Public Archaeology:
Balancing a Need for Clothed Museum Figures with a Limited Archaeological Record

A Poster Presentation at SAA 2010 in St. Louis, Missouri
By Mary Spanos

A note about copyright:

This poster presentation was prepared for and presented at an educational event. All cited materials are protected by the copyrights of the original publications (references are provided on the page following the poster in this PDF). All other images and text are protected by the copyright of the author, Mary Spanos.
The archaeological textile data recovered in the Southeast informs us about yarn and textile structures from the Archaic era and on through historic times. However, there is limited data on garments in use:

- **Woodland Era**
  - Beside their canoe at river’s edge, a grandmother and granddaughter prepare oysters for smoking.

- **Mississippian Era**
  - The chief’s hair style is based on Alexandre de Batz’s late 17th-century watercolor of the chief of the Tunica, Ellis Whitney’s time (Lakwete 2003).
  - The chief’s feather mantle is being constructed on a bust form in his cabin. Whitman’s time (Lakwete 2003).

- **Southeast Indian textile technology** suggests possible constraints on garment forms:
  - The shoe form, a portable modern bucket, was technically similar in Europe as elsewhere. In the American Southeast, the shoe was historically made and tanned by the Indians, which consisted of deerskin and native blankets resembling shawls, some being made of the inner bark of trees and some from a plant like daffodils which when pounded remains like flax. The Indians covered themselves with these blankets, draping one around themselves from the waist down and another over the shoulder with the right arm uncovered” (Clayton et al. 1995:75).

- **Public Archaeology: Balancing a Need for Clothed Museum Figures with a Limited Archaeological Record**
  - Lucrecia Perryman, a resident of Mobile, a midwife, a laundress, and a former slave, was also the subject of an archaeology project by the Center for Archaeological Research at the University of South Alabama.

- **Bottle Creek chief** climbs the logs step up the chief’s mound to greet his visitors.

- **Grandmother figures**
  - Beside their canoe at river’s edge, a grandmother and granddaughter prepare oysters for smoking.

- **Mississippian Era**
  - The chief’s feather mantle is being constructed on a bust form in his cabin. Whitman’s time (Lakwete 2003).

By 1800, the close and laborious task of spinning thread and yarn had been mechanized and the sewing machines which was originally developed for industrial use had been successfully marketed for home use. The industrial revolution provided households with sewing machines and an abundance of cloth and thread. Practical buttonhole attachment for residential sewing machines became available in the late 1860s (Cooper 1976:62). Buttons were made of metal, shell, and knotted yarn (the zipper was not invented until 1935).

Importantly note regarding industrialization: Eli Whitney did not invent the cotton gin. He patented a new type of gin, but tools and machines for separating the cotton lint from the seed were in common use long before Whitney’s time (Lakwete 2003).

- **The industrial revolution** provided a complex manufacturing process. Beside their canoe at river’s edge, a grandmother and granddaughter prepare oysters for smoking.

- **Mississippian Era**
  - The chief’s feather mantle is being constructed on a bust form in his cabin. Whitman’s time (Lakwete 2003).

The USA French trader predates the invention of the sewing machine, which explains why his right hand arm—his waterstrake—could not have pushed a needle through the layers of denim in the seams of modern jeans.

- **Clayton et al. 1995:83, 291.**

- **The humid climate of the North American Southeast preserves limited archaeological data to inform us about the prehistoric clothing of that region.** Ceramic impressions of yarn and cloth were combined with prehistoric art and early European chronicles to outline life-sized figures in the new archaeology museum at the University of South Alabama. The museum’s touring tour of the Gulf Coast begins in the Woodland era and ends with a midwife (and former slave), circa 1900.
Public Archaeology:
Balancing a Need for Clothed Museum Figures with a Limited Archaeological Record
A Poster Presented at SAA, St. Louis, 2010

Mary Spanos, mary@anthropologicaltextiles.com, www.anthropologicaltextiles.com

Abstract

The humid climate of the North American Southeast preserves limited archaeological data to inform us about the prehistoric clothing of that region. This poster presentation discusses how ceramic impressions of yarn and cloth were combined with prehistoric art and early European chronicles to outfit life-sized Woodland and Mississippian figures in a new archaeology museum at the University of South Alabama. The museum’s sartorial tour of the Gulf Coast includes a French trader of the 1750s and a midwife (and former slave), circa 1900. Cloth samples from reproduction garments for these prehistoric and early historic figures will be available.

References Cited on Poster


Spanos, Mary 2006 Mississippian Textiles at Beckum Village (1Ck24), Clarke County, Alabama. M.A. Thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.

Sharp, Robert V., Editor 2004 Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South. Art Institute of Chicago and Yale University Press. New Haven.
