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ABSTRACT

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(2006.01)

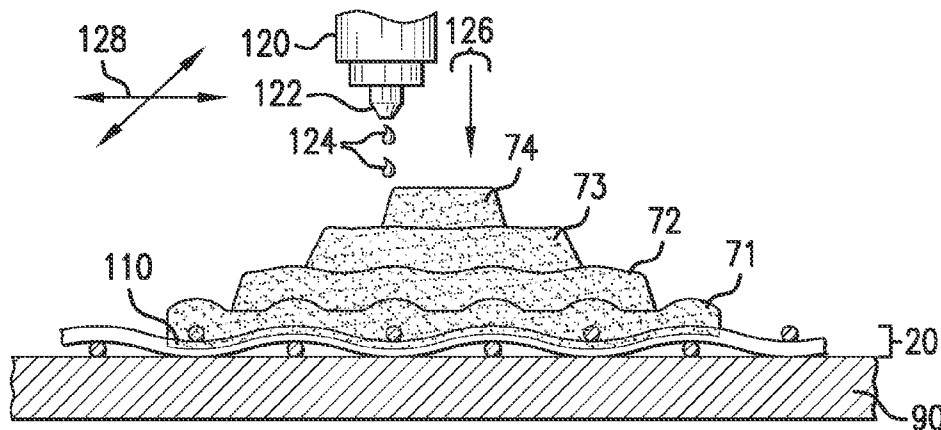
A43B 23/07 (2006.01)

(2006.01)

A43B 23/02 (2006.01)

(2006.01)

Methods and systems are disclosed for three-dimensional printing directly onto an article of apparel. Disclosed is a method and system for direct three-dimensional printing onto an article of apparel, including designing a three-dimensional pattern for printing onto the article, positioning at least a portion of the article on a tray in a three-dimensional printing system, the portion being positioned substantially flat on the tray, printing a three-dimensional material directly onto the article using the designed pattern, curing the printed material, and removing the article from the three-dimensional printing system.



