

ELZA ALBIŅA, Mg.Art
Polychrome wood restorer
Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation
elza.lapina@gmail.com

TABITA LAPIŅA
Grand master-restorer of textiles
tabitalapina@inbox.lv

Keywords: Kathputli, marionette, polychromy, textile, restoration, conservation

Kathputli are traditional wooden marionettes from Rajasthan, India, controlled by a single string. The tradition is documented from the 16th–17th centuries under Mughal and Rajput patronage and was maintained by the itinerant Bhat community. Performances combined narrative, music, satire, and social commentary.

The puppet Sita, made of polychrome-painted wood with textile, metal, and glass elements, belongs to the Art Museum Riga Bourse collection.



3. Before restoration



4. Before restoration



5. Before restoration (front)



1. Before restoration (back)



2. Before restoration (front)



6., 7., 8. Restoration process



9. Restoration process.
On the left - original
wooden arm, on the
right - newly made arm



10., 12. Restoration process

CONDITION BEFORE RESTORATION

The marionette was in moderately poor condition. The right wooden forearm (elbow to wrist) was missing, while the hand was preserved. The polychrome surface was unstable, with flaking, abrasion, and losses of paint and ground layers. Multiple overpaintings indicated prolonged and intensive use. Wooden surfaces were covered with dust and ingrained dirt. Metal elements showed light surface corrosion, and many glass and bead decorations were missing or heavily soiled.

The costume exhibited severe deterioration. Fibers were weakened, frayed, and torn, with localized material losses and reduced structural strength. Some textiles were faded due to environmental exposure. The head ornament was incomplete, lacking original textile, glass, and bead elements.

RESTORATION OBJECTIVES

Stabilize polychromy; clean and conserve wood, metal, glass, and textiles; reconstruct the missing arm fragment; reinforce and reassemble the costume.

RESTORATION PROCESS (METHODS & MATERIALS)

Polychrome and ground layers were consolidated using 3% Klucel G in alcohol. Ground losses were filled with rabbit-skin glue and Bologna chalk gesso, sanded, polished, and sealed with 5% rabbit-skin glue.

Surface dirt was removed using dry brushing and controlled vacuuming, followed by wet cleaning with diluted Vulpex soap. Metal elements were mechanically cleaned and passivated with a 7% tannin–alcohol solution. Glass ornaments were cleaned mechanically and with 0.01% acetic acid solution.

The missing right forearm was reconstructed from linden wood, modeled after the intact arm, primed with Klucel G, toned, covered with neutral silk textile, and reattached. Retouching was carried out with watercolors and non-oxidizing bronze and gold imitation paints.

Textiles were locally stain-treated (3% ammonia for insect stains; warm glycerin for tannins), washed in a 3% delicate detergent at 25 °C, and reinforced with dyed silk gauze linings using fine silk thread. The costume was reassembled, preserving original seams and materials wherever possible.



13., 14., 15. After restoration

