

# Feature



## Belts and Beetle Wings Zenzie Tinker

*The lead conservator describes work on the belt and beetle wing embellishments from Ellen Terry's iconic "Beetle Wing Dress."*

Over a three year period the iconic "Lady Macbeth Beetle Wing Dress" was painstakingly investigated and conserved at Zenzie Tinker Conservation Ltd, UK for the National Trust. I had the pleasure of leading the conservation effort. The stage costume was made for Ellen Terry who starred opposite Henry Irving in the 1888 Lyceum Theatre, London production of *Macbeth*.

Contemporary newspapers described Irving and Terry as "one of British theatre's most well established and best loved acting partnerships to take to the stage" and the play opened to critical acclaim and criticism in equal measure. (1) In March 2011 the costume was redisplayed at Ellen Terry's home, Smallhythe Place in Kent, mounted for the first time in a pose echoing the famous Singer Sargent painting of the actress that is now displayed at the National Gallery, London. (right)

Oscar Wilde described Ellen Terry's arrival at the artist's studio and commented that, "The street that on a wet and dreary



John Singer Sargent, Ellen Terry as *Lady Macbeth*, 1889. Image: the [Tate Museum](#).

morning has vouchsafed the vision of "Lady Macbeth" in full regalia magnificently seated in a four-wheeler can never again be as other streets. It must always be full of wonderful possibilities." (2)

The complex conservation project is currently being worked on for publication, aspects of which will feature here at a later date. In the meantime, and to tie in with this issue on embellishment, I will discuss the treatment of the beetle wings themselves and the conservation-restoration of the original belt worn with the dress.

Beetle wing, or elytra, were a highly prized decorative element in many ancient cultures, having been used in countries such as India, Thailand, China, and Japan. Their exotic and iridescent beauty made them sought after in Europe and they were particularly fashionable in the 18th and 19th Centuries.

Elytra are not actually the wings of beetles but are the hardened forewings that cover the delicate flying wings of the insects. The beetles have a short life span of three to four weeks in their adult stage. To avoid killing the beetles, only those that die of natural causes are collected. It was their mysterious and iridescent quality that made them perfect for the embellishment of the dress designed for Ellen Terry by Alice Comyns-Carr and made by her dressmaker Mrs Nettleship.

Mrs Comyns-Carr said that she wanted to make, “the dress look as much like soft chain armour as I could, and yet have something that would give the appearance of the scales of a serpent,” and so Bohemian yarn, a twist of soft green silk with blue tinsel, was chosen for the crocheted and knitted ensemble.

Once finished, the desired chain mail effect was achieved, but Alice Comyns-Carr said, “We did not think it was brilliant enough, so it was sewn all over with real green beetle wings and a narrow border in Celtic designs worked out in rubies and diamonds, hemmed all the edges.” (3) It was Terry herself who suggested the dress be, “trimmed all over with green beetle’s wings,” after seeing Lady Randolph Churchill wearing a beetle wing trimmed dress to a party.

The resulting dress and Terry’s other costumes for the production were a triumph. Dress historian Valerie Cumming, in her assessment of the effect of the costumes of Henry Irving and Ellen Terry in this



Detail of beetle wing decoration to sleeve edge before conservation. Photo: Zenzie Tinker.

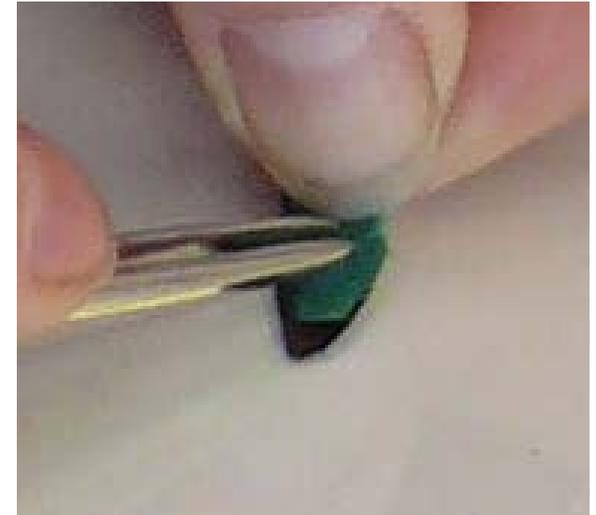
production of *Macbeth*, said that the whole effect was majestic and that together Irving and Terry “must have seemed the incarnation of exotic and barbarous splendour.” (4)

