that any removal of stitches be absolutely essential. This meant that the original shape of the drape had to be determined before any of the previous repair stitches were removed, which proved more complicated than anticipated. In the end it required removing one or two repair stitches at a time and letting the fabric guide each step. All of the unnecessary and disfiguring repair stitches were removed, and the drape fell together beautifully. The weakened areas were supported using a combination of stabilization techniques, and new hook and eyes were added to replace those that had been removed with the old mends or otherwise lost.

The original dress sketch by *Gone With The Wind* costume designer Walter Plunkett indicated that the dress had feathers around the bodice, shoulder straps, and hipline, throughout the skirt, and around the hem. It is difficult to say from existing photos how many feathers were originally placed on the dress. In the film we see very few full shots of this dress, and we never see the back. What is clear is that the dress had previously lost some feathers, and about a dozen replacement feathers had been added to fill in some of this loss prior to the dress's arrival at the Ransom Center. The need to remove the new feathers was obvious; they were neither the right color nor the right shape.

[It was clear which feathers were original.](#) The new feathers were too red, thin, and did not curl in the same way as the originals. The original feathers are actually made of two feathers joined, sewn, and curled with a thread that runs up the center spine. What was not clear was exactly where the missing feathers belonged.

Ultimately the decision was to remove any new feathers that did not blend, most noticeably those trimming the bodice and the shoulder straps, and to leave any that could be disguised by original feathers—these were mostly on the drape. Replacement feathers were ordered from a supplier that custom dyed new ostrich plumes. It was a challenge to match the color when no original feather could be provided. Removing an original and sending it to the supplier was not an option. In the end a color was chosen that would visually blend with the originals. The feathers were re-created using the same techniques as the original feathers.

Another factor that governed the ultimate solution to the feather question was the delicate nature of the fabric. Keeping in mind the fabric's fragility, it was decided that no replacement feathers would be sewn to the actual dress. Instead, feathers are attached to the mannequin around the top of the dress and on the shoulder straps when the dress is displayed. Though it is essentially playing a trick on the viewer, adding the new feathers in this manner means that the dress will not be further compromised.

### **Green curtain dress**

The conservation work began with careful examination and removal of repairs and additions that had been made to the dress after the film but prior to its arrival at the Ransom Center. For example, one unoriginal element that the conservator carefully removed was the wire "hoop" sewn to the hem of the chartreuse underskirt in the front of the dress.

The biggest concern with the green curtain dress was the waistline. The skirt is made like a dress, attached to a bodice of thin cotton to eliminate the need for a waistband and to make Scarlett's waist appear as thin as possible.

The skirt is pleated and sewn to the bodice. Yet the pleats are of varying sizes and not entirely caught within the waistline seam, leaving some parts of the pleats hanging loose. Additionally, multiple rows of stitching made it clear that many alterations had been made to the waist over the years. The initial plan was to remove all of the extra stitching and reset the pleats, but this could be done only if the original placement of the pleats was apparent. In the end, it was impossible to determine the exact placement of the original pleats and which stitches were original. The final decision was to take a cautious approach and leave the waistline alone. The loose pleats were stabilized to keep them safe when the dress was handled and put on a dress form.

The cording used for the shoulder trim and the belt is made from cotton cord covered with silk threads and then twisted together. The silk threads were breaking off, and loose ends of silk were tangled. To stabilize the silk so that no more threads were lost, each silk thread was straightened with painstaking care and secured using an archival adhesive.

Though the fabric was in generally good condition, there were a few small splits in the velvet and the lightweight cotton bodice that required support to prevent further damage while the dress is on display.

Although the [mystery concerning the discoloration of the green curtain dress](#) has yet to be solved, the fabric is in structurally good condition.

### **Green velvet dressing gown**

Initially, the green velvet dressing gown appeared to be in generally good condition, but closer inspection of the silk velvet revealed that it is very fragile. The silk is beginning to split along the folded edges of outer seams and around the embroidery. Additional small splits are beginning to appear within the body of the gown. The color has changed unevenly over time, darkening slightly in the areas exposed to light.

The green velvet dressing gown is designed with three small pleats at the center back waist, each placed at the seam line of the four panels that form the back of the dress. The long skirt hangs from these pleats, concentrating the stress of the weight on those areas. These areas are naturally vulnerable to stress-related damage. The damage to this area began to appear sometime prior to the green velvet dressing gown's arrival at the Ransom Center, evidenced by old mends that attempted to stabilize and strengthen the fabric but ultimately proved unsuccessful.

Stabilizing this area using conservation techniques was tricky. The tiny pleats are made up of two folds pulled together and sewn over the seam, making four layers of fabric over a seam, with two fabric layers on each side. Further complicating the matter was a construction technique used to help control the shape at the back: the seam allowance was snipped right up to the stitches holding pleats. Because of this construction, the delicate fabric gave out over time and began to tear from the weight of the skirt.

The old repairs were removed from the pleats. The method of the previous repair—the size of thread and needle used—exacerbated the original damage. Now there were not only significant splits and multiple tiny holes in the fabric but also a loss of the fragile silk pile. Each layer of the three pleats and the seams underneath required individual support with a fabric so fine that it would not interfere with the garment's structure and final look, and stitched with thread strong enough to hold it but thin enough to require using only the smallest needle. This process was difficult not only because the areas were so small and fragile but also because it required turning the garment essentially inside out and working between the delicate green silk velvet and the yellow silk lining without releasing any original construction stitches.

At the top seam of both sleeves and at the wrist end, there were small stress splits. Throughout the gown several seams had loose or broken threads, and the hem threads were broken or missing in several sections. There were small holes in the velvet at the hemline, and much of the hem had loose or broken threads. All of these splits, stress points, and loose stitches required support to give the area strength and make the green velvet dressing gown safe for handling and display.

There were many loose sequins and a few broken embroidery threads on the costume. The thread holding the metal sequins and beads generally appears intact but is in fact very fragile and breaks easily. The loose sequins and beads were secured and weakened threads given support with additional stitches.

The velvet of this gown is deceptively fragile and needs to be handled with great care or the fabric could continue to split. To mitigate what could be irreparable damage, the green velvet dressing gown's condition will continue to be monitored, handling will be kept to a minimum, and it will be kept in temperature- and humidity-controlled conditions in its archival storage container.