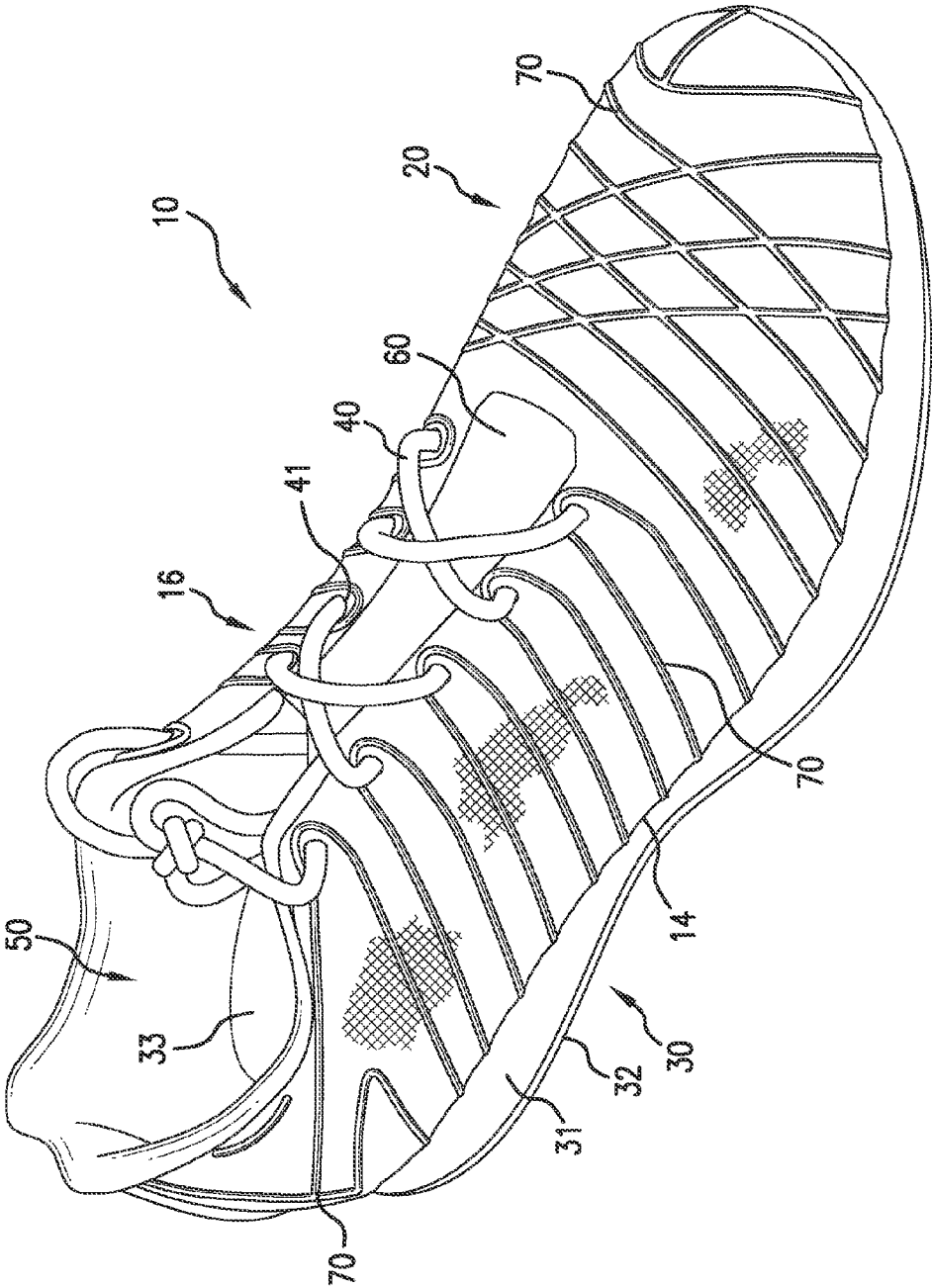


FIG. 1

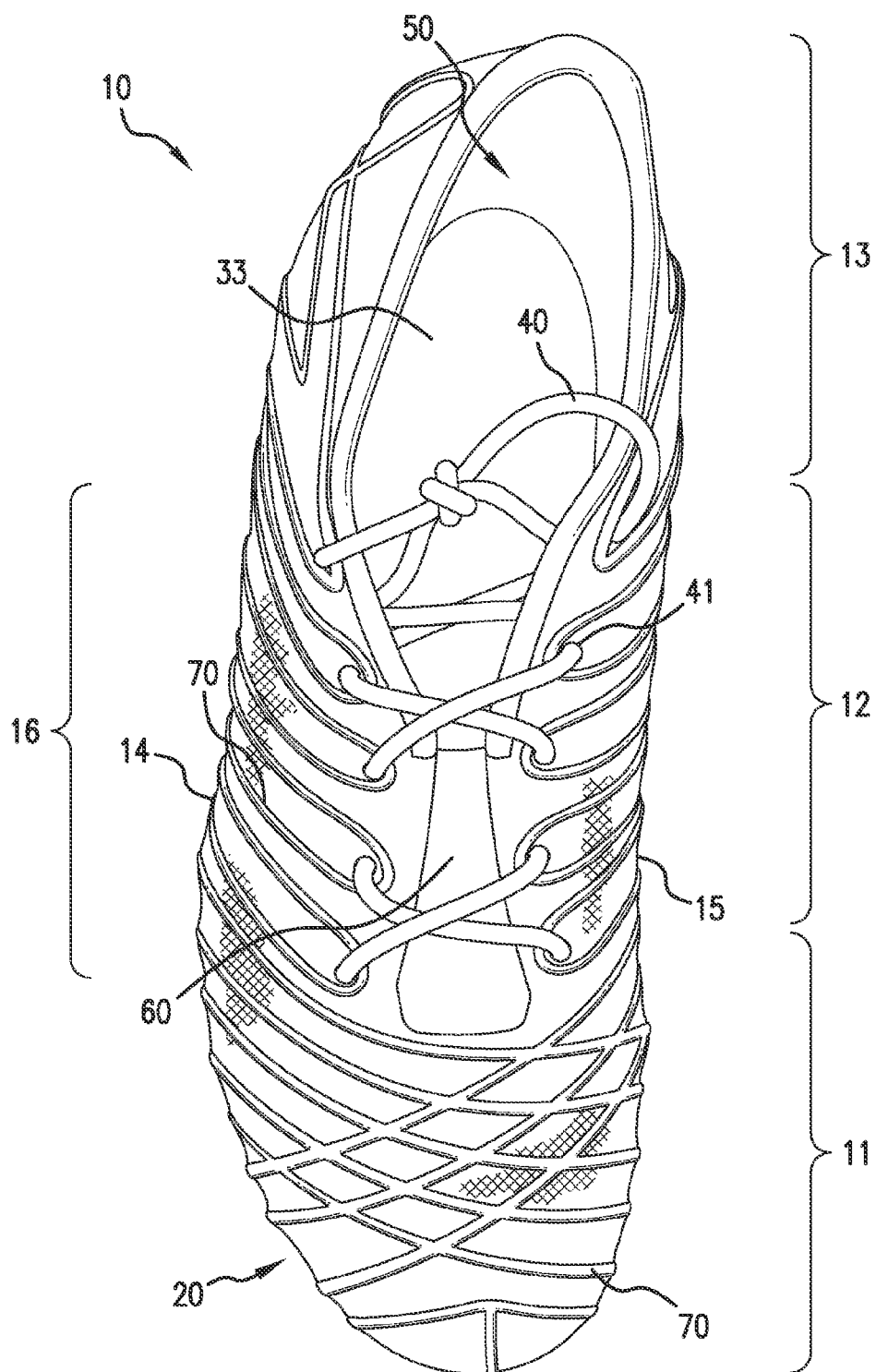


FIG. 2

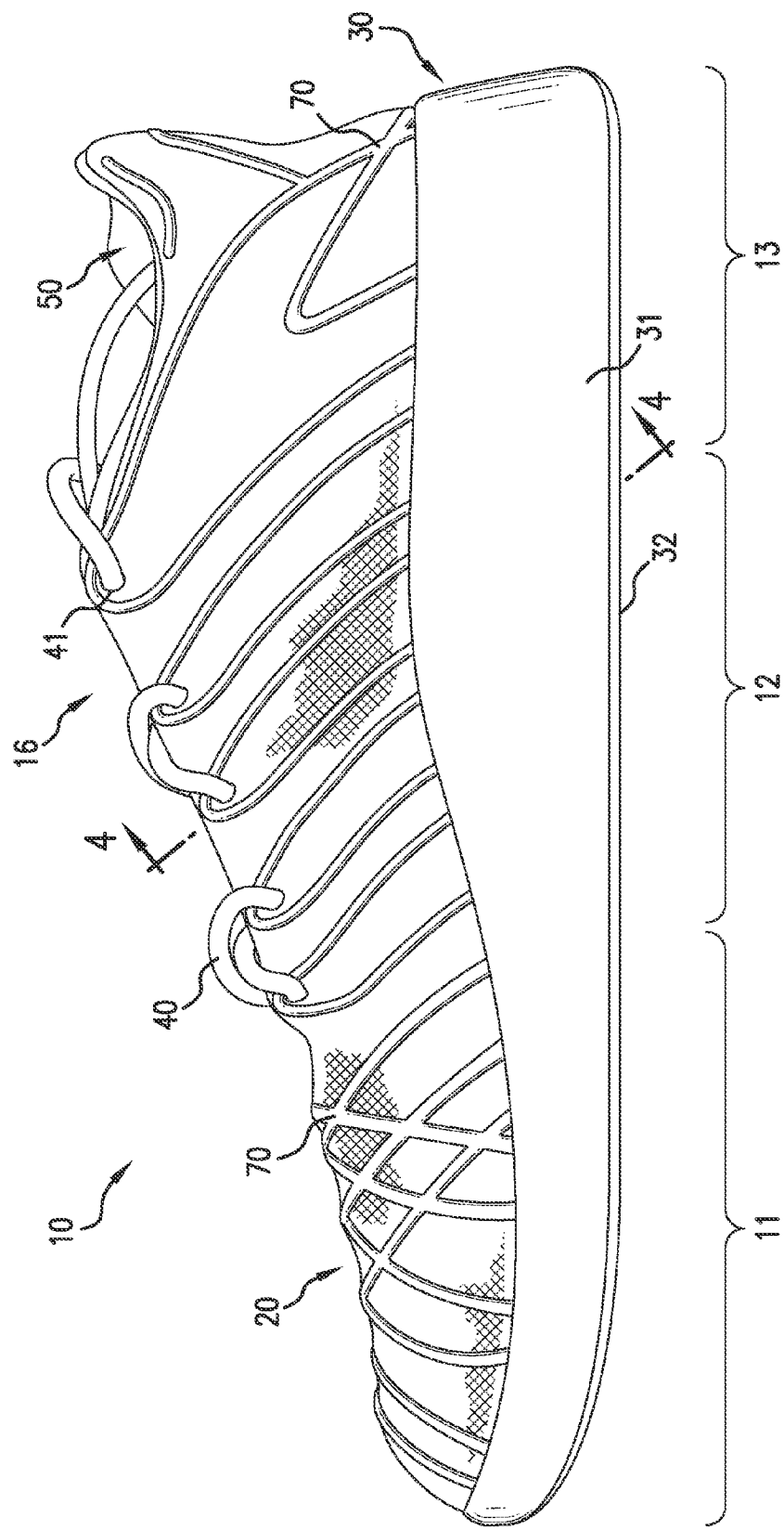


FIG.3

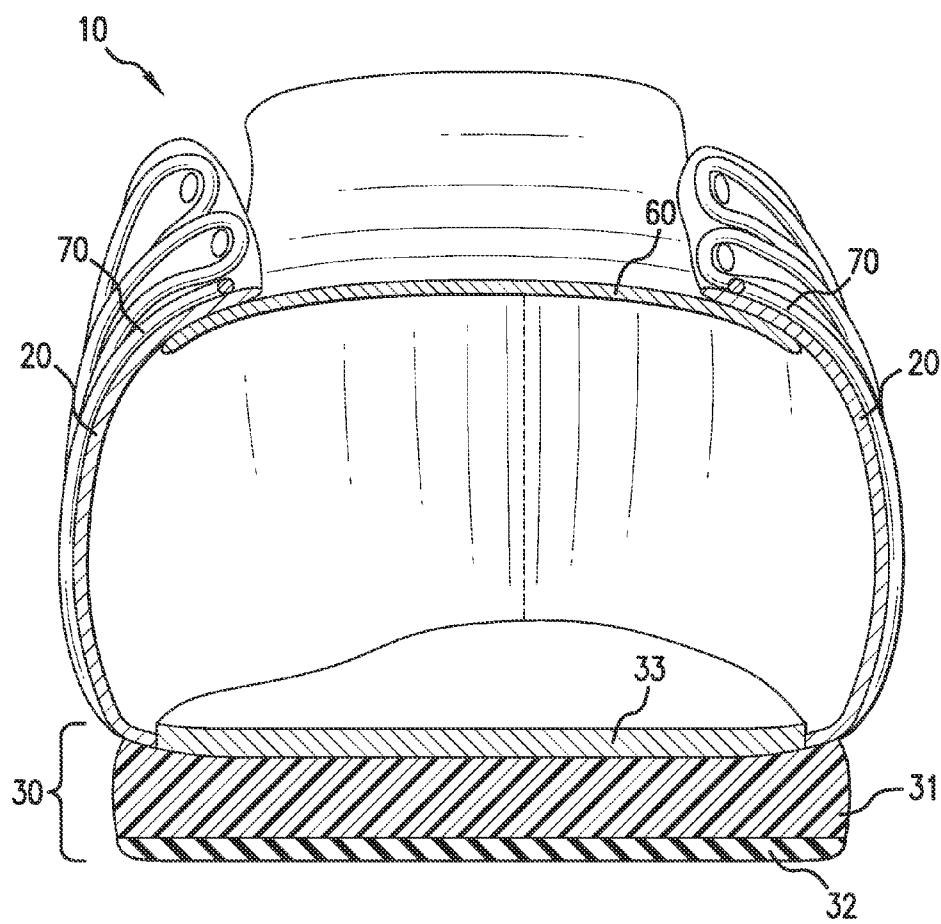


FIG.4

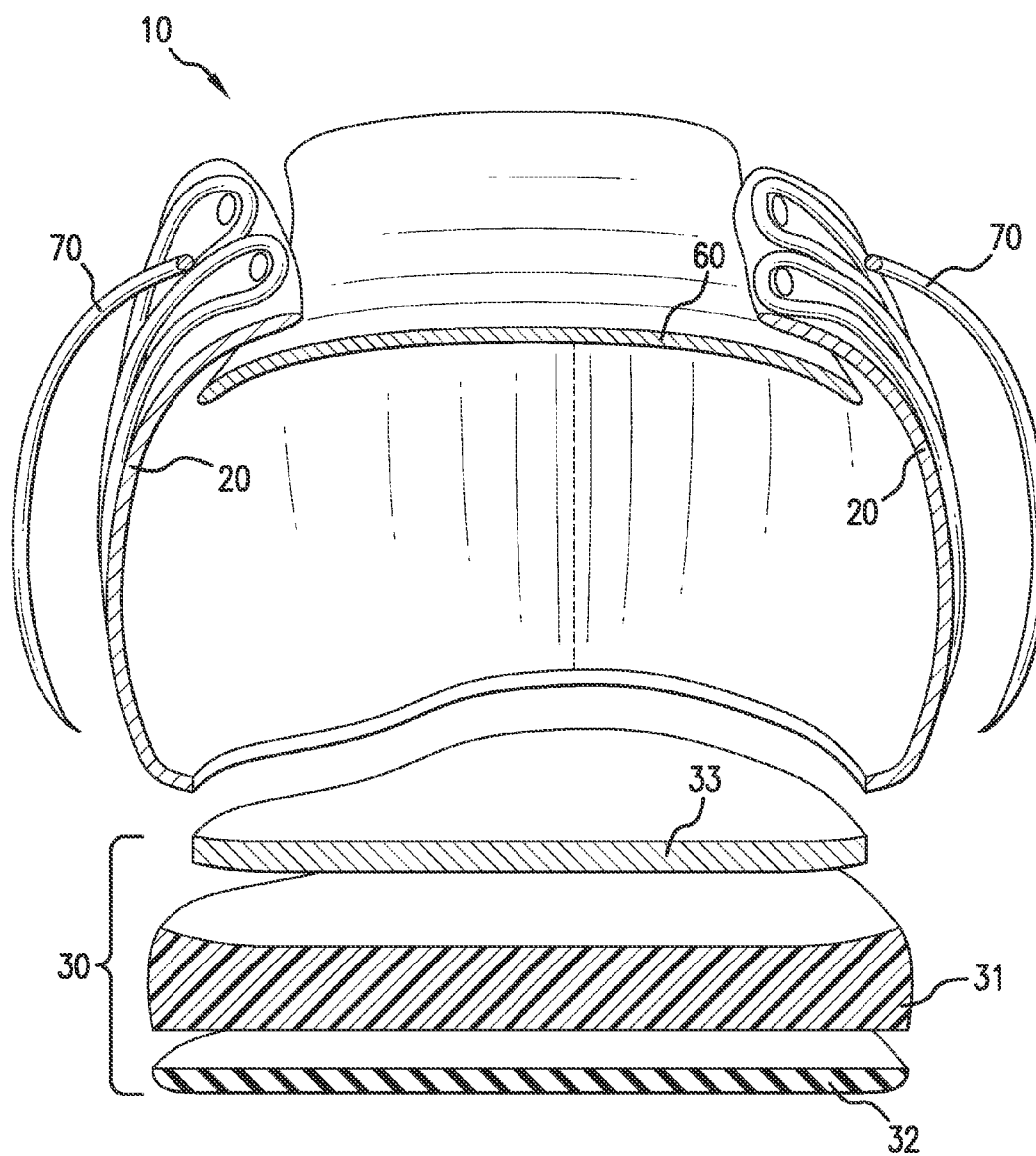


FIG. 5

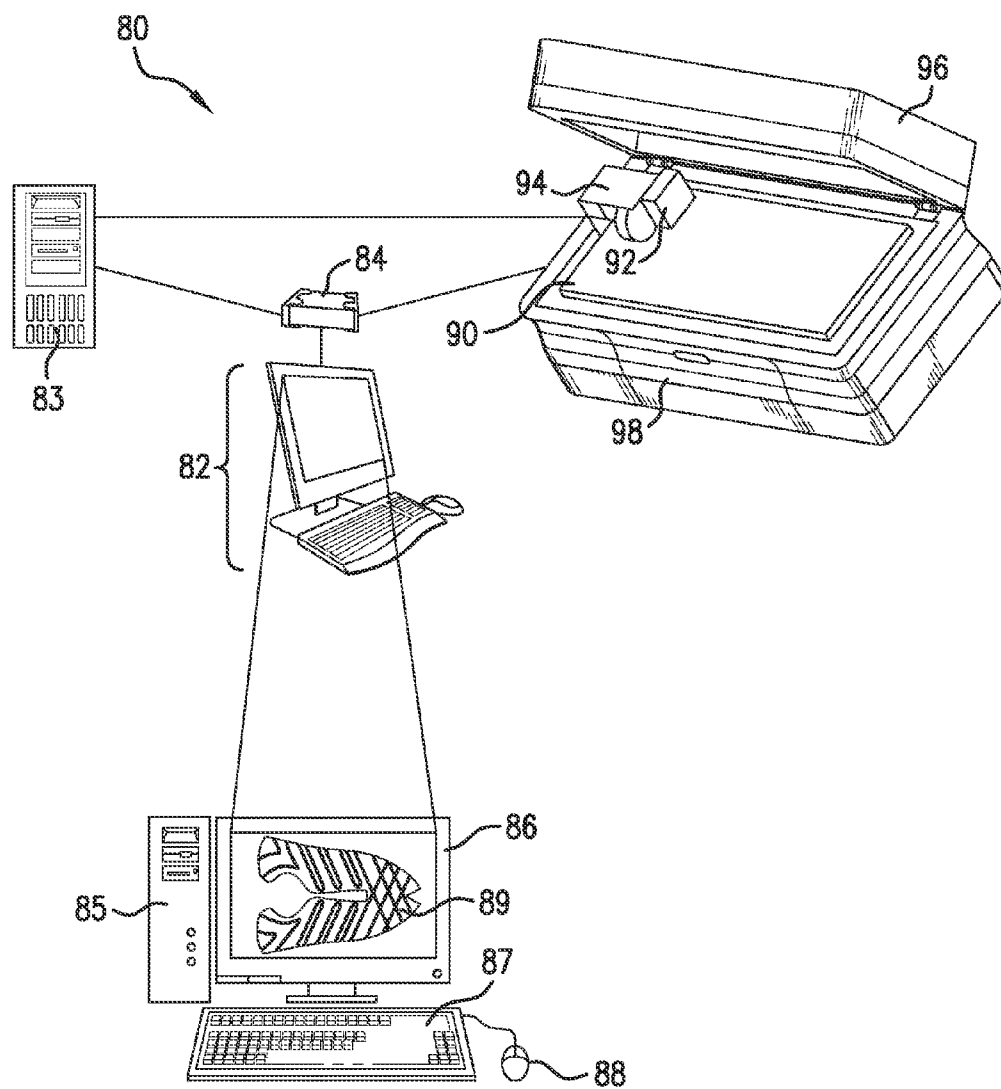


