

Mounting a Tahitian Mourner's Costume

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This rare Tahitian mourner's costume is from Captain Cook's second voyage of discovery on HMS Resolution, through the Pacific in 1774. The multi-layered costume comprises 9 wearable parts and has been displayed in different configurations since it was transferred between Oxford University Museums, from the Ashmolean to the newly-opened Pitt Rivers Museum in 1884.

Due to previous case restrictions the mourner's costume had only ever been displayed at a maximum height of 2m and heavy components such as the pearl shell mask and wooden breastplate were mounted too low, whilst other more fragile materials like the Imperial-pigeon feather cloak, were completely obscured from view.

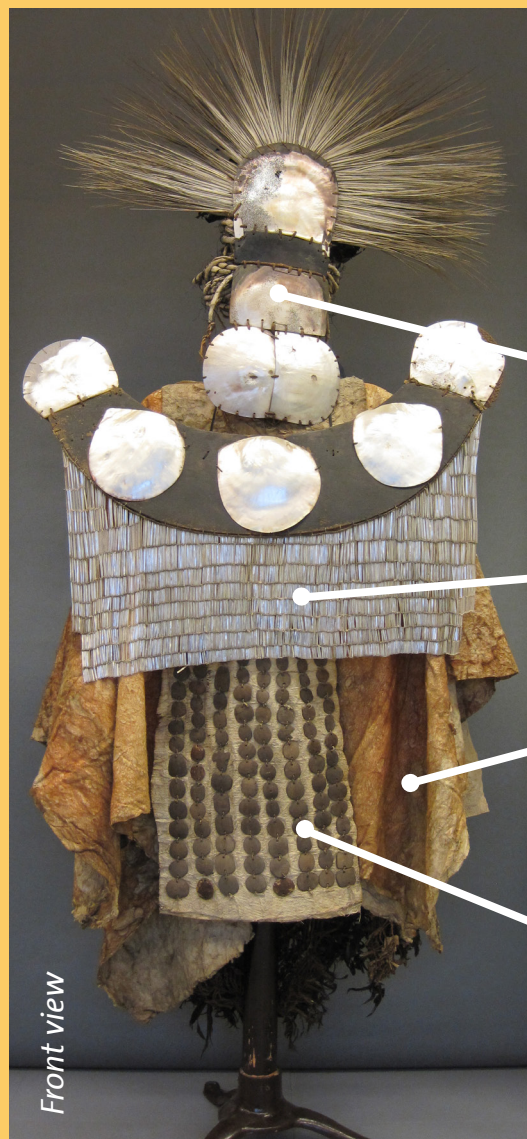
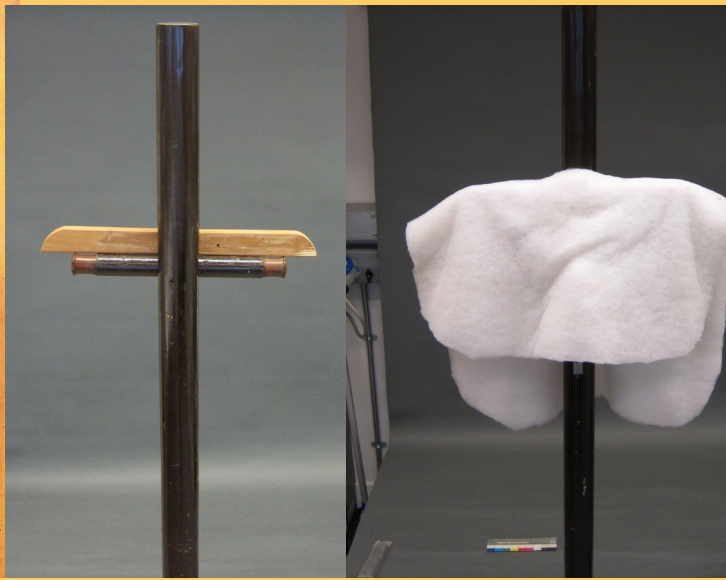
These past interpretations failed to embody the imposing character the chief Tahitian mourner personified during the elaborate mourning ceremony, that marked the death of a high-ranking member of society. Armed with a shark's teeth sword and 'maddened' with grief, the chief mourner would attack or even kill anyone who crossed his territory.

