

The James Monroe Museum

Costume Conservation Project



Elizabeth Kortright Monroe's shoes, ca. 1786.

The James Monroe Museum & Memorial Library in Fredericksburg, Virginia, contains the largest collection of objects in the country related to the fifth president. The museum, open since 1927 and currently administered by the University of Mary Washington, owns over 1,600 objects; 10,000 archival documents; and 10,000 books.

Among our artifacts is an incredible 42-piece collection of clothing worn by James and Elizabeth Monroe, their children, and descendants. The collection includes the court suit worn by Monroe while negotiating the Louisiana Purchase in France, and the gown worn by Mrs. Monroe on her wedding day. Some of the oldest articles are vests worn by a young Monroe as a student at the College of William and Mary on the eve of the Revolution.

The collection illustrates all aspects of the Monroe family's daily existence, from their public life in Europe and Washington to their private life at home. It presents this often under-recognized historical figure as a man, with tastes and opinions, relationships and family. It also gives us an opportunity to learn more about Mrs. Monroe, a woman virtually unknown to history since her husband burned all her correspondence after her death.

Unfortunately, after years of display and

improper storage, the costumes had deteriorated to a state in which they could no longer be safely exhibited, and, in the 1980s, the last was removed to storage. The stories they hold were on the verge of being lost forever.

Four years ago, the museum embarked on an ambitious project of assessing, conserving and returning the costume collection to display on a limited basis. Our goal is to open a new window into the life and times of James Monroe and his family. By exhibiting the conserved garments and making them available for research and publication, we can help people understand Monroe's world better than ever before.



James Monroe's breeches and waistcoat, ca. 1786.

The project began in 2005 with an assessment of each garment, conducted by professional textile conservators Colleen Callahan and Newbold Richardson. This included preliminary research into the history of the costumes, a process which yielded several important discoveries. Perhaps the greatest was learning that one gold velvet empire-waist gown, dating to ca. 1800 and believed to have been worn by Elizabeth Monroe in France, was missing an important piece! Examination revealed that an overlay had been attached to

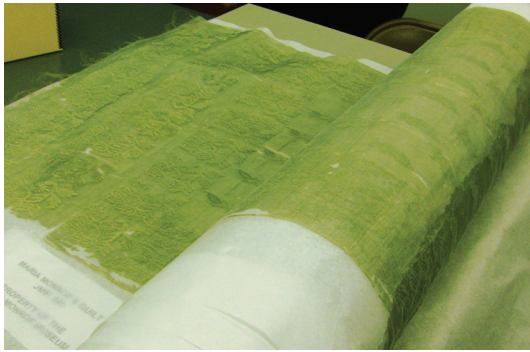
the gown at one time, and research into early 19th-century fashion showed that overlays of embroidered gold net were popular. It made sense that the fashionable Elizabeth, known "la Belle Americaine," would have had her court dress made in the latest style. And in fact, the catalogue for the auction where our dress was purchased included a notice of "several yards of old gold net, embroidered." Our thought is that auctioneers did not know the embroidered net went with the gold velvet dress, and sold the two items separately. We are currently trying to locate the original gold net.

After completing the assessment, the conservators drafted a treatment proposal for each item, and actual conservation work began. Even with careful planning, however, we encountered challenges! In one case, we found that an aquamarine-tinted lace shawl, dating from the 1820s, had been attached to stiff plastic net with glue and thread. The conservators had to develop a weak solvent to melt the glue while not damaging the lace, in addition to finding and removing hundreds of tiny stitches. The painstaking work progressed at a rate of several inches a day and what had been an estimated 3-week project ballooned into a 3-month project.



Elizabeth Monroe's wedding dress bodice.

Museum & Memorial Library



Pre-conservation shawl worn by Elizabeth Kortright Monroe.

Another garment – the gown we know as Elizabeth Monroe's wedding dress – turned into a project of its own. Our assessment revealed that the damasked off-white silk dress was remade at least three times. The original fabric, embroidered with a floral pattern in green, pink, orange, blue and yellow, dated to the 1750s – 18 years before Elizabeth was born. Her father, Lawrence Kortright, was a successful New York City merchant who had access to the finest textiles from Europe. The fabric was probably purchased for Elizabeth's mother, Hannah, who made it into a sack-back gown in the mid-18th century style. It was then altered to accommodate trends of the late 18th century, coinciding with the Monroes' wedding date of 1786. It appears to have been made over again in the early 19th century, possibly for the Monroe daughters. The gown eventually came to the museum through their youngest daughter, Maria Hester.

We now had to make a decision: should we return the dress to its 1786 appearance, or to the way it looked in the 1830s? While discolored and showing stress tears, the fabric was in good shape, and almost all the material that would have made up the original sack-back gown was still extant. However, the bodice had been so heavily altered over the years that it would not have been possible to restore it to its 1786 state. From our point of view, the dress is most important for being Mrs. Monroe's wedding gown, but we could not envision a way to display it with a mismatched skirt, petticoat and bodice.

Our conservators began to investigate a way to rebuild the earlier bodice using modern materials. They came up with a revolutionary solution that combined digital technology with histori-

cal research. DePersico Designs, a Pennsylvania company, pioneered a technique in digitally photographing fabric at very high resolution and using lasers to print the image onto new fabric. They had never attempted this technique on an historic textile, but they agreed to try it on a section of our gown. Being careful to protect the fabric from harmful light, the staff at DePersico were able to obtain an image of a full repeat of the pattern so detailed it was possible to see individual embroidery stitches on the screen.



Pre-conservation court gown.

After much trial and error, we were able to produce a bolt of modern fabric with the historic pattern printed on it. The conservators will now reconstruct the 1786 bodice, using remaining evidence of seams in the current bodice and piecing the rest together from pattern books. The restored 1786 skirt and petticoat will be displayed alongside the reconstructed bodice, allowing the public to see Elizabeth's wedding dress as it was when she wore it. We'll also be able to retain the 1830s bodice for research. This is the first time such a technique has been used, and we hope costume conservators will benefit from it for years to come.

The costume conservation project has been invaluable to Monroe scholarship, but it has also become the largest fund-raising effort in the museum's history, bringing in nearly \$100,000 over the course of the project. In 2005, the National Endowment for the

Humanities named it a We the People project, recognizing its importance to American history. In 2007, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Park Service awarded the project a Save America's Treasures grant, in recognition of its efforts to protect significant historical artifacts. A donation from the Virginia Daughters of the American Revolution followed, and local organizations such as the Rappahannock Colonial Heritage Society and our own Friends of the James Monroe Museum were extremely generous.

As the project nears its completion, we are still in the process of raising the last \$11,000 needed. We plan to display the results of 4 years' hard work in a limited-engagement exhibition currently set to open in the late fall of 2009. This will be the only opportunity for the public to see the entirety of this remarkable collection in one place. ☞

Special thanks to Adele Uphaus, membership and special events coordinator, and Meghan Buding, assistant director and curator, both of the James Monroe Museum and Library, for contacting us and sharing this special project with our membership! They can be contacted via email at auphaus@umw.edu and at mbuding@umw.edu.



James Monroe's court suit, ca. 1804.