Despite what one might imagine, historic beetle wings (formed of keratin) have proved to be relatively stable and those on the dress had aged well and did not seem adversely affected by the light damage that had affected the dress itself. Each wing had been drilled with two small holes to allow it to be stitched via silk thread to the dress.



Detached beetle wings. Photo: Zenzie Tinker

Over the years many of the wings had dropped off due to the deterioration of the silk thread securing them; these were collected up periodically and saved by National Trust staff. Aged beetle wings are however quite brittle and so there were many wings on the dress that had broken or cracked, probably due to a combination of contemporary use and subsequent handling of the dress during periods of repeated display, repair and storage.



Beetle wing were repaired by adhering coloured Japanese tissue.to the back. Photo: Zenzie Tinker.

Repairing the beetle wings was undertaken during the last phases of conservation of the dress because, however carefully we handled the dress, there was the risk of further breakages occurring. After testing, we found that the best way of repairing the cracked and broken wings was to support them on Japanese tissue, hand coloured using acrylic paint. The wing shaped supports were adhered to the reverse of the damaged wings using a mixture of wheat starch and rabbit skin glue.

All the repaired beetle wings and those that had fallen off the dress were re-attached using stranded cotton thread in an appropriate colour. We had chosen this thread to repair the crocheted and knitted parts of the dress, so this was consistent with that decision, and it means that all the repair stitching is easily identifiable from the original Bohemian silk thread.

After discussions with the National Trust project team it was decided to take the unusual step of adding more beetle wing to the dress. Known anecdotally as, “the Beetle Wing Dress” it was felt important that it should look as rich with beetle wing as it does in the Singer Sargent portrait. Members of the public had donated beetle wing to Smallhythe Place over the years and many of these were undamaged historic wings, very similar to those used on the dress.



Preparing additional beetle wings by delicately drilling one hole in them. Photo: Zenzie Tinker.

Interestingly, most of these had either no holes or just one hole drilled into them, and so this became a means of identifying these non-original wings from the original ones on the dress, which had two holes. The “unholed” wings were delicately drilled with one new hole each, using a hand Dremel tool and micro-drill bits. These wings were then positioned and stitched to the dress in areas where there were few or no original wings remaining, via their one sewing hole.

Many of the original accessories worn with the costume still remain with the dress,



Sleeve with additional beetle wings being placed in position. (above) Unconserved belt pinned to dress. (below) Photos: Zenzie Tinker.



including the cloak seen in the portrait, the dagger and scabbard and the belt that snakes around “Lady Macbeth’s” waist and hips. Over the years, again probably through use and re-use of the costume, the belt had lost some of its length and could no longer criss-cross around the body. When previously on display at Smallhythe Place, the cloak had been mounted over the dress obscuring the back view and hiding the missing belt sections. The plan was to mount the dress and cloak separately with the mannequin revolving to give a 360° view.

The belt is embellished with brass *repousse* Celtic style shapes in two designs stitched to a ribbed band. Often when elements of an object are missing, conservators fill the area of loss with a plain infill dyed to blend and take the viewer’s eye over the damage. However, because of the highly decorative nature of the Celtic metal shapes, this did not work visually so we had to think again. There was evidence of previous repair to some of the fixings of the metal shapes onto the belt, so we felt able to unpick one of each design to create a mould to make replacement elements.

