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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Conservators find best treatment for wedding veil from "Gone With The Wind" is no treatment

Gone With The Wind is full of lessons about love, life, and loss. Almost 75 years later, Scarlett's silk wedding veil has one more lesson.

"At the end of our life, it is the end of our life. We are all organic material. When a costume has come to the end of its life, it is no different than we are," says Cara Varnell, a specialist in Hollywood film costumes and the conservator working on the Ransom Center's five *Gone With The Wind* dresses.

Scarlett's silk wedding veil arrived at the Ransom Center in the early 1980s brittle and lined with permanent creases, indicating that the fibers were damaged and deteriorating. Because of its fragility, the veil is a prime example of an item conservators may decide not to conserve.

Varnell explains that the conservation team could conceivably decide to support the veil with replacement tulle netting. The problem is that they wouldn't be able to stitch the tulle to the cap because the cap is friable, meaning it will turn to dust if handled too much.

"It becomes this trade-off," Varnell said. "If we try to conserve it, what will happen? I wouldn't achieve anything by way of support, and it would require so much handling I might end up with nothing. If we leave it alone, what will happen? We'll pack it properly, it shouldn't be shown, and it will be an object to be studied, not one to be displayed."

Since conservation will probably deteriorate the veil even further, Varnell and the conservation team have decided to keep an eye on the veil and gauge how quickly it's deteriorating.

"My fundamental philosophy is just because I can do it, doesn't mean I should do it," Varnell says.

The veil teaches another lesson: sometimes conservators should not wear gloves.

"You can't tell the condition of this silk tulle just by looking at it. And if you wear gloves, not only are you causing potential damage, you get no sense of the condition of the fibers. As soon as you touch it without gloves, you realize it's very crunchy, which means that the fibers are damaged," Varnell says.

Although the veil is deteriorating, the conservation team can still tell that the cap is "incredibly well made," Varnell says. The team also found that the veil tulle is diamond shaped, whereas the tulle that makes up the cap is square. All of this evidence suggests that, if not studio-made, the cap may have been an original Southern woman's cap from the mid-nineteenth century.



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“Walter Plunkett spent several weeks traveling the South researching costumes from the period and meeting with women introduced to him by Margaret Mitchell,” says Jill Morena, Ransom Center collection assistant for costumes and personal effects. “Some of the women gave Plunkett swatches from period garments. I wouldn’t be surprised if a woman in the South gave him this cap.”