

Preserving the Disposable: Conservation of a Paper Dress

By Marlen Börngen



Paper dress from the Atopos Collection Athens (registration number: 2006.02.235). **Left:** before conservation. **Right:** after conservation.

The arts organization Atopos Contemporary Visual Culture in Athens, Greece, has collected more than 500 pieces of paper clothing, ranging from medieval Japanese examples to recent paper designs by Issye Miyake and Hugo Boss. The core of the collection, however, consists of paper dresses produced between 1966 and 1968, during the brief but widespread heyday of paper fashion (see *Art in Print*, Sept–Oct 2014).¹ In conjunction with a 2013 exhibition at the Galerie Stihl in Waiblingen, Germany (an organization dedicated to works on paper), we restored one iconic example.²

A classic 1960s A-line dress, manufactured in 1966 by the Mars Manufacturing Company in Asheville, NC, the restored garment features a round neckline and half-sleeves finished with textile cuffs. It is made of a three-ply material consisting of a top layer offset printed with horizontal black and orange stripes and two under-layers. Seven percent of the fabric content is a synthetic fiber, possibly Nylon, that creates a scrim reinforcement

between the first and the second layers; the remainder consists of chemical wood pulp, a staple of papermaking.³ Describing this material as “paper,” however, is misleading: the individual fibers are more intact and more loosely enmeshed than in standard paper, creating a rough surface.⁴ The material might be more accurately described as a nonwoven fabric.

Atopos owns two examples of this dress—one that has never been worn and one “used” dress in need of conservation. The Atopos staff plans to exhibit the two dresses together in future and thus decided that evidence of use, like the creases created when the wearer was sitting, for example, should be preserved in the worn dress, but that we should eliminate non-meaningful and distracting damages.

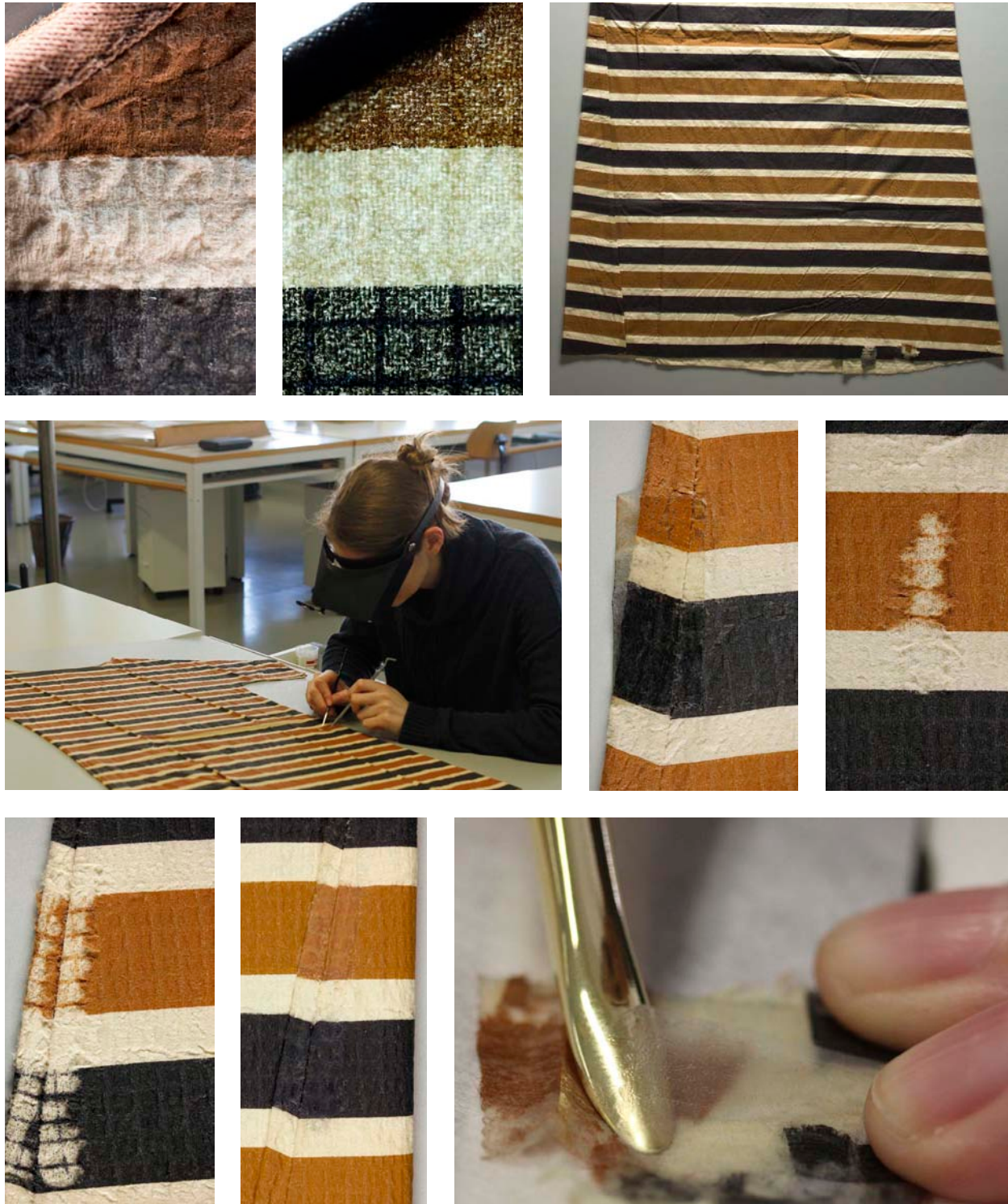
In addition to the central wrinkles from sitting, the dress bore straight creases that appear to be the result of being folded for sale in a plastic wrapper. It had been trimmed at the bottom in accordance with the advice printed