We prepared a rapid set dental silicon set in a plaster mould, and wiped a oil film over the original shapes to protect them and ensure safe release and a good impression. Once this was set, we prepared a quick set polyester two-part resin combining natural earth pigment and polyester colouring dyes to achieve a good match with the original brass. The cast polyester was removed from the mould whilst still warm and natural earth pigments in gold and bronze were applied to

the edges to achieve a metallic effect. The new shapes were finished with a coloured wax layer, left to dry, and then carefully buffed to remove excess wax.

These replacement elements were incorporated with the originals on the belt, supported on dyed cotton webbing tape to recreate the correct length. The length was gauged by scaling off contemporary photographs of Ellen Terry in the costume and computing with her known height.

When the conserved dress was reinstated at Smallhythe Place on the new, gently rotating mannequin, it was agreed that the careful blending of conservation and restoration techniques employed by the conservation and curatorial team had worked really well. The famous *Lady Macbeth* beetle wing dress can once more be enjoyed by visitors to Ellen Terry's [charming home](#) in Kent, UK.

Grateful thanks to the wonderful team at Zenzie Tinker Conservation Ltd and The National Trust for permission to publish.

### Notes

- (1) Emma Slocombe, *Lady Macbeth* at the Lyceum, National Trust Historic Houses & Collections Annual 2011, Apollo.
- (2) Valerie Cumming, *Macbeth* at the Lyceum, 1888, *Costume*, no 12, 1978.
- (3) Siobhan Barratt, Thousands of iridescent beetle wings, in The National Trusts Arts, Buildings, Collections Bulletin, July 2011.
- (4) Valerie Cumming, as above.



Detail of belt before conservation/restoration. Photo: Zenzie Tinker.



Seventeen newly cast decorative elements with the originals and their moulds to the right. Photo: Zenzie Tinker.

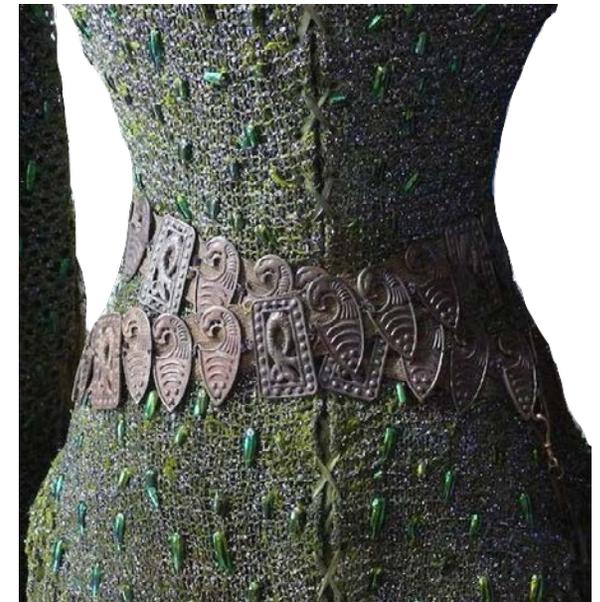


Front view (above) and back view (below) of conserved/restored belt after treatment. Photos: Zenzie Tinker



Full view of dress after conservation and mounting. Photo: Zenzie Tinker.

*Zenzie Tinker* received her BA in the History of Design. She then completed a three year apprenticeship in textile and tapestry conservation with Ksynia Marko in 1988 followed by the Museums Association Certificate in Textile Conservation in 1991. Zenzie worked as a conservator and senior conservator at the Museum of London and the Victoria & Albert Museum specialising in costume until 2003 when she left London to set up Zenzie Tinker Conservation in Brighton. She has served as an accreditation assessor for ICON for ten years and also sits as conservation advisor on the Heritage Volunteer Committee for the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies (NADFAS). She has researched, taught and published widely on the use of adhesives for textile conservation. Visit her [website](#) for more information.



Detail of mounted belt from back after conservation/restoration. Photo: Zenzie Tinker.