

## Conservation and Restoration Uncovers the History of a First Lady's Gown

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### Abstract:

The James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library in Fredericksburg, VA has an important collection of clothing belonging to the Monroe family. Of particular interest are several gowns worn by James Monroe's wife, Elizabeth Kortright Monroe (1768-1830). One of these gowns is made of elaborately brocaded silk taffeta with a supplementary damask design of lace motifs. In 2008-2009, my business partner, Newbold Richardson, and I conserved this gown and delved into its history. This presentation is about the history of the gown, its conservation stabilization and its display in an eighteenth century configuration.

### Contents:

History of Elizabeth Monroe's Brocade Gown / Conservation and Display of Elizabeth Monroe's Brocade Gown

### History of Elizabeth Monroe's Brocade Gown



Fig. 1:  
Brocaded damask gown before conservation.

The James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library in Fredericksburg, VA has an important collection of clothing belonging to the Monroe family. Of particular interest are several gowns worn by James Monroe's wife, Elizabeth Kortright Monroe (1768-1830). One of these gowns is made of elaborately brocaded silk taffeta with a supplementary damask woven pattern of lace motifs. This presentation details answers to questions about this gown's history that my business partner, Newbold (Newbie) Richardson, and I addressed and an overview of the conservation work we performed on it as part of a Save America's Treasures program grant to conserve a number of the pieces in the Monroe collection.

An image of the gown shows the fragile condition it was in when we first encountered it (fig. 1). In this image of the full gown, a piece of paper separates the overskirt and petticoat. Excluding the cut of its much altered bodice, the brocaded damask gown obviously had eighteenth-century origins in its fabric and the style of its overskirt and ruffled petticoat, both of which are decorated with fringed trim.



Fig. 2:  
Silk taffeta gown, c.1786, now beige originally bright pink.

The most important question about the gown's history we explored was whether Elizabeth Monroe had worn the brocade gown or a taffeta gown in the collection as her wedding dress in 1786 (fig. 2). While some family accounts stated the brocade gown was the wedding dress, other family traditions favored the taffeta gown. This taffeta gown is in the style of the 1780s and has not been altered. Unfortunately, the taffeta gown is now sadly faded from its original bright pink color due to light exposure over many years of display and its fabric is damaged to the point that it cannot be stabilized. We mounted it for this photograph so there would be a document of its condition in 2009. Even though this gown is now beige, I will refer to it as the pink gown.

In beginning our research on the brocaded gown, the first questions we addressed were: “What is the likely date of the brocaded gown’s fabric?” and “What is the date of the brocaded gown’s style as we encountered it in 2008?” The brocaded gown’s silk fabric is a complicated weave combining a damask ground of floral, leaf and lace motifs with large scattered multi-colored brocaded flowers. A gown at the Victoria and Albert Museum (T.36-1973) is made of a similar fabric from a design by Anna Maria Garthwaite, dated 1752. Based on this similarity and other comparisons with 1750s brocaded silks, our conclusion was that the fabric dated to the early 1750s. As for its style in 2008, the gown bodice had been altered for wear as an evening dress in the 1840s, possibly by Elizabeth’s granddaughter. In the 1830s and 1840s, eighteenth century-style silks were back in fashion and many eighteenth century dresses were remade at this time. Miraculously, the overskirt and petticoat were left largely intact including their eighteenth century fringed trim, perhaps because along with the revival of eighteenth-style fabrics, in the 1840s, there was a revival of the overskirt over a petticoat look.

Next we wondered what the gown’s first incarnation in the 1750s would have been like. Elizabeth Kortright Monroe came from a well-to-do merchant family from New York, and her parents married in 1755, so it may well be that this fabric was originally purchased and made up for her mother’s wedding dress. Though the gown could have had either a sack or a fitted back at that time, somehow the flowing pleats of a sack back seemed more likely to us. There were also slight indications at the top waist edges of the overskirt panels that the fabric had originally extended above the waist in the back, in keeping with the original gown being a sack back. In the 1750s the gown’s front probably had an open bodice with robings worn with a stomacher. Our thought was that if the gown was a sack back that maybe a whole new look was achieved in 1786 by unstitching the sleeves and the back pleats, then cutting a new closed-front bodice from the back pleat fabric above the waist. Such a bodice would have been similar in style to the bodice of the 1780s pink silk taffeta gown and this alteration would also have created the extant separate overskirt.