A new display case allowed for the costume's true height of over 2.6m and three-dimensional form to be realized for the first time in more than 200 years. While mounting techniques more commonly used for the display of Western dress were utilized to create a more authentic interpretation of the Chief Tahitian mourner.



PREVIOUS DISPLAYS

Former display method: 'flat' within case- mounted onto a pole with wooden cross piece.



The surviving costume consists of 9 wearable components:

Barkcloth bindings and feather headdress: due to the inaccurate order of layering, the unravelled bindings are constricting the underlying pandanus hat with attached barkcloth cape.

Pearl-shell mask fringed with tropic bird feathers: mounted too low, the mask would fail to conceal the wearer's identity and hinder vision.

Wooden breastplate: mounted too low, causing unnecessary weight and pressure across the chest.

Two barkcloth *tiputa*: one thick 'poncho' like garment and one much smaller fine brown layer. Here the brown *tiputa* is obscured from view.

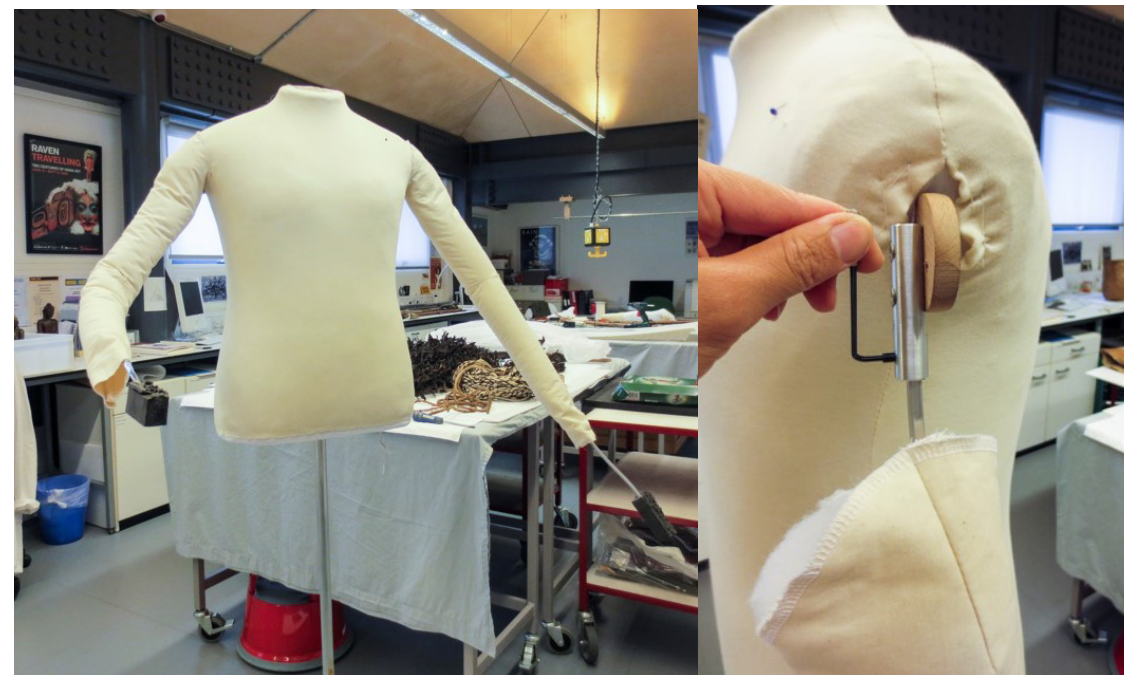
Barkcloth Apron: decorated with small coconut discs, the accompanying belt is obscured from view.

Feather cloak: inaccurate order of layering, the cloak is unsupported and crushing the barkcloth cape.



