

Repairing "Toy" Ventriloquist Figures

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REPAIRING "TOY" VENTRiloQUIST FIGURES

This guide deals with the repair of the ventriloquist figures made by Juro/Eegee/Golberger, Horsman, and other companies that made similar figures. The repairs covered in this guide are the most common repairs needed. All of these repairs can be easily made by the owner.

INTRODUCTION

From the time I wrote the guide series titled **Identifying "Toy" Ventriloquist Figures**, I have received numerous emails asking how to repair these figures. I have replied to all of the emails, however it usually involves retyping information I have recently sent to someone else. I realized it would be much easier for me and the questioner to have all the information in a guide. There, the problems, solutions, and necessary steps could be laid out, complete with photographs. This information would be readily available to sellers or buyers who wish to repair a figure prior to or after the sale. Plus, I could provide more in-depth information, as sometimes my time did not allow me to be as detailed as required or as the questioner needed.

GOAL

My goal is to help the reader repair his or her ventriloquist figure. Most often the sellers will not repair a figure (or clean it up) because they do not want to damage the figure. They often leave the clean up and repair to the buyer, selling the figure "as is". This is understandable on their part as the item represents a certain value to them. Any damage they cause to the figure reduces that value and possibly reduces the money they will get for it. For the buyer, this usually means a lower price to pay for an item which can be repaired, often quite easily. Items needing repair will usually have fewer bidders, thus a lower price at final bid. It does not matter to me which side sees the profit, I just hope that these figures will get repaired and used (or displayed). They are all wonderful items and deserve repair.

WHICH FIGURES APPLY?

Most of the figures covered in my **Identifying "Toy" Ventriloquist Figures Guides** are quite similar when it comes to repairing them. The majority of them were made by Juro/Eegee/Goldberger or Horsman. Most of these figures are the kind that have a stuffed body and stuffed limbs. Other figures may be harder to repair and are outside the scope of a guide such as this. This applies to figures made by Cremeal, such as Mr. Parlanchin and Peter Patter. For those figures, I suggest the owner seek a person who is knowledgeable in their repair.

THE PROBLEMS

The most common problem by far is the mouth does not work anymore. Other problems involve torn or missing limbs, missing hands, cleaning, or locating missing accessories. These problems and others are covered below:

Mouth Does Not Work

The mouth not working is the most common problem I am asked about and the problem most often listed when a figure is for sale. The mouth hangs open and does not close after the string is released. This is caused by the return band breaking. The return bands are almost always rubber bands. These deteriorate with age or may break with usage. A mouth hanging open is a good clue to the buyer that the band is broken. This is usually very easy to fix, but requires the removal of the head from the figure. The band is replaced and the head is then re-attached.

Replacement Bands The replacement band can be another rubber band, elastic cord (such as used in sewing), or a light spring. There are ups and downs to all methods. A **rubber band** is usually the item that was there originally and is easy to use. But they will decay again and need replacement. Finding the correct size rubber band can be tricky. Generally, a thick band will outlast the thinner ones. **Elastic cord** is an excellent choice for replacement. I prefer the oval type elastic band that is available in the sewing sections of stores. The elastic cord "string" type works as well, but I have found the oval to last longer. Both can be tied to make the correct size band you need and it lasts much longer than rubber bands. However, they are a step away from "original". Oval elastic cord may be too 'strong' for some figures, and you will need to use the regular "string" type elastic cord. The third, and best option is a **metal spring**. These will generally last for the life of the figure, but finding the correct one is difficult. Finding the correct one is so difficult that it is tough to use this method. A great deal of trial and error is needed, and finding that one spring with the correct length and strength of pull is almost luck. When I find one, I buy several extras just to have available.

Strength of pull Strength of pull is very important. If the band or spring is too light, it does not close the mouth correctly or fast enough. If it is too hard or tight, the mouth will be hard to open or it will snap shut extremely fast (and loud). Elastic cord allows you to easily adjust the strength of pull by how big you make the size of the band. A smaller band has more pull and a larger band has less pull. As with rubber bands, a thicker elastic cord is stronger (more strength of pull) than a thinner cord of the same length.