FIG. 6

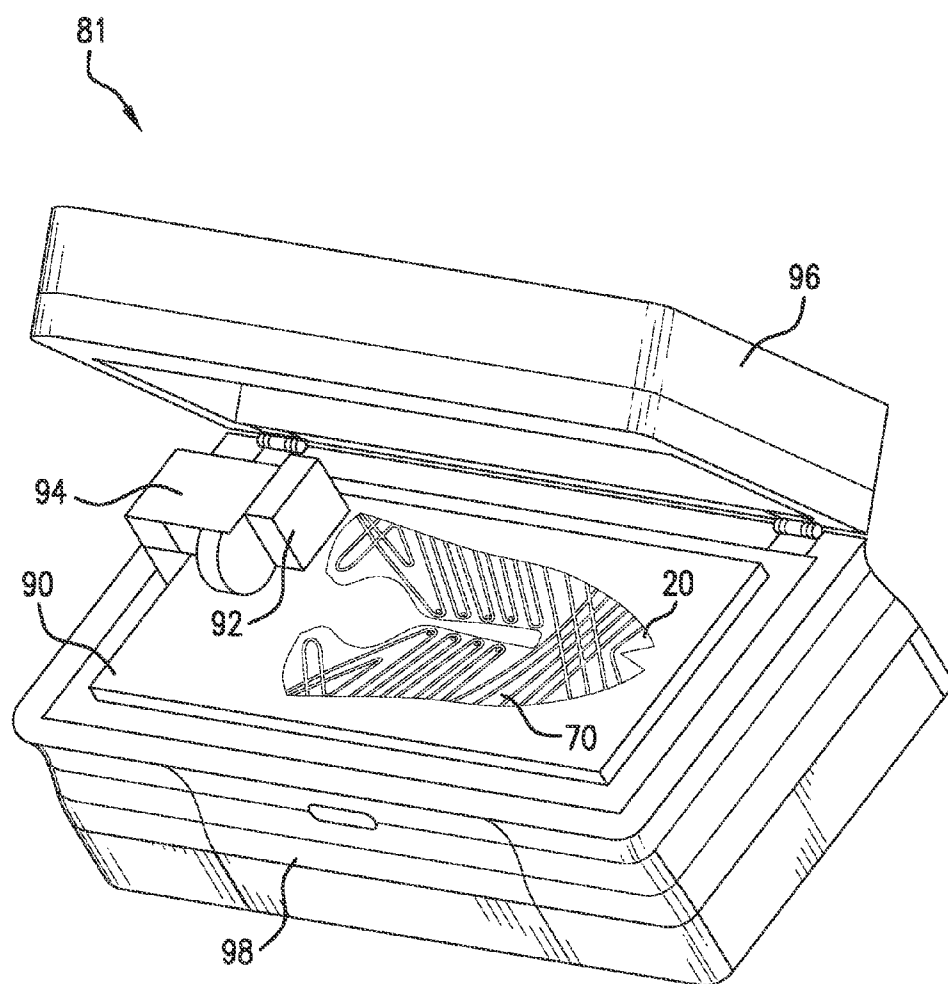


FIG. 7

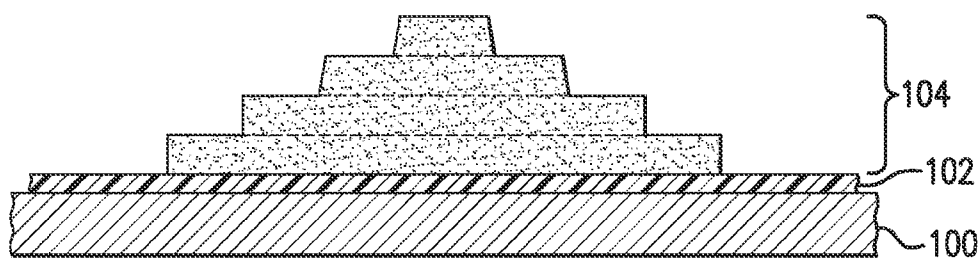


FIG. 8
Prior Art

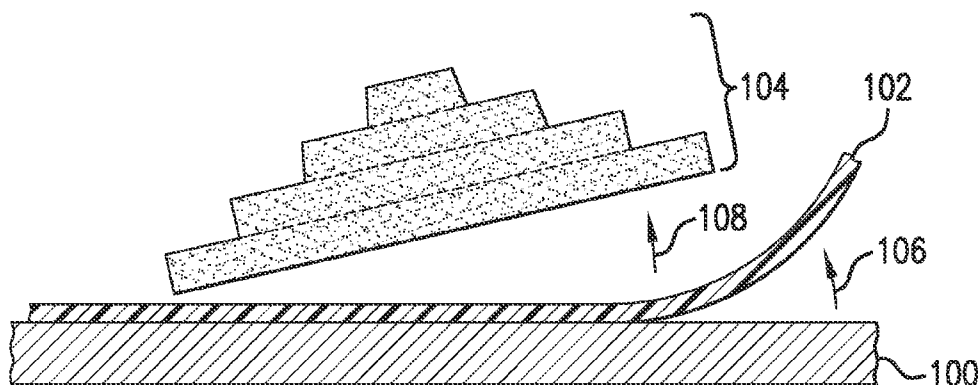


FIG. 9
Prior Art

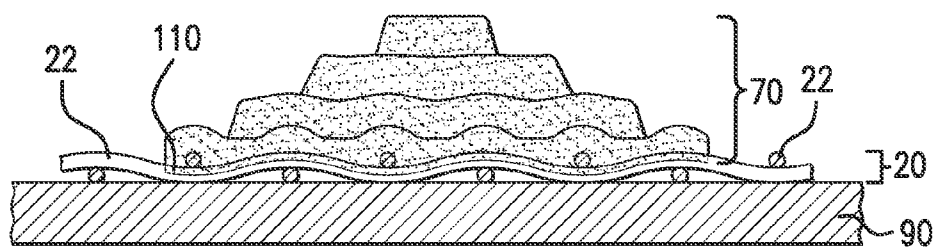


FIG. 10

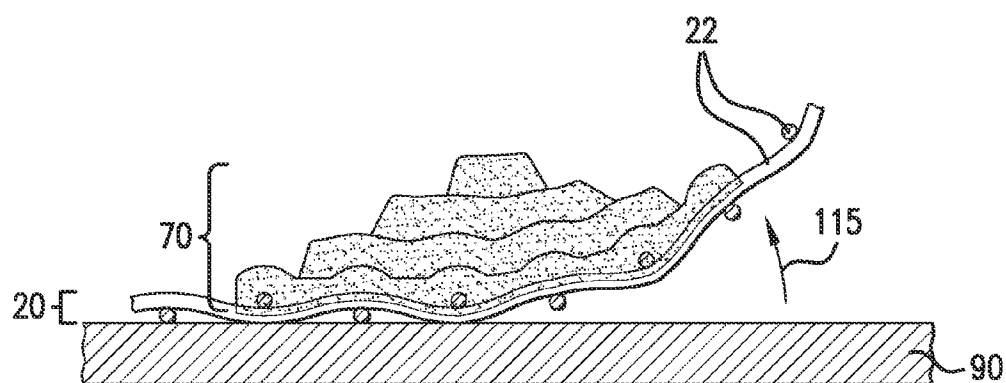


