TALE OF A THOUSAND FEATHERS: THE CONSERVATION OF A CHINESE FOLDING SCREEN

Katy Smith* - Textile Conservator
Susan Catcher - Senior Paper Conservator, Victoria & Albert Museum

INTRODUCTION: This poster presents a cross-disciplinary student project undertaken by Katy Smith as part of a 3-year textiles conservation apprenticeship at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. The conservation of a 19th century Chinese folding screen (V&A object number 6484-1869) was carried out under the supervision of an experienced paper conservator. The mixed media object, comprising of silk embroidery and feather collage was an opportunity to learn traditional paper conservation techniques, which could then be taken back to the textiles conservation studio.

1. OBJECT HISTORY: The screen has a lacquered wooden frame of 5 panels. One side is decorated with paper-backed silk, painted, and embroidered with silk and metal threads, showing figures in a landscape. The other side is gold paper, decorated with a three-dimensional collage of paper-backed feathers. It was produced for the Western market between 1825-65, and was shown at the Paris Exhibition in 1867. Shortly afterwards it was acquired for the South Kensington (later Victoria & Albert) Museum, in London. The feathers were identified as being Kingfisher tail and wing feathers, natural and dyed. The screen was not a typical product for the Chinese home, Kingfisher feathers being more commonly used for headdresses and jewellery. The screen was included in the V&A’s 2012 international touring exhibition ‘Art for Everyone’, as an example of the museum’s early collecting policy.

2. CONDITION: In preparation for travel and display, the screen required interventive conservation work on both the paper, textile and feather elements. The screen was soiled with an accumulation of dust. The outer feather panel, and outer silk panels at each end were in poor condition, and had suffered the most extensive damage, including splits and tears to the paper and silk. The damage was as a result of poor handling, transport and storage in the past, and of the poor quality materials that had been used in the manufacture of the screen. Old repairs included paper strips and textile patches adhered to the front surface. There were also patches to the back of the paper surfaces, indicating that at least one panel had been removed from the wooden frame for repair. No records of past treatments could be found. Throughout the feather panels, elements of the collage had been lost, with the exposed paper beneath painted blue. Where damaged, the feather elements were creased, or loose, and vulnerable to becoming detached.

3. APPROACH: A traditional paper conservation approach was used, as both the feather collages and embroidered panels were backed onto paper. Materials would include Japanese Sisasku paper and wheat starch paste. Parts of the screen would be disassembled, to gain access to the reverse side of the damaged surfaces. The feather collage panels could not be removed due to the fragile, and inflexible nature of their decoration, but silk panels appeared to have been removed for previous repair. All previous repairs would be removed as they were all ineffective and visually intrusive.

4. CLEANING: The entire screen was thoroughly surface cleaned, using a museum vac with low suction, and a fine sable brush. Old repairs on the surface were removed. Paper repairs were re-moistened and peeled away, with a thin crepeline patch mechanically removed – the adhesive having become brittle. In preparation for paper repairs to be carried out from the back, small temporary paper tabs were used on the front surface, adhered with a dry thick starch paste to hold the torn edges together in the correct alignment.

5. REPAIR OF SILK EMBROIDERED PANELS: Two embroidered panels were removed from the wooden frame - these from either end. A metal spatala was inserted beneath the edge of the panel, and used to separate the join. The embroidery was rolled off onto a cardboard tube. It could then be laid flat, face down, for conservation. Tom edges were humidified using damp blotting paper through a Sympatex barrier. Repairs were made using strips of Japanese Sisasku paper, cut into 6mm strips with the aid of a mounted needle to give a feathered edge. The edges were adhered with starch paste, smoothed with a bone folder, and weighted down to dry. On the right side of the panel, loose braid and embroidery threads were reattached using thick starch paste, applied with a fine sable brush and held in place with finger pressure.

6. REPAIR OF FEATHER PANEL: With a silk panel removed, the inner linings were exposed. In places these had been previously removed or torn through for access to the back of the feather collage, which had been patch repaired. The old paper patches were moistened and removed, and silk patches gently pulled away. Splits in the paper were joined, as before, using Japanese Sisasku paper and starch paste.

7. REPAIR OF PAPER LININGS: Where they had been torn the original linings were repaired with strips or patches of Japanese paper. Where sections of lining had been removed, new paper was inserted, a higher quality than had originally been used. A new full paper lining was inserted, pasted to the wooden frame and pulled taught before being weighted down to dry. These multiple linings act as a buffer and as a support for the decorated outer surfaces. The screen was reassembled, with the embroidery panels secured back into the frame, adhered around the edges with thick starch paste using a wide brush. Finger pressure was used to ensure close contact. The edges were weighted for 24 hours. All temporary facings could then be moistened and removed.

8. REPAIR OF FEATHER COLLAGE: Where elements of the feather collage were loose or vulnerable, they were supported with small tabs of Japanese paper, adhered with starch paste to their underside, bridging any areas of weakness.

9. RESULTS: The screen was made stable for travel and display. All old repairs were removed and replaced using traditional paper conservation techniques and materials. Where internal linings had been damaged, they were patch repaired, and where they were missing entirely, they were replaced. The structural integrity of both the linings and the decorated panels was restored. Any loose or fragile elements of the feather collage were secured, and where the repairs were visible, they were coloured with watercolour to match the surrounding surface.

*Author for correspondence: katy.smith@gmail.com