Given the Monroes’ 1786 wedding date, the pink gown has an edge as far as design goes but it was only its 1840s style bodice that detracted from the brocade gown’s eighteenth century legitimacy. In the end, we decided that because of its sumptuous fabric, the brocade gown was the better candidate for Elizabeth Monroe’s wedding dress with the pink gown being relegated to a trousseau dress made at the time of her marriage or possibly soon afterward.

### **Conservation and Display of Elizabeth Monroe’s Brocade Gown**

The gown’s overskirt and petticoat had been hand sewn and all the seaming appeared to be nineteenth century with no eighteenth-century seaming remained. Luckily the fabric was not dry rotted though it was desiccated and had many slits (fig. 3). We began our conservation treatment by taking the panels of the overskirt and petticoat apart and hydrating them before doing any sewing conservation. As we unstitched the panels, it became clear that these skirts had been taken apart and put back together more than once.

Each overskirt panel except for the two front panels were backed with a layer of off-white silk organza – the organza was used to minimize the weight of the backing fabric. We began working at the center of each panel and worked out to the hem and waist edges, over stitching all the slits in the fabric to the backing fabric with off-white hair silk thread. Where necessary patches of tan silk taffeta covered with a layer of nylon conservation net were inserted under splits and areas of loss and over stitched in place. The net made the tan taffeta blend in better with the ground fabric.





Fig. 3:  
Detail of right front overskirt panel before conservation stabilization.



Fig. 4:  
Detail of right front overskirt panel after conservation stabilization.

The overskirt fronts were backed only with the tan silk taffeta, and the edges of the backing were turned to create a facing effect along the interior front edges. The areas of loss were treated using same method as the other panels (fig. 4).

The three petticoat panels were given the same treatment as the overskirt panels and then sewn to a tan taffeta back panel to recreate the petticoat. The three most damaged petticoat panels were backed with the organza and the areas of loss, filled in with tan taffeta and conservation net but minimal stitching was used to hold these layers together. These panels were then retired to storage.



Fig. 5:  
Detail of petticoat ruffle before conservation stabilization.

With the petticoat ruffle we had a pleasant surprise: – it turned out that its hem edge had originally been scalloped and the scallops had been tacked up. We released them and stabilized the petticoat ruffle using the same organza/taffeta/net/hair silk treatment as the panels (fig. 5). A facing of the tan taffeta was cut and stitched to the back of the bottom edge of the scallops (fig. 6). Finally, the ruffle was gathered, reattached to the petticoat, and the trim stitched back on it.



Fig. 6:  
Detail of petticoat ruffle after conservation stabilization.

We had numbered the overskirt panels and after the overskirt panels were stabilized as described, they were laid out in the order that they had been sewn together and it was clear this was not their eighteenth century configuration. We were able to figure out the original positions and sewed them to together in this configuration.

An exhibition of the Monroe clothing was organized after the conservation project was finished. For the brocade gown to be displayed in an eighteenth century configuration, we couldn't just display the overskirt and petticoat – it would need a bodice. To replicate the gown's fabric, we decided to use computer generated fabric printed in the brocaded damask design. For the bodice style, I took a pattern from the 1780s pink taffeta gown and constructed the new bodice in that style.

What we discovered is that the computer technology reproduces the design very accurately but getting the color matching is much more difficult. One color would be set and then they would go on the next one and the first one would change. Finally after many trials, we had our three yards of fabric, which I cut – very carefully – and made into the bodice.





Fig. 7:  
Brocaded damask gown dressed for exhibition.

This is the result (fig. 7). When the gown was dressed for the first time for the photo shoot, it was a very emotional moment. Yes, the background color of the bodice fabric is a little off, but light makes a difference and when it was on display, the light was dim. As wonderful as the original overskirt and petticoat are, they would not have had the same impact displayed without a bodice. Needless to say, we had not expected the almost 600 hours over two and half years it took to do this project, but in the end, we considered it our gift to the nation.