FIG. 11

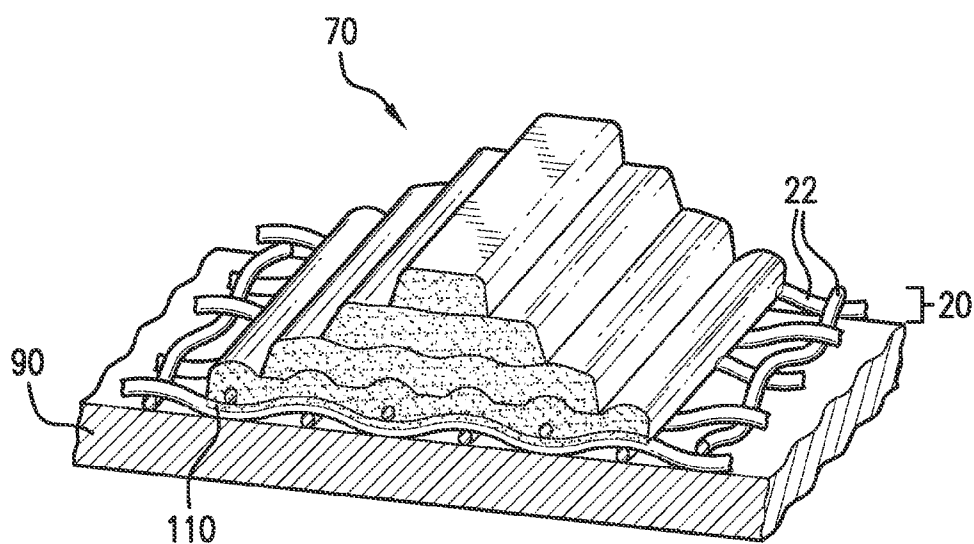


FIG. 12

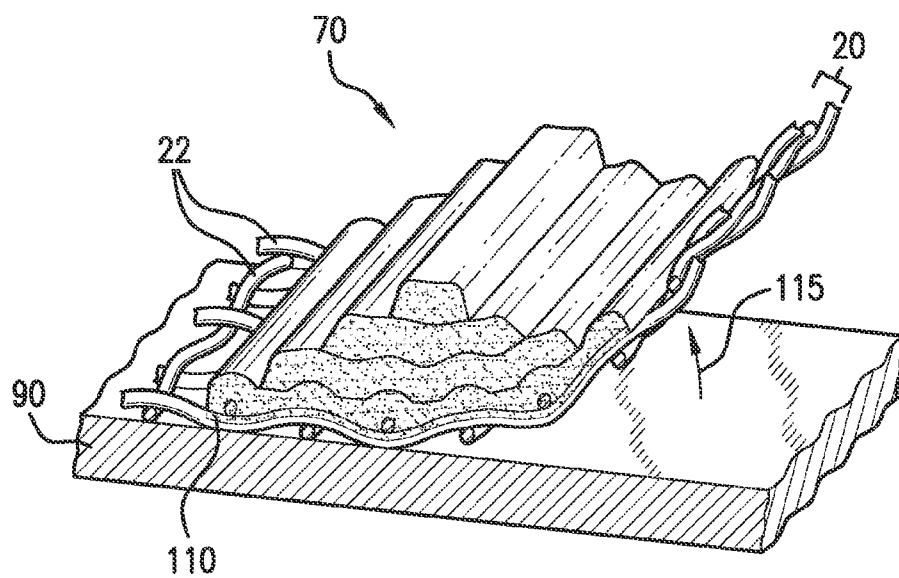


FIG. 13

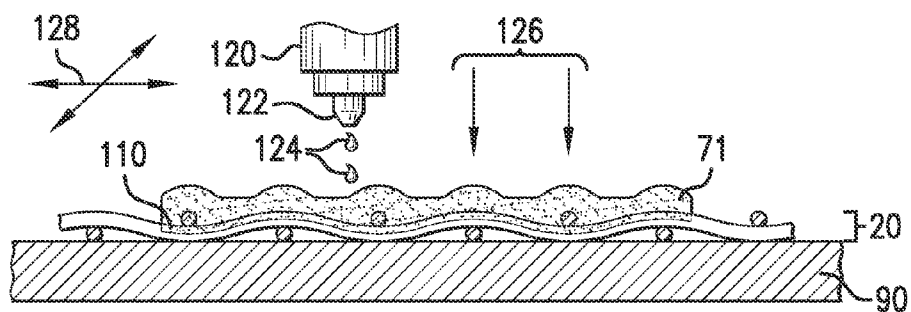


FIG. 14

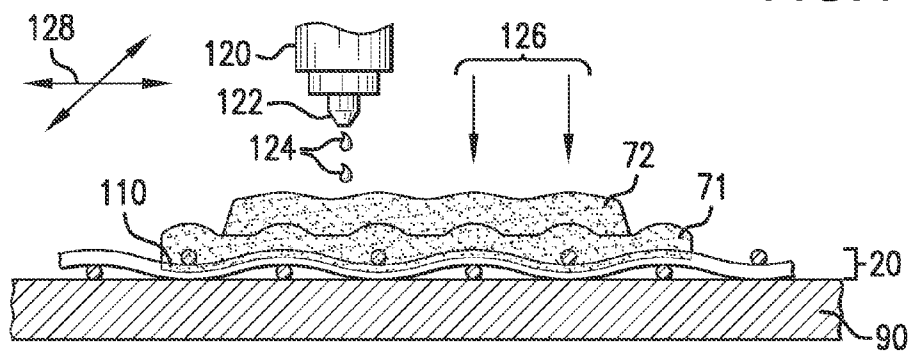


FIG. 15

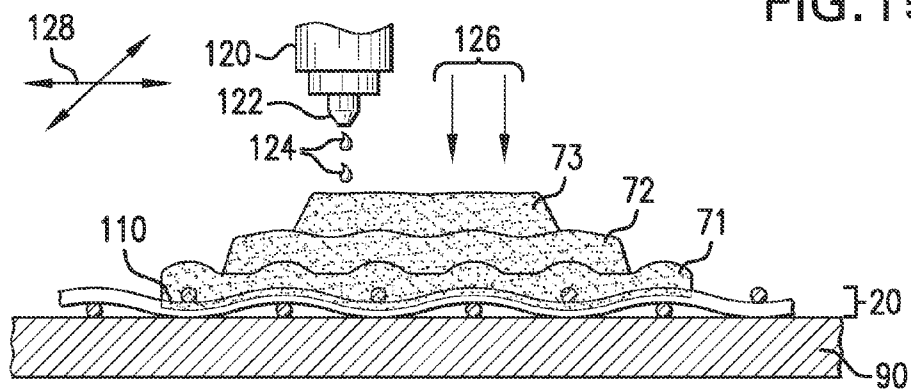


FIG. 16