MAKING THE MOUNT

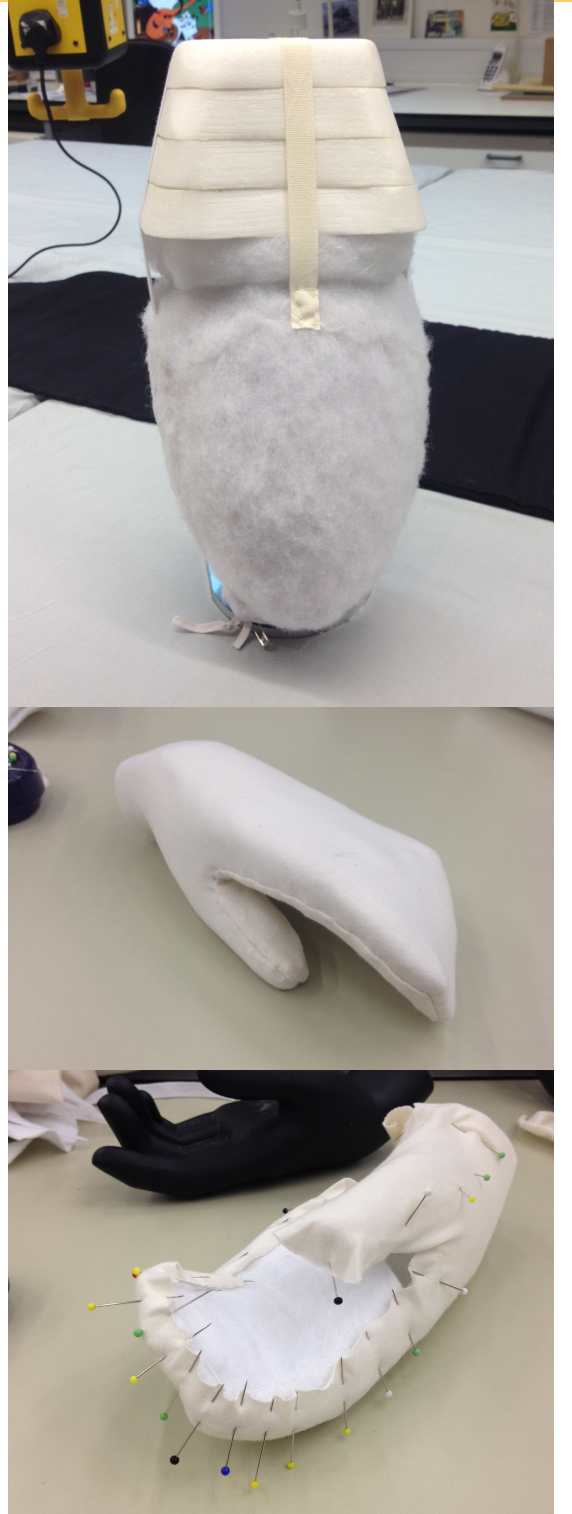
1. A buckram male torso was padded with graded layers of polyester-batting. To this basic framework additional structures were fixed, including a reinforced neck plate and adjustable aluminium wire 'arms' encased in soft sleeve supports.



2. As the costume consists of many layers worn one on top of the other, it was necessary to make individual underpinnings to help control and define each part. Made from a combination of Reemay®, Rigiline® (a flexible polyester boning), silk and muslin, the underpinnings minimised friction and creasing between the textured surfaces.

3. To provide a firm yet soft support for the pandanus hat and barkcloth bindings, a buckram head was modified with layers of plastazote® and polyester-batting. The head was not strong enough to support the pearl-shell mask and wooden breastplate, so a custom-made steel bracket with security clips was fixed at the re-inforced neck plate. This holds the heavy components securely in the correct position.

4. As intended when dressed, no part of the mount is visible. To help lend scale and symmetry to the large proportions of the costume, 'hands' were added to the mount. Lightweight fossshape was selected and 'hands' were cast from a fibreglass mould and finished with a stretch jersey covering.



NEW DISPLAY

The costume is now displayed in the new case alongside other reinterpreted objects from the Cook-Voyage Collections.

Mounting the costume as a complete wearable ensemble was a delicate balance between interpretation and support. By introducing alternative mounting methods not typically applied to ethnographic dress the new mount enhances the costume, creating an 'otherworldly' impact, without compromising its original cultural properties.

Acknowledgements: Fundamental metal work and bespoke fixings were made by PRM display technicians Alan Cooke and Chris Wilkinson. Conservation and material analysis was carried out by Jeremy Uden, Deputy Head of Conservation, PRM. This collaborative project was made possible with the support and guidance of Heather Richardson, Jeremy Uden, Andrew Hughes, Marion Kite, Sam Gatley and Sandra Smith. Further Reading: Conserving "Curiosities" Blog: <http://conserving-curiosities.blogspot.co.uk/> Refashioning and Redress: Conserving and Displaying Dress The Conservation and Display of the Tahitian Mourner's Costume at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. Getty 2016. Uden, Richardson and Lee.



Pitt Rivers MUSEUM

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