



Smithsonian  
*National Museum of the American Indian*

**PRELIMINARY ABSTRACTS**

*for*

**PRESENTATIONS AND POSTERS**

*for the*

**International Mountmaking Forum**

*at the*

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Mair La Touche, Benchmark (May 6<sup>th</sup>)

## **"New Mannequin Design for Fragile & Hard-to-Handle Parkas" details the construction of mannequins for hooded parkas from the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) and the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI).**

These beautiful garments are an important part of the over 500 objects selected from the two museums for long-term loan to the NMNH Alaska Arctic Studies Center. "Living our Cultures", the Arctic Center's inaugural exhibit, is scheduled to open in a new wing of the Anchorage Museum in 2010.

Those objects going to the Center are expected to be taken out of the cases periodically for study, so one of the core requirements in the exhibit is satisfying this expectation of a high level of access to the collection by Alaskan Native populations. Part of the challenge to conservators and mountmakers was to balance access to the objects with their safety and long-term preservation.

In the instance of the mannequins, the problem was stated as needing: Easy removal from the cases, a certain facility in handling and moving the artifact when on the mannequin, the ability to dress and undress the mannequin with a minimum of handling to the object, and a visual effect that was somewhere between a realistic body and the fuller support that would be best for a garment on long-term display. The parkas - of gut, caribou, squirrel skins & auk hides - are fragile and cannot take vigorous handling. Nor do they open up in the front, as so many clothes do, which would allow for easier dressing and undressing. And they all have hoods, which needed to be supported as well.

The ultimate solution is built around a three-part design that was used with variations for all five garments. First, there is an Ethafoam "noodle" that supports the sleeves in one continuous arc. That piece has a slot in it that fits onto a "handle" fitted into the top of the mannequins' Ethafoam torso. With the fitting of the arm-piece over the handle, the two parts are locked together. The third piece in the design is a "headband" that pegs into the arm-piece. It is this last piece holds the hood up.

The advantage of this design is in the ease of manufacture, the ease of dressing and undressing and the additional advantage of being able to use the "noodle" as you would a hanger with which to carry and handle the parka, or alternately, using the "handle" to carry or move the mannequin all in one piece, with minimal touching of the garment itself.

I usually make mannequins that are realistic bodies, carved from Ethafoam. I knew that was not the answer for these pieces. The solution that was hammered out - through a bit of trial and error - is one I am very pleased with. First because I know they were relatively easy to make, unlike the carved bodies. But more so because of the ease of handling which is a real and a pleasant surprise, evident to both me and the conservators every time we have to dress or undress one of these remarkable artifacts.