

BIO



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Laura Mina is Conservator of Textiles with the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture. She previously served as Head of the Textile Conservation Lab with Winterthur Museum, and Affiliated Assistant Professor of the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation, and as Associate Conservator with the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Laura received her M.A. in Fashion and Textile Studies: History, Theory, Museum Practice from the Fashion Institute of Technology, and her B.S. in Performance Studies from Northwestern University. Her research interests include conservation ethics, mannequins, and the chemistry of textile cleaning.

ABSTRACT

Soft Forms and Hard Finishes: An Experimental Approach to Mannequins Representing Real People

In the summer of 2024, the National Museum of African American History and Culture opened Forces for Change: Mary McLeod Bethune and Black Women's Activism. This updated exhibit explores Bethune's impact and influence in social justice, as well as ongoing activism and leadership by other Black women. The gallery display includes three ensembles worn by contemporary black women who are political and social activists. To support the gallery's interpretation and celebrate these women and their actions, the goal of the mannequins was to represent the women accurately not only in body proportions and posture, but also with dynamic and specific poses. For many practical and aesthetic reasons, including the range of body shapes and poses, the nature of the stretchy contemporary clothing, and dress-ability, it was necessary to custom build the forms with rigid foam and soft batting and felt. At the same time, it was desired that the surface finish contrast with the fabric clothing in texture and be able to be painted different colors. With only three forms to build, the NMAAHC textile conservation team took the opportunity to experiment. The forms would be displayed in closed cases with other objects for two years, so the need to meet high archival standards was important. Both building the diverse and very specific custom bodies and the experimental approach to surface finishing involved much problem solving and trial and error. The bodies were made with a combination of ready-made Dorfman archival form parts, used creatively and not always as the manufacturer intended, and carved Ethafoam planks and scraps, covered in batting, felt, and fabric. After experimenting with various options, the surface finish was ultimately achieved with the application of gesso on fabric coverings, which was further refined and painted by the museum's exhibitions team. While time-consuming to make, these forms were highly successful in achieving the look of a hard mannequin with soft materials that were advantageous in the dressing process, and in creating recognizable but abstracted likenesses of the three women being represented. While this approach to mannequins would be challenging to scale up for a large exhibition, this process was a great learning experience and allowed us to expand our knowledge and experience with different materials and their application. Continued collaborations with the museum's fabrication specialists who use different tools and materials than the textiles lab could continue to refine the approach to surface treatment and develop new ones. In sharing this project, we hope to add to and continue conversations about displaying diverse bodies and creating customizable forms for dynamic displays, as well as to inform and inspire further experiments in costume mounting.