on the packaging of many of these garments: “To shorten the paper dress, all that is needed is a steady hand and a pair of scissors.”⁵ Furthermore, the owner had narrowed the dress to create a slimmer fit—instructions for making alterations using adhesive tape were also included in some packaging.⁶ Here the left and right sides of the dress had been folded over and affixed with tape. The right side was still taped but the left side had come undone (as had the tape fixed along the lower hem of the dress to secure the fold), exposing tape residues and skinning the surface of the dress.

Our goal was to return the dress to its condition when the owner would have worn it, preserving her alterations. A fragment of the top ply that had become stuck to loosened tape was released with a heated spatula inserted between the adhesive layer and the fabric, then cleaned to remove residual adhesive and reattached in its original location. Skinned areas on the surface were retouched after thin Japan paper had been adhered to the

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Top row, from left to right: dress weave and surface in raking light; nylon scrim visible in transmitted light; dress center showing wrinkles with loosened pressure-sensitive tapes at bottom hem. Center row, from left to right: use of a heated spatula to separate the tape from a dress fragment; partially detached pressure-sensitive tape, left side of dress; skinning of dress surface from detached tape. Bottom row, from left to right: skinned area; same area after treatment, folded into the previous position; use of a heated spatula to separate the tape from a dress fragment.

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area as a barrier shaped to fit the loss (thus the retouching can easily be removed in future if desired). The Japan paper was first tinted to match the printed pattern so minimal retouching was required once the paper was in place. This paper insert was manipulated to imitate the woven texture of the original dress. Original fragments of the printed top ply that had become detached were reattached in their original positions.

To return the left side of the dress to its desired shape we gently bent the material, allowing it to settle into a soft curve. The original tape was preserved during this process but we did not rely on it as a fixative, and instead attached small strips of Japan paper in four locations; in two places we also used the extant tape to secure the fold. This fold can easily be opened again if need be.⁷

In terms of both its original design and its casual homemade alterations, this paper dress documents a particular moment of public engagement with wearable art and disposable fashion. This is what we sought to preserve.

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4. Evidenced by a Herzberg microchemical stain test of a small fiber sample from the bottom of the dress and examination at 200x magnification.

5. Walford, *Ready to Tear*, 15.

6. Virginia Knight, "The Answer to Laundry in Outer Space": *The Rise and Fall of the Paper Dress in 1960s American Fashion* (bachelor's thesis, University of North Carolina, Asheville, 2015), 4. https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/unca/f/V_Knight_Answer_2014.pdf.

7. Conservation materials used in the treatment included: 2.5 percent methylcellulose Methocel A4C adhesive (Dow Chemical Company), Lascaux acrylic adhesive 498 HV, Stabilo Carthello pastel pencils, and Japanese kozo tissue. At Atopos, these dresses are stored in custom-designed storage boxes fitted with tissue padding and designed to stabilize each dress.

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Notes:

1. See Stamos Fafalios and Vassilis Zidianakis, "Fragile,' 'Souper' and POP! The Atopos Paper Fashion Collection" in *Art in Print*, vol. 4, no. 3 (September–October 2014), 14–17.

2. "Pap(i)er Fashion" (26 January 26–21 April, 2013). I worked on this conservation project as my senior project at the Studiengang der Konservierung und Restaurierung von Kunstwerken auf Papier, Archiv- und Bibliotheksgut at the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste (Study Program of Conservation of Works of Art on Paper, Archives and Library Materials at the State Academy of Art and Design) in Stuttgart.

3. Jonathan Walford, *Ready to Tear. Paper Fashions of the 60s* (Fonthill, Ontario: Kickshaw Productions, 2007), 13.