The Chinese wisteria

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Women Size 6: Bust (34.5”), Waist (25.5”), Hip (36”)

This design was one ensemble of a wearable art collection that was inspired by the Chinese painting, *Chinese Wisteria*, drawn by the designer’s father who is a well know Chinese painting artist in China. The purposes of this design were to: (1) fuse the techniques of Chinese painting and art philosophy with Western garment silhouettes; (2) experiment with nuno felting technique as a dart replacement technique to achieve “zero waste” in the garment, which is tenant of sustainable design; and (3) apply a variety of textile surface design and handcraft techniques to silk fabrics throughout the garment, such as heat/wet felting, silk painting, hand beading, and bead embroidery.

Chinese painting is one of the oldest known artistic forms and still plays an important role in the art world. The intention of this design was to interpret the spirits of Chinese painting and Chinese philosophy, *Taoism*, along with its particular aesthetic expression into textile and wearable art design. Finding the intermediary between Chinese painting and wearable art design and ideally bonding two artistic forms together was the challenge for this project. Chinese ink was originally painted on silk fabric and can last for thousands years, in preparation to undertake this design project, the designer tested the feasibility of using Chinese ink as a natural dyestuff and textile painting medium using standards from the AATCC. Total 276 textile samples were tested for submersion and direct application. The successful textile testing results provided valuable information and confidence in using Chinese ink as a hand silk painting medium to create textile and wearable arts inspired by Chinese painting.

Taoism, one of two main Chinese philosophies deeply influenced the designer’s father and his paintings. Aesthetic concepts of *Taoist*, draw from nature and posit that natural beauty is superior to man-made beauty. “Emptiness” and “calm” are two naturalistic aspects of the *Taoism* (Dongchu, 1991). The composition of the inspiration painting also followed the aesthetics of *Taoism*, which were the balance of softness and stiffness, and emptiness and fullness. Thus, the designer extracted four fundamental components from the initial inspiration: motifs, colors, mood, and printing techniques to express the spirit of the Chinese painting and the aesthetic concepts of *Taoism* to create this piece of wearable art. First, the shapes of the wisteria flowers and the branches were used as the inspiration and referenced to create unique silhouettes and textile surface designs. Second, black and white were determined as the main colors of this design because black and white colors are the colors of *yin-yang* philosophy in *Taoism*. Also, the balance of black and white color in a Chinese painting depicts the aesthetic style of this Chinese artist. Third, the mood of the designer for this design was to convey the overall feeling of the aesthetic of the *Chinese Wisteria* and philosophies of *Taoism*. Fourth, nuno felting techniques were used to create unique textile surface and achieve the technical design purpose.

Nuno felting has only 20-year history (White, 2007). It is known as laminated felt (Houghton, 2009). Using this technique, the wool fibers go through the weave of the cloth (usually silk) before the felting and shrinking process started, and entangle on the back side after several steps (White, 2007). A nuno

felting experimentation was undertaken before starting making the garment in order to determine the accurate shrinkage due to the unknown characteristics of the nuno felting. The silk chiffon and 8mm silk organza demonstrated the best nuno felting results with ideal shrinkage of 50 percent. The long dress silhouette represents the long branches of the Chinese wisteria. To achieve "zero waste," a garment pattern was not made, instead the garment was engineered from two rectangular pieces of fabric. The designer determined the skirt length was 48 inches from the waist to floor. The nuno felting area was 16 inches long from the waist to the hem. According to 50% shrinkage that occurred on silk chiffon tests, the nuno felting area on the skirt would need to be 32 inches long. The top of the dress was 18 inches long from the shoulder to the waist and the nuno felting area covered the chest. The measurement was 12 inches from the top of the chest to the waist after felting, so the fabric would need to be 24 inches long to accomplish the garment design through nuno felting, making the total fabric length 94 inches. Since both silk chiffon and 8mm silk organza had the same shrinkage, the two fabrics were combined at the chest line using nuno felting technique to diminish the transition from silk chiffon to silk organza. Both front and back pieces used 16 inches-long 8mm silk organza (54 inches wide) attached with 82.5 inches-long silk chiffon (54 inches wide), including seam allowance. Two pieces of rectangular fabric for front and back were sewn on two shoulder seams, leaving 25 inches wide for the neckline opening. The silhouette of the garment was completely shaped by nuno felting two rectangles and sewing the shoulder and side seams.

In order to emulate the dry brush technique of the branches in the inspiration painting, black wool fibers were placed unevenly at the top and bottom edges of the felting area on the fabric. The piece was felted on a flat table and then additionally molded on the dress form by rubbing the fiber with warm water by hand. Once the nuno felting process was done, the front and back pieces were draped on the dress form again to achieve the best fit on the body. The shoulder seams and side seams were determined and sewn after the draping section. The nuno felting and the gathering caused the shoulders to naturally drop down to form short sleeves. The skirt was gathered naturally by the felted areas. The skirt of the sewn dress was submersed in a white vinegar bath to prepare for gradient dip-dyeing in a Chinese ink dyestuff solution. The skirt was hand painted after the dip-dyeing process and hung dried. The 13 floral embroideries that made out of the round beads and sequins, black round beads and white pear-shaped beads were attached on the body and skirt to represent the wisteria flowers around the branches appearing in the inspiration painting. The ½ inch diameter round felt balls that were made by heat/wet felting technique were attached between the rows of the black round beads on the nuno felted area to represent the flower buds.

The final garment successfully achieved the goals of creating the wearable art integrated with the sustainable concept and handcraft techniques. This design demonstrates that nuno felting can efficiently replaced the darts to fit the garment on the body. If the placement and measurements are well engineered, nuno felting technique could ideally shape a garment to the human form and control the shrinkage. Using nuno felting techniques could also reduce the waste of the fabrics and sewing threads. This design achieved the goals of "zero waste" and "biodegradable." The time to create this wearable art design was approximately 70 hours.

References

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Houghton, L. (2009). *Felting fashion: Creative and inspirational techniques for feltmakers.* London: Batsford.

White, C. (2007). *Uniquely felt.* North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing.

Image 1 – Front (above)

Image 2 – Back (Above)

Image 3 – Detail (Below)

Image 4 – Detail (Below)