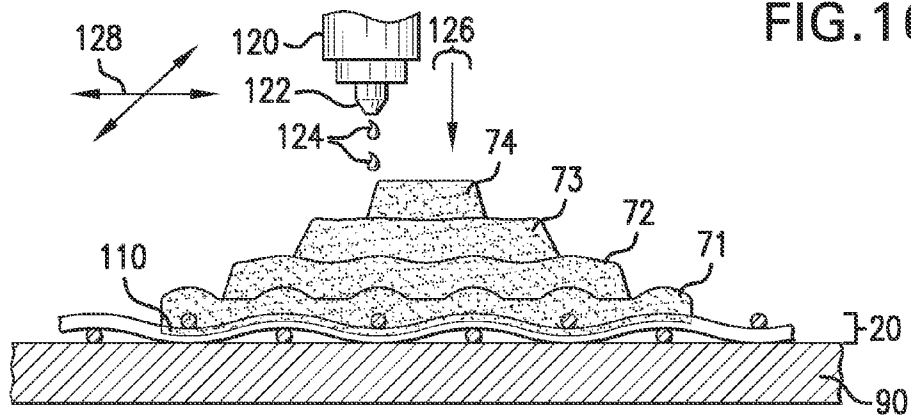


FIG. 17

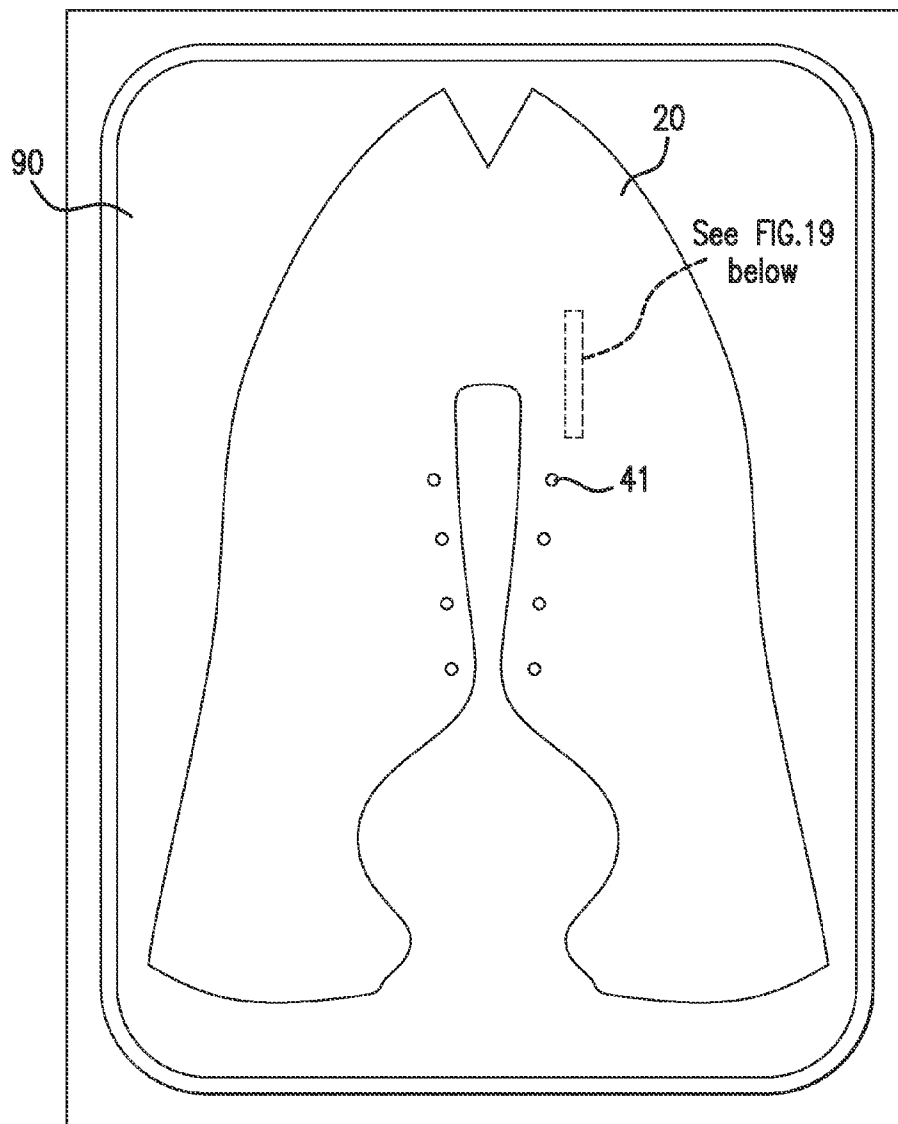


FIG. 18

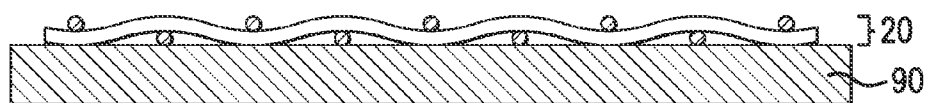


FIG. 19

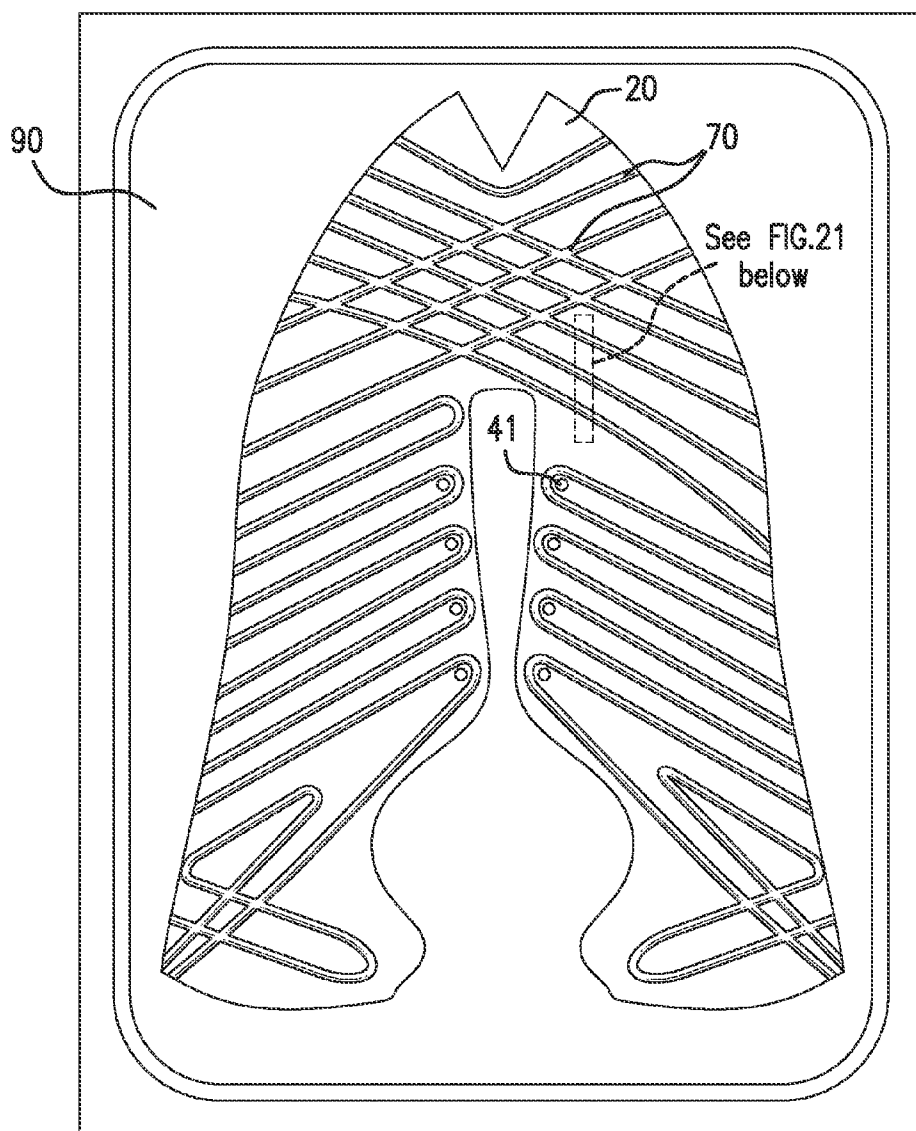


FIG. 20

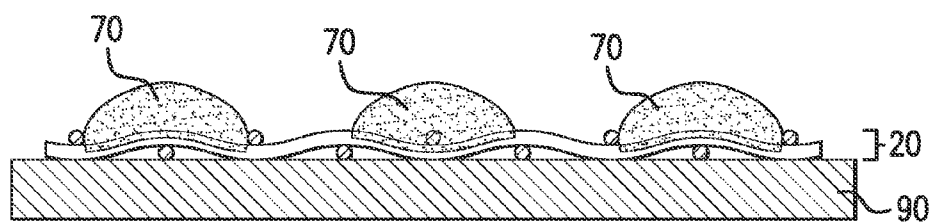
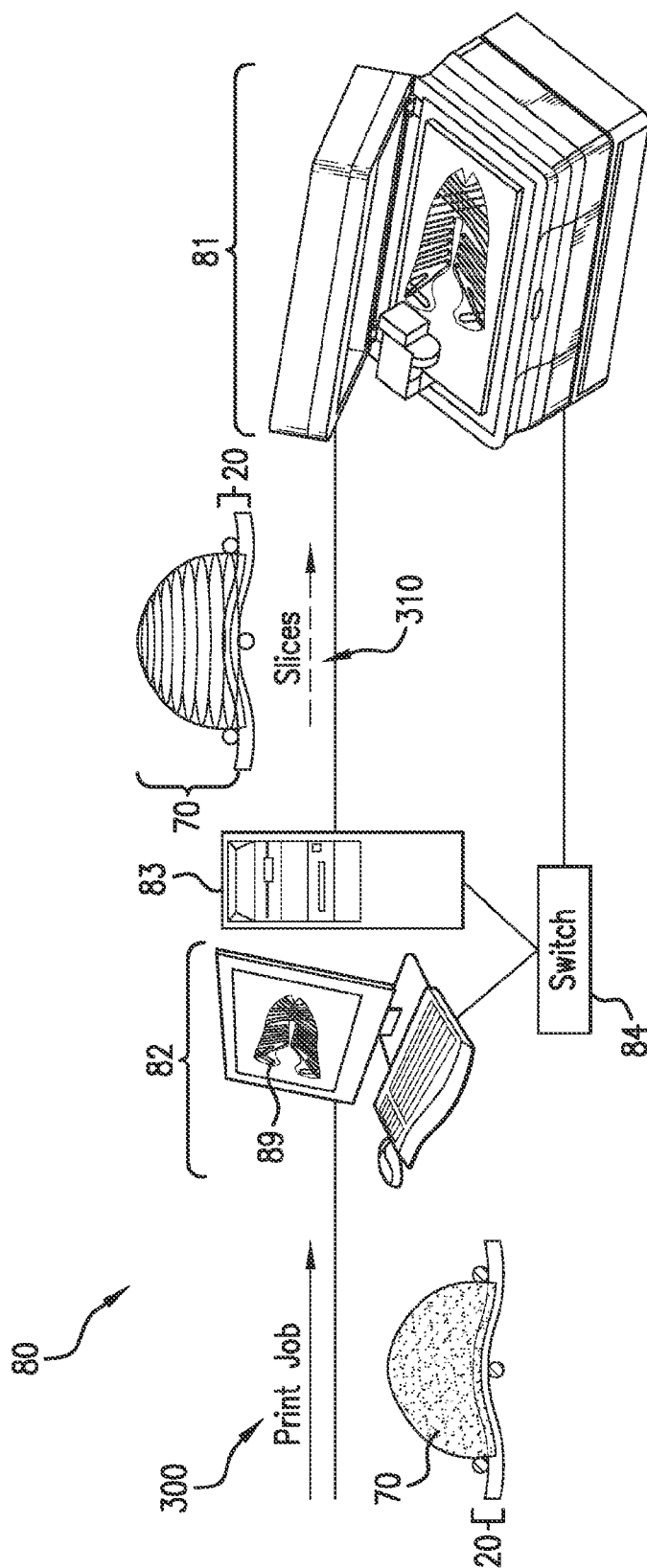


