

Lucie Görlichová

University of Maribor,
Faculty of Mechanical Engineering
lucie.gorlichova@um.si

Andreja Rudolf

University of Maribor,
Faculty of Mechanical Engineering

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Reading a Historical Dress: Analysis and Decomposition as the Basis for a Virtual Reconstruction

Analysing historical garments offers valuable insights into past material culture, social norms, and craft practices. This study focuses on a two-piece silk dress from the second half of the nineteenth century held in the clothing heritage collection of the Maribor Regional Museum and applies the methodological framework of the book *The Dress Detective* (Mida & Kim, 2015) to examine its material, construction, and cultural significance. The dress, which consists of a bustle-supported skirt and a fitted jacket with a princess line, is an example of the fashionable silhouette of the 1870s–1880s, with its extremely narrow waist, rich embellishments, and intricate details such as lace, pleats, and fabric-covered buttons. Made from natural fibres (probably silk, cotton, linen) and sewn both by hand and with early machine stitches, the dress reflects the transitional tailoring techniques of the period.

The analysis revealed functional solutions, including a concealed pocket, as well as non-traditional design features, such as an unusual bust dart (beneath the decorative gathered band in the bust area). At the same time, signs of wear, alterations, and damage/deterioration were documented, testifying to the active use of the dress and later adaptations. Beyond its aesthetic qualities, the dress conveys ideals of femininity, social status, and physical discipline that characterised late nineteenth-century fashion. By dissecting the dress into its structural and material components, the study demonstrates how object-based analysis provides essential data for virtual reconstruction and enables the preservation of its technical and cultural information beyond the physical boundaries of the textile. This work thus emphasises the potential of systematic analysis of garments to serve not only as a research method in the history of dress, but also as a basis for the development of digital strategies for documenting and preserving textile heritage for future generations.

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References

Mida, I., & Kim, A. (2015). *The dress detective*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

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