Removing the head Removing the head is fairly easy on most figures. The head is held to the body by some type of fastener which holds the neck of the head to the cloth body. This fastener is slid inside a sewn lip on the cloth body. When it is pulled tight, the cloth body is pulled tight against the head. Most heads have a groove on them at the neck. The fastener is pulled tight into this groove, thus attaching the cloth body to the head. On older figures, the fastener was generally wire. The wire was pulled tight and then the ends are twisted together. Other fasteners will be string or a plastic band. Where possible, I recommend undoing the fastener with the thought of reusing it. You may not want to or need to, but the possibility of having to reuse the fastener does exist. This means you must untwist the wire or untie the string. The wire is easier to untwist with needlenose pliers. As for plastic fasteners, you usually have to cut them. Once the fastener is undone or cut, the material around the neck will loosen and the head easily comes off (or falls out, so be careful and hold onto the head). See **photo 1** for an illustration of the head/neck area described above.



Photo 1 Head area, notice the sewn loop on the neck

Band replacement Once the head is off, the band can be replaced. Different figures had different ways the rubber band was placed to make the mouth close. If you are lucky, parts of the band are still in place and you can readily see the attachment points. One will be on the back of the jaw. The other will be at some attachment point on the head. It may be a hook that attaches to the rim of the neck (at the back of the head) as in **photo 2**.



Photo 2 Hook attachment on rim of neck (at back of head)

On some newer figures, the band attaches to the jaw and then exits the head through a hole in the neck or at the rim under the jaw. It then wraps around the head, falling into the tightening groove to keep it in place (**photo 3**).



 Photo 3 Band exits the head and wraps around the neck

If the band is not attached, you need to figure out how it was attached. First find the attachment point on the jaw. This may be a hook or staple of some kind. When you find it, attach some elastic cord to it (or whatever you are using for the band). Now move the other end of the cord or band to where a good attachment point would be. To find this, open the mouth and watch it close. A good attachment point will pull the mouth shut in a natural manner. Depending on where you hold the band, the mouth may not close completely or may seem to bind. A little trial and error will show you how it was originally. Most of the attachment systems were very simple and basic, so try to think about the easiest way to do it.

Once you figure out the attachment points, you need to find the correct tension for the band you are using. I open and close the mouth with various tensions (tightness of elastic or spring) until the mouth closes the way I want it to close (natural, no snapping shut). This is easy with elastic cord. Once you figure out how long the elastic cord needs to be to make the mouth shut properly, you tie the elastic cord to make a band. Then you put the new band in place. The head is ready to be re-attached. Re-attaching the head is covered in the next section.

The Head Came Off

This is a common problem due to the way most ventriloquist figures have their heads attached, or you may have removed the head to replace the mouth band. The head usually has a groove at the base of the neck. The heads are held to the cloth body by wire, string or other fasteners that fit in this groove. There is a loop sewn on the cloth body, at the neck area, that the fastener is slid into and around the neck area. This is then tightened around the base of the head. The fastener gets into the groove on the head and pulls the cloth of the figure tight around the base of the head. Often, the twisting back and forth of the head causes it to break the wire that holds it on, or the fastener comes out of the groove around the base of the head. Sometimes the head can be put back on and the fastener just tightened more.

Re-attaching the head Re-attaching the head is actually quite simple. I prefer to use a plastic zip tie for a fastener to re-attach the head,. You can also use copper wire or string if you wish. If you removed the head for repair and undid the fastener, then replace the head and tighten the fastener. BE SURE the fastener is IN the groove at the base of the head before FULLY tightening the fastener. Tightening pulls the cloth body into the groove and that is what holds the head on. I prefer to replace the string and wire fasteners with plastic zip ties. These do not break and make a permanent repair. They have to be cut off to be removed, however this is easily done. If you can find long thin zip ties (about 11" long), they work wonderful. You just slide them into the cloth loop on the body that the previous fastener was in. However most zip ties long enough to go around the neck are too wide to nest in the groove properly. I use 2 shorter ones and fasten them together to make one long tie. I do this by placing a zip tie at each half of the sewn loop (where the seam is) as in **photo 4**.



Photo 4

I put the head in place and then start tightening the zip ties (**photo 5**).



Photo 5

I make sure each side is tightened an equal amount so the cloth does not bunch up in one place. After the zip ties are fully tightened, I cut off the excess that sticks out. **Photo 6** shows a head that has been zip tied back on (but the excess has not been cut off yet).