FIG. 21



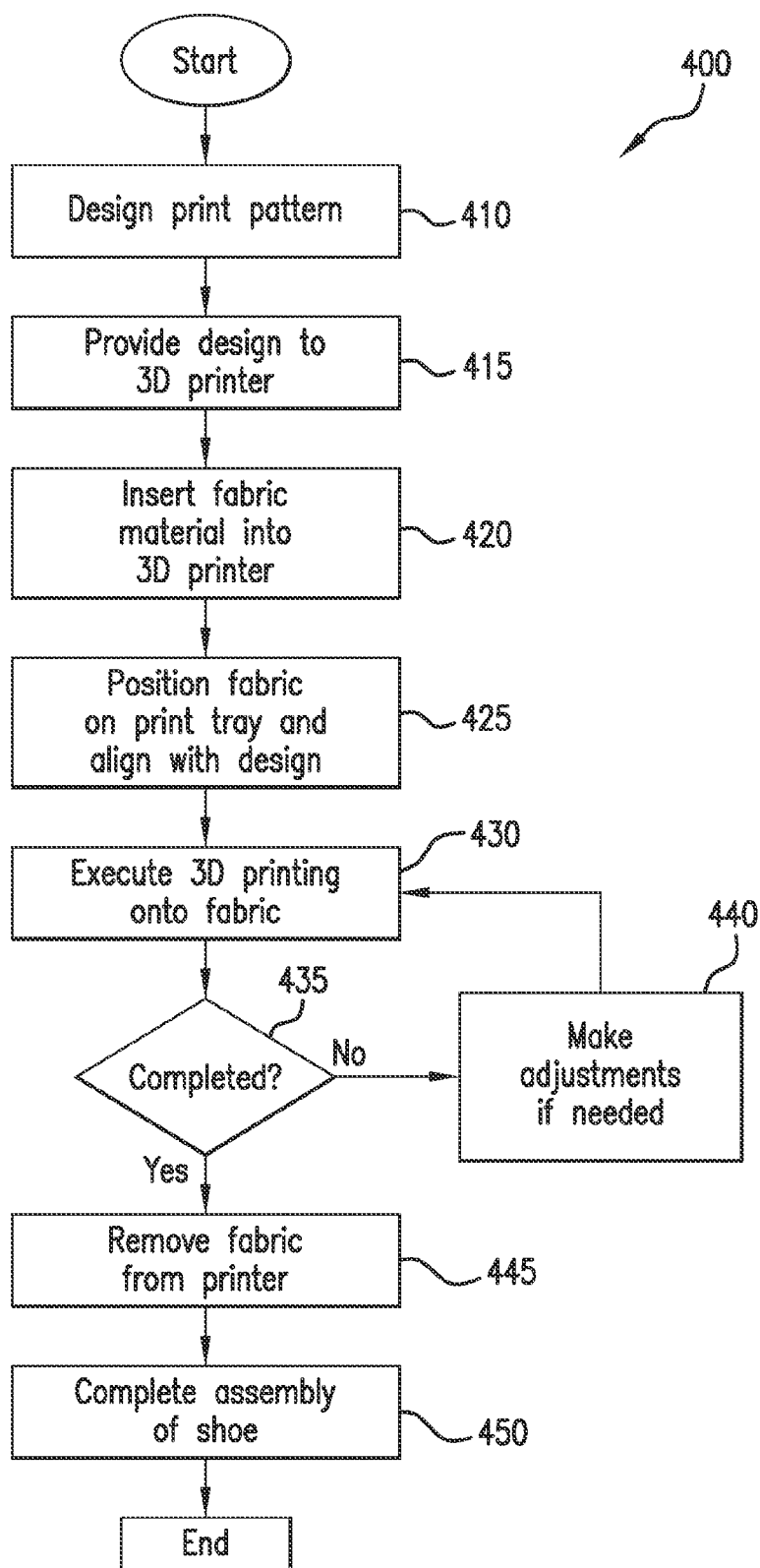


FIG. 23

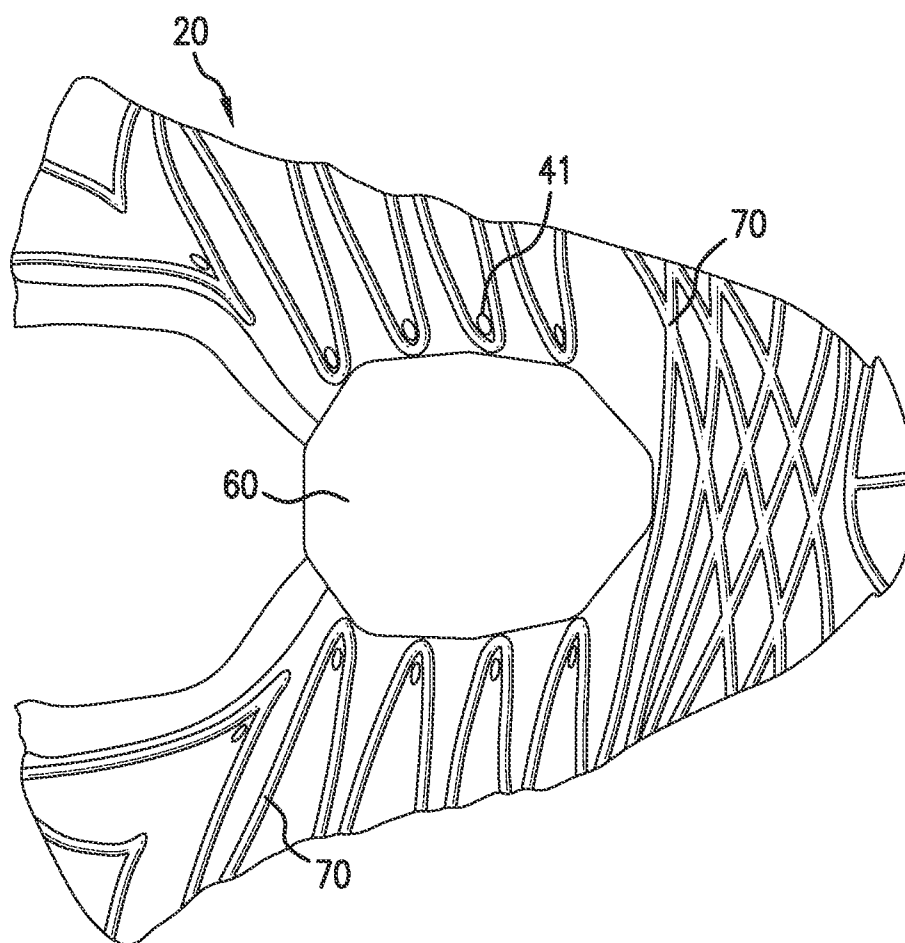


FIG. 24

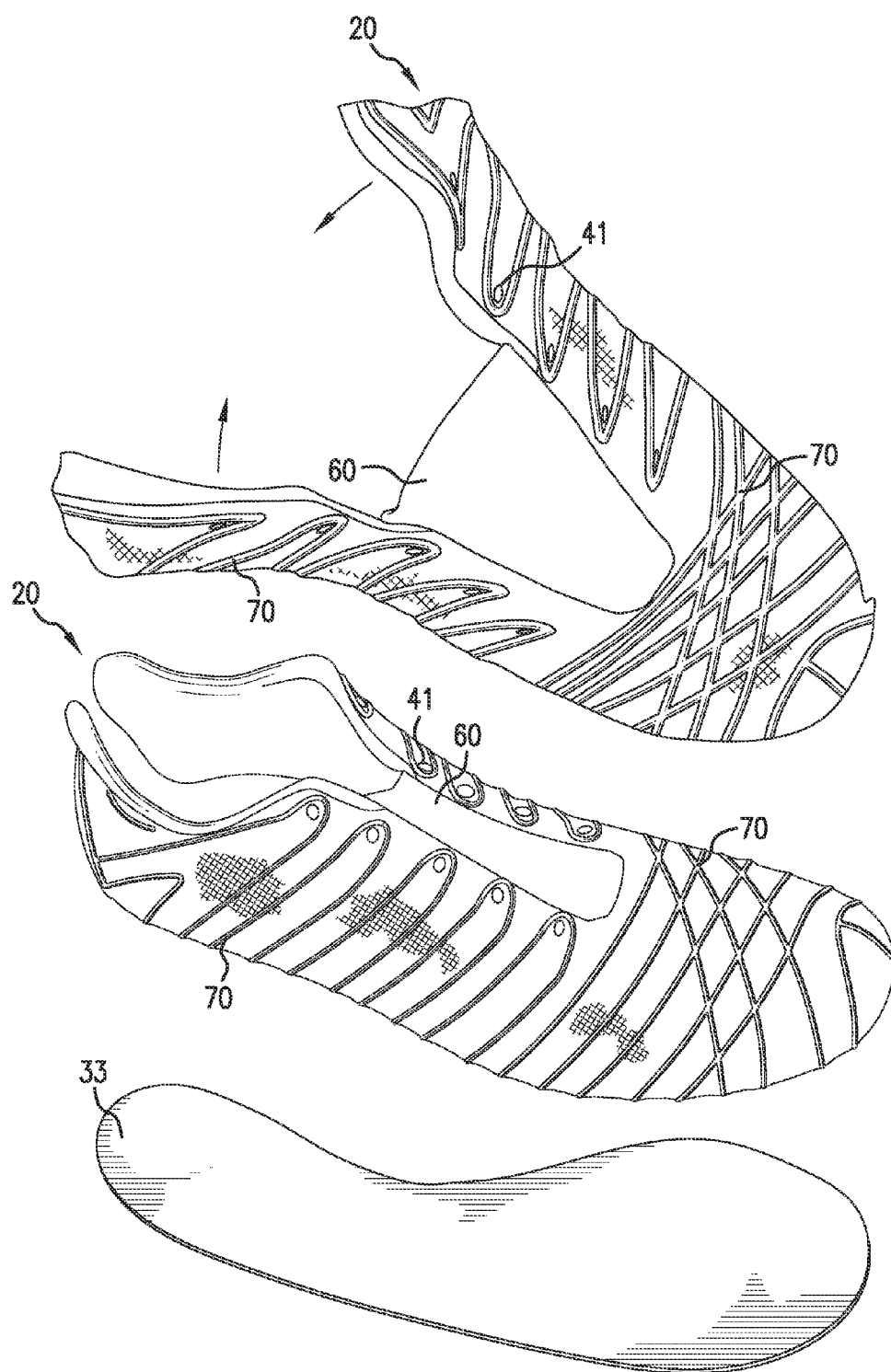


FIG. 25

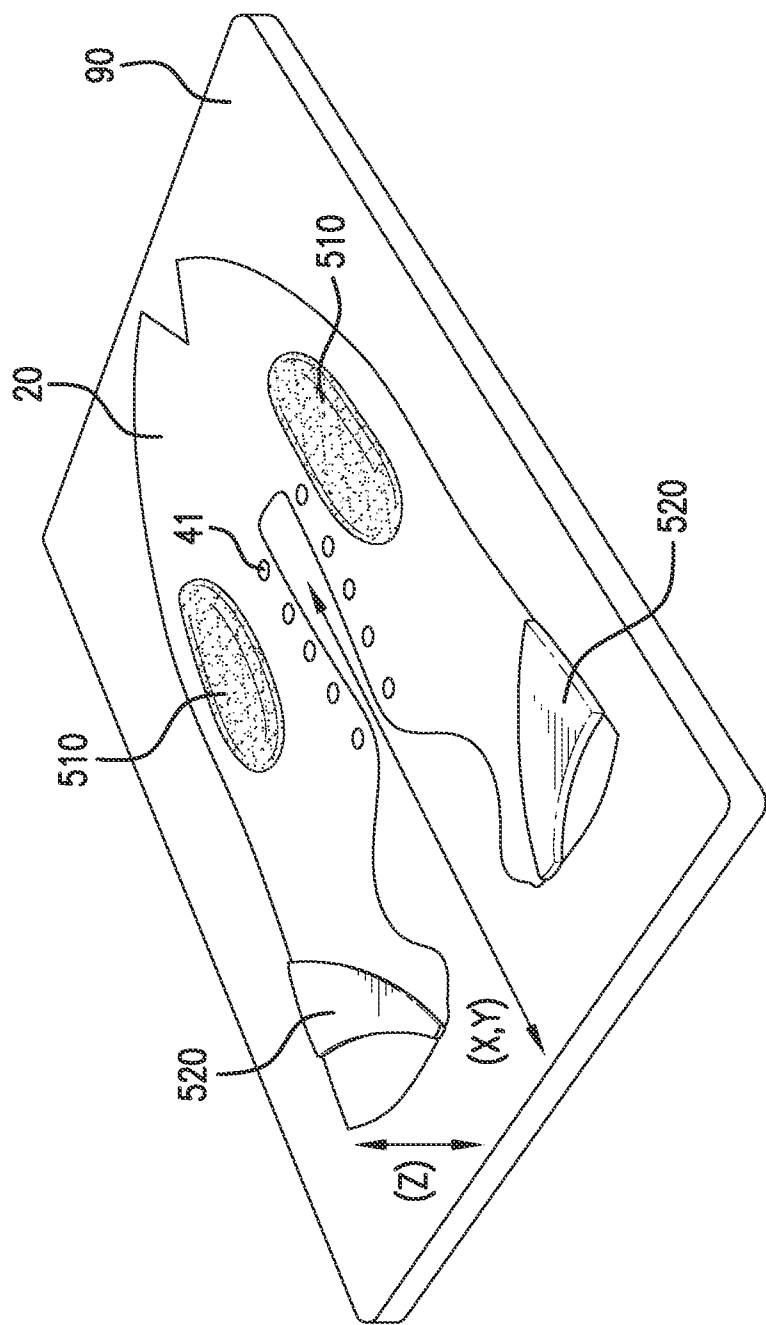


