

## **AIM Report: March 2010**

Norman Hartnell dolls dress conservation:

In 1943 a collection of twenty dolls made in the Hartnell workshop and dressed in Latin American costume, were sent on a travelling exhibition across Britain to raise funds for the Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen's Family Association (SSAFA). After the exhibition, some of the dresses were given to Sir Norman's PA who stored them under her bed, allowing her niece, Susan, to play with them when she visited. In 2007 Susan donated them to the BSDC and funding was sought to restore and conserve them in order that they could be exhibited again. A grant from AIM and Pilgrim's Trust allowed three of the dresses to be treated. In 1943 Picture Post had carried an article about the exhibition, and a paper archive was donated along with the dresses, but little else was known.

The dresses and accessories were in a poor state; the silk was shredding and the extensive beadwork coming loose from the garments. From the black and white photographs in Picture Post it was difficult to tell which countries were represented and which pieces of jewellery belonged to which garment. Detective work and the process of elimination revealed that along with Uruguay, Salvador and Panama (the conserved dresses) we also had Cuba, Peru and Chile, along with some parts of the Haitian costume. The three selected dresses were cleaned and steamed to remove folds and potential stress areas, the undersides were netted and the beadwork replaced. The time-scale for the conservation had originally been set for six months, but in the event the work took almost a year of minutely detailed stitching.

In 2008 contact was made with Jane Hattrick, Honorary Archivist of the Hartnell-Mitchison Archive & Collection, University of Brighton, who confirmed there was another dress, Bolivia, in the Archive. Miraculously there was also a doll. It had been assumed that none had survived as their bodies were made of sacking, stuffed with sawdust. The dolls' faces were sculpted by Helen Lee Barclay, and were then painted and wigged by Norman Hartnell himself. Together we hope to locate some if not all of the dresses and re-create the original exhibition with the same purpose, to raise funds for SSAFA and allow these unique costumes to be seen by as wide an audience as they attracted on their first journey around the country. In the meantime, further funding is being sought and the dresses are available for viewing and study in the BSDC.

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Original photograph of Uruguay: 1943



Conserved Uruguay: 2010