Photo 6

Figure Is "Coughing Up Foam"

Some figures are stuffed with foam bits, instead of the fluffy stuffing used on newer figures. These figures usually had some sort of cardboard disk or other cover that goes between the foam stuffed body and the head. The purpose of this item is to be a barrier between the foam body and the empty head area. Over time or with play, the barrier gets moved out of the way, decays, or was left out in a previous repair. Either way, the barrier now does not stop the stuffing from getting into the head. This means it comes out the mouth or interferes with jaw movement. You can clean the foam out through the mouth, but to really fix this problem you must remove the head. Usually the barrier has been bent during play and just needs to be moved back in position. If you must replace the cardboard disk on figures not having them, cut another one to go into the body at the neck. It should be slightly bigger than the base of the head (so it is not pushed into the head). The cardboard should be stout and hard to bend (like that used for the back of a writing tablet) but not real hard like corrugated cardboard. I usually cut a much larger cloth circle to place over the foam, **before** the cardboard is replaced and the head re-attached. That means there is the foam stuffing, cloth barrier, cardboard barrier, then the head. This is a security measure to make sure the problem is solved. The head is then replaced onto the figure. **Photo 7** shows the cardboard circle from inside the body and a cloth circle I cut to be placed in the body.



Photo 7 Cardboard circle from figure and cloth circle

Limbs are Torn/Missing/Fell Off

Quite often these figures will have torn limbs, or the limbs have been pulled off. Hand sewing is usually needed when repairing the limbs, whether it is closing a tear or reattaching a limb. Sometimes the limb is torn so bad that it requires material to be sewn to it for reinforcement. An alternative is a sticky cloth bandaging tape. This material is webbed and usually sold for taping the legs of horses. It is called Vetrap and is made by 3M. It comes in a roll about 3" wide. It is wonderful for those circular tears that threaten to make a foot or hand fall off. Generally, the repaired limb will be covered by clothes to hide the tape. The tape comes in several colors, including black. I used yellow because it would show up better in the photograph. See **photo 8 and 9** for illustrations. It is possible to buy replacement limbs, or easily make your own. These will look better and more original. You can even use the limbs from a "donor" body. Limb replacement is required if the figure is missing a limb. You can actually use the 3M Vetrap to make legs although I would recommend buying a replacement. Replacements are available on eBay from the seller **Braylu**.



Photo 8



Photo 9

Hand Fell Off/Missing

Sometimes a figure is missing a hand. It is possible to find replace hands on eBay. You can also use a donor figure to get hands from. Be sure the hand(s) you get are for the size figure you have. There are different size hands available. It is best to buy a pair to make sure the hands match, in size as well as style, and left/right. If you must reattach a hand that fell off, it may be hard to get the hand back on the figure and make it look original. Look at the hand and check the attachment area. The hands usually have a groove around the wrist. A fastener setup is used that is similar to the way the head is attached. If possible, I try to sew the hand back in and make it look original. If the cloth is too bad to allow this, I use a plastic zip tie to hold the cloth in the groove on the hand. Cut off the excess zip tie once you fasten it tight. **Photo 10** shows a hand which had to be re-attached this way.



Photo 10 Repaired hand and example (notice the groove)

Figure Is Dirty

To clean a figure, I use regular dish washing soap and water. I have been able to clean up most figures quite well using this and a wash rag. Sometimes it requires some hard scrubbing. To clean around the eyes, I use a **soft** toothbrush, the softest I can find, or an artist's paint brush. The eyes are hard to clean but add so much to the figure when they are clean. Sometimes they look clean but usually they are not, so I always clean them. Use a soft brush so you do not scratch the paint. Often, there are dark marks on the figure that will not come out, no matter how hard you clean. I leave them alone. If it bothers me too much or looks too bad, I repaint the figure to cover it.

Clothes Dirty/Need Repair

The clothes are best washed by hand. I used a small amount of soap, add water, then let the item soak. I then hand wash the item with care. Remember, some of these clothes are 40 to 50 years old, or were not sewn very well. I let them hang dry. An inexpensive hand steamer will remove any wrinkles. Repairs are best done by hand and with as little sewing as possible.

Need New Accessories/Shoes/Clothes

Over time, these figures will lose their accessories, shoes, or clothes. Hats almost always get lost. Some figures have accessories, such as Charlie McCarthy's monocle or Groucho's cigar. You can buy these items on eBay. ThrowThings is an eBay seller and they sell most of the replacement items you need. Most of these items will be listed on eBay by other sellers as well. Always verify if the item is new or used.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Thank you for reading this guide. I hope it was helpful.

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