FIG. 26

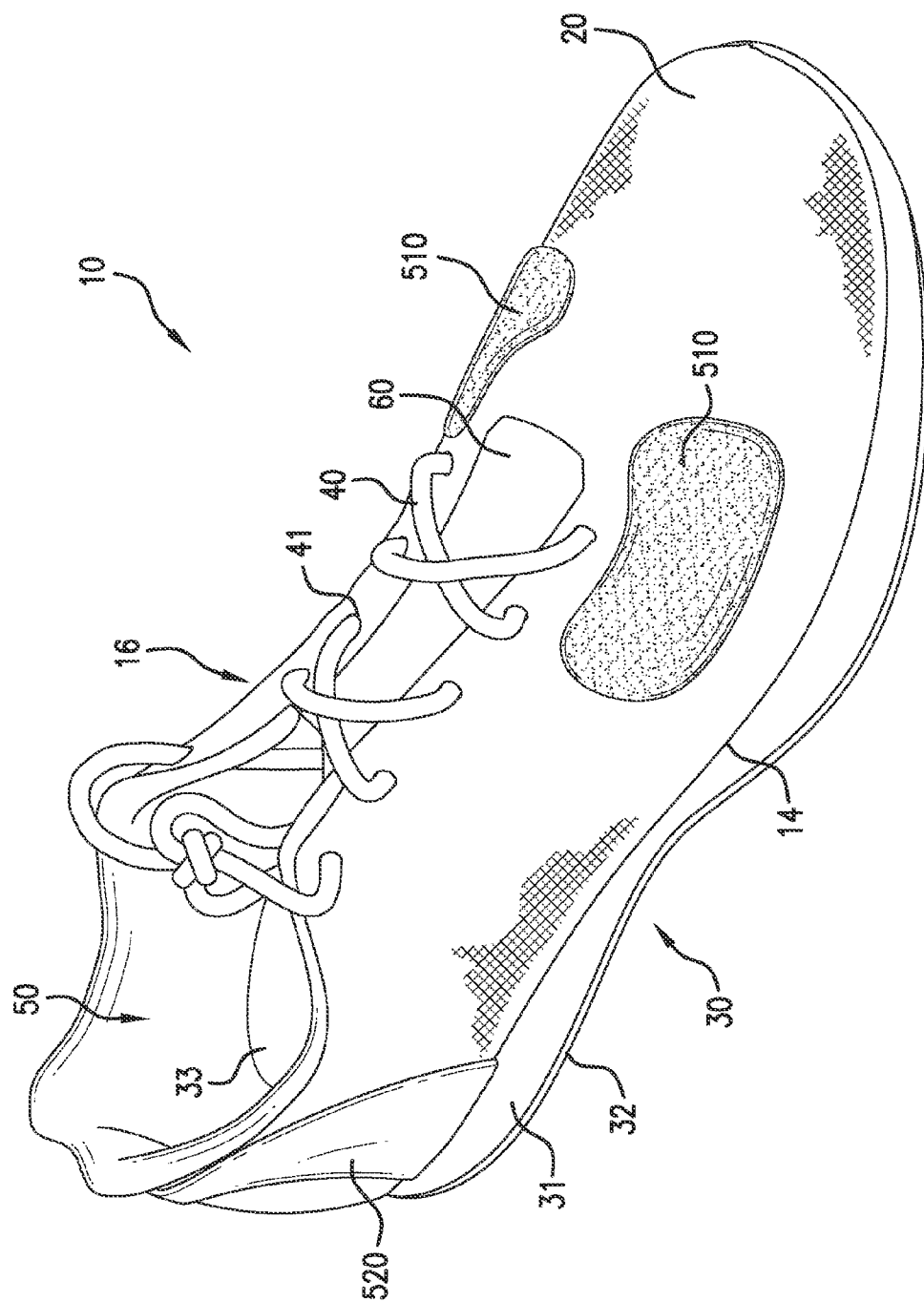


FIG. 27

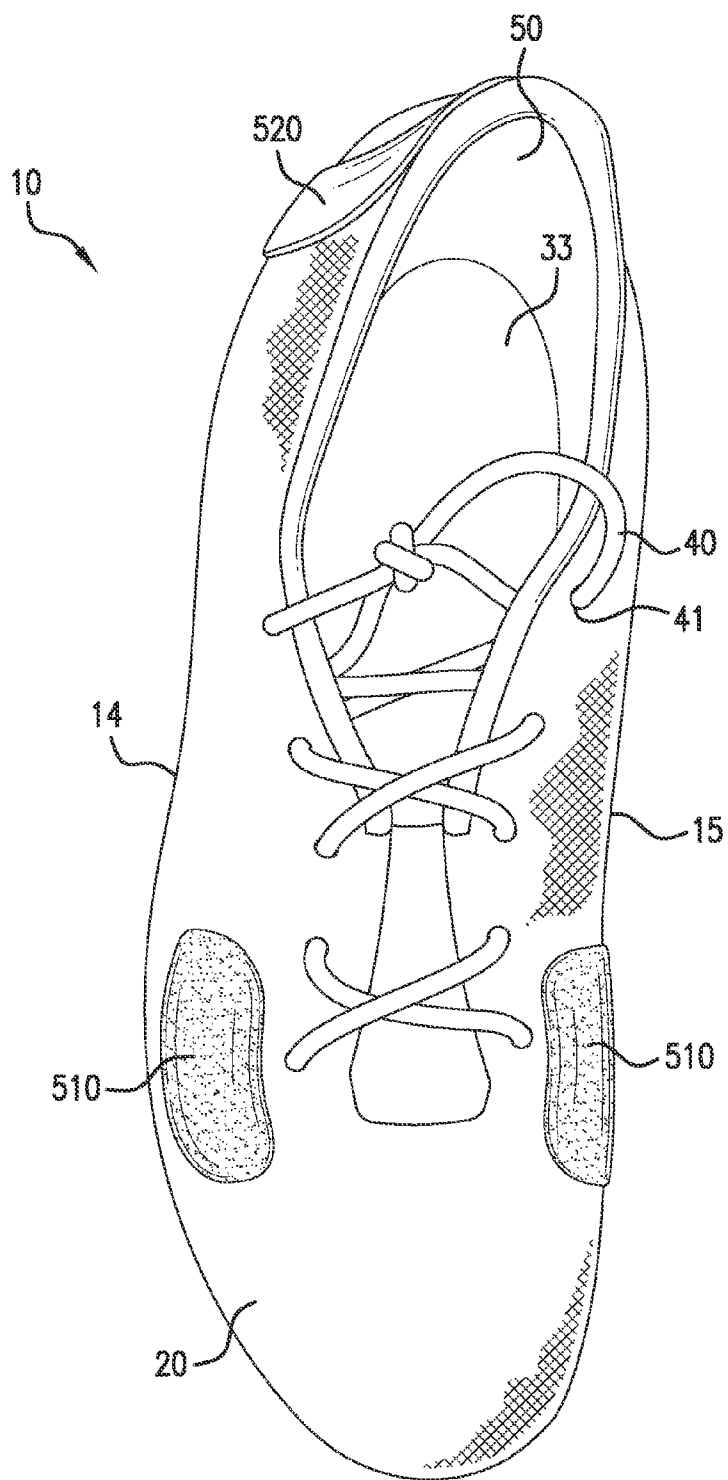


FIG. 28

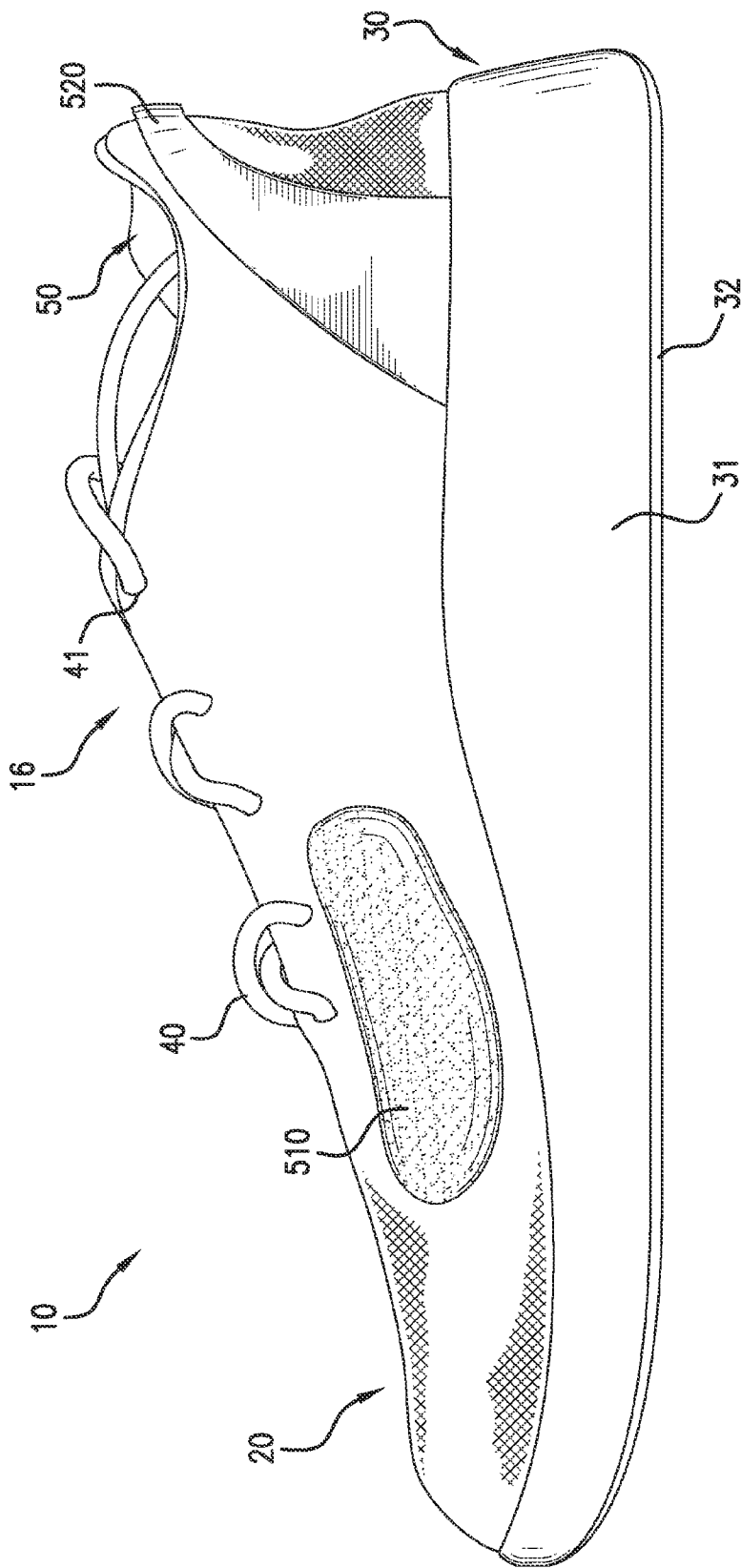
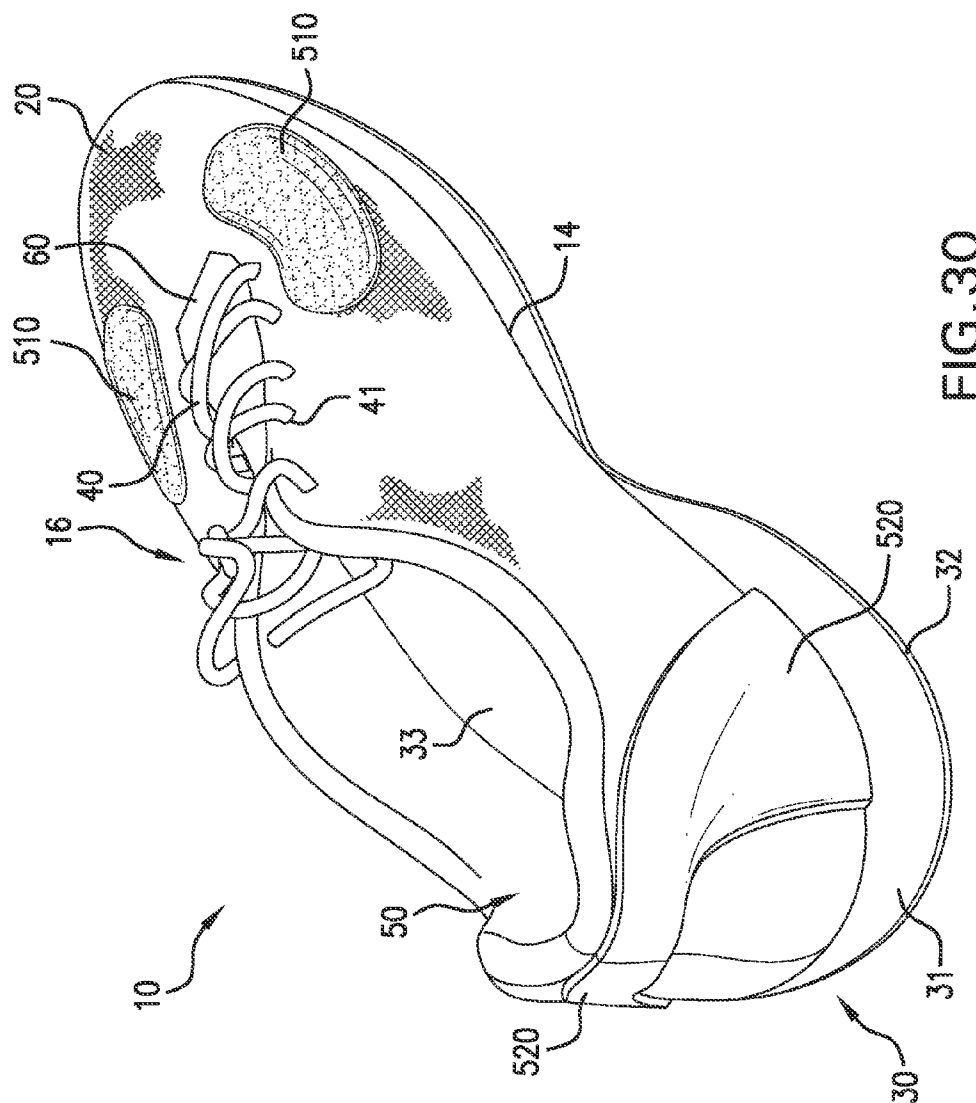


FIG. 29



DIRECT PRINTING TO FABRIC**TECHNICAL FIELD**

[0001] This disclosure relates generally to the field of three-dimensional (“3D”) printing onto an article of apparel, footwear, or equipment, and more specifically to methods and systems for 3D printing directly onto fabric apparel materials.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0002] The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated in and constitute a part of this specification, illustrate embodiments and, together with the description, serve to explain the features, advantages, and principles of the embodiments disclosed throughout this disclosure. For illustration purposes, the following drawings may not be to scale. Moreover, like reference numerals designate corresponding parts throughout the different views. In the drawings:

[0003] FIG. 1 shows an elevated view of an article of footwear consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0004] FIG. 2 shows an elevated view of a top portion of an article of footwear consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0005] FIG. 3 shows an elevated view of a medial side of an article of footwear consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0006] FIG. 4 shows a perspective cutaway view of an article of footwear consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0007] FIG. 5 shows an exploded perspective cutaway view of an article of footwear consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0008] FIG. 6 shows a schematic view of a 3D printing system consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0009] FIG. 7 shows a perspective view of a 3D printer with an upper portion of an article of footwear inserted therein, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0010] FIG. 8 shows a cross sectional view of a conventional 3D printed surface on a release layer over a substrate;

[0011] FIG. 9 shows a cross sectional view of a conventional 3D printed surface being removed from a release layer and substrate;

[0012] FIG. 10 shows a cross sectional view of a 3D printed material on an upper portion of an article of footwear, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0013] FIG. 11 shows a cross sectional view of a 3D printed material on an upper portion of an article of footwear being removed from a tray, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0014] FIG. 12 shows a perspective view of a 3D printed material on an upper portion of an article of footwear, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0015] FIG. 13 shows a perspective view of a 3D printed material on an upper portion of an article of footwear being removed from a tray, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0016] FIG. 14 shows a cross sectional view of a first layer of 3D printed material on an upper portion of an article of footwear and a curing process, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0017] FIG. 15 shows a cross sectional view of a second layer of 3D printed material on an upper portion of an article of footwear and a curing process, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0018] FIG. 16 shows a cross sectional view of a third layer of 3D printed material on an upper portion of an article of footwear and a curing process, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0019] FIG. 17 shows a cross sectional view of a fourth layer of 3D printed material on an upper portion of an article of footwear and a curing process, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0020] FIG. 18 shows an overhead view of an upper portion of an article of footwear placed on a tray and prior to 3D printing, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0021] FIG. 19 shows a cross sectional view of part of the upper portion of an article of footwear shown in FIG. 18 placed on a tray and prior to 3D printing, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0022] FIG. 20 shows an overhead view of an upper portion of an article of footwear placed on a tray and post 3D printing, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0023] FIG. 21 shows a cross sectional view of part of the upper portion of an article of footwear shown in FIG. 20 placed on a tray and post 3D printing, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0024] FIG. 22 shows a schematic view of a 3D printing system and method consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0025] FIG. 23 shows a process for manufacturing an article of footwear, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0026] FIG. 24 shows an overhead view of an upper portion of an article of footwear after printing and prior to completion of footwear assembly consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0027] FIG. 25 shows a perspective view of an upper portion of an article of footwear after printing and during placement in contact with a sole portion during assembly consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0028] FIG. 26 shows a perspective view of an upper portion of an article of footwear after 3D printing and prior to completion of footwear assembly consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0029] FIG. 27 shows an elevated view of an article of footwear assembled after printing of the 3D pattern shown in FIG. 26, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0030] FIG. 28 shows an elevated view of a top portion of the article of footwear shown in FIG. 27, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure;

[0031] FIG. 29 shows an elevated view of a medial side of the article of footwear shown in FIG. 27, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure; and

[0032] FIG. 30 shows an elevated view of a rear portion of the article of footwear shown in FIG. 27, consistent with an embodiment of the disclosure.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0033] The following discussion and accompanying figures disclose methods and systems for 3D printing and assembly of an article of footwear having an upper that includes 3D printing directly onto the upper material. In particular, an exemplary method is disclosed for 3D printing directly onto a fabric material, which allows building of a structure on the fabric for use in apparel applications. The disclosed methods and systems may use any suitable 3D printing system.

[0034] As used throughout this disclosure, the terms “three-dimensional printing system,” “three-dimensional

printer,” “3D printing system,” and “3D printer” refer to any known 3D printing system or printer. Contrary to known 3D printing methods, however, the disclosed methods and systems accomplish 3D printing directly onto any surface of a textile, a natural fabric, a synthetic fabric, a knit, a woven material, a nonwoven material, a mesh, a leather, a synthetic leather, a polymer, a rubber, and a foam, or any combination of them, without the need for a release layer interposed between a substrate and the bottom of the printed material, and without the need for a perfectly or near-perfectly flat substrate surface on which to print. For example, the disclosed methods may include printing a resin, acrylic, or ink material onto a fabric, for example a knit material, where the material is adhered/bonded to the fabric and where the material does not generally delaminate when flexed, rolled, worked, or subject to additional assembly processes/steps. As used throughout this disclosure, the term “fabric” may be used to refer generally to materials chosen from any textile, natural fabric, synthetic fabric, knit, woven material, nonwoven material, mesh, leather, synthetic leather, polymers, rubbers, and foam. Also as used throughout this disclosure, the terms “printing” or “printed,” and “depositing” or “deposited,” are each used synonymously, and are intended to refer to the association of a material from a source of the material to a receiving surface or object.

[0035] Consistent with an embodiment, an exemplary article of footwear is disclosed as having a general configuration suitable for walking or running. As used throughout this disclosure, the terms “article of footwear” and “footwear” include any footwear and any materials associated with footwear, including an upper, and may also be applied to a variety of athletic footwear types, including baseball shoes, basketball shoes, cross-training shoes, cycling shoes, football shoes, tennis shoes, soccer shoes, and hiking boots, for example. As used throughout this disclosure, the terms “article of footwear” and “footwear” also include footwear types that are generally considered to be nonathletic, formal, or decorative, including dress shoes, loafers, sandals, slippers, boat shoes, and work boots. Disclosed embodiments apply, therefore, to any footwear type.

[0036] While the disclosed embodiments are described in the context of footwear, the disclosed embodiments may further be equally applied to any article of clothing, apparel, or equipment that includes 3D printing. For example, the disclosed embodiments may be applied hats, caps, shirts, jerseys, jackets, socks, shorts, pants, undergarments, athletic support garments, gloves, wrist/arm bands, sleeves, headbands, any knit material, any woven material, any nonwoven material, sports equipment, etc. Thus, as used throughout this disclosure, the term “article of apparel” may refer to any apparel or clothing, including any article of footwear, as well as hats, caps, shirts, jerseys, jackets, socks, shorts, pants, undergarments, athletic support garments, gloves, wrist/arm bands, sleeves, headbands, any knit material, any woven material, any nonwoven material, etc. As used throughout this disclosure, the terms “article of apparel,” “apparel,” “article of footwear,” and “footwear” may also refer to a textile, a natural fabric, a synthetic fabric, a knit, a woven material, a nonwoven material, a mesh, a leather, a synthetic leather, a polymer, a rubber, and a foam. For example, materials used in footwear formation are disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 5,709,954, which is incorporated by reference.

[0037] In accordance with the systems and methods described throughout this disclosure, there is provided a

method of direct three-dimensional printing onto an article of apparel, comprising: designing a three-dimensional pattern for printing onto the article; positioning at least a portion of the article on a tray in a three dimensional printing system, the portion being positioned substantially flat on the tray; printing a three-dimensional material directly onto the article using the designed pattern; curing the printed material; and removing the article from the three-dimensional printing system.

[0038] In accordance with the systems and methods described throughout this disclosure, there is also provided a method of fabricating an article of footwear, comprising: designing a three-dimensional pattern for printing onto an upper; providing the pattern to a print server; positioning at least a portion of the upper on a tray in a three dimensional printing system, the portion being positioned substantially flat on the tray; aligning the portion of the upper on the tray with the pattern; printing a three-dimensional material directly onto the upper using the designed pattern on the print server and the three-dimensional printing system; curing the printed material; removing the upper from the three-dimensional printing system; and assembling the article of footwear using the printed upper and at least one footwear component chosen from a sock liner, a midsole, and an outsole.

[0039] In accordance with the systems and methods described throughout this disclosure, there is provided a method of fabricating an article of footwear, comprising: designing a three-dimensional pattern for printing onto an upper; providing the pattern to a print server; positioning at least a portion of the upper on a tray in a three dimensional printing system, the portion being positioned substantially flat on the tray; aligning the portion of the upper on the tray with the pattern; printing a first layer of three-dimensional material directly onto the upper using the designed pattern on the print server and the three-dimensional printing system; allowing the first layer of printed material to at least partially absorb into a surface of the upper; curing the first layer, wherein the cured first layer has a first modulus of elasticity; printing at least one additional layer of the material on the cured first layer; curing the at least one additional layer, wherein the cured at least one additional layer has a different modulus of elasticity than the first modulus; removing the upper from the three-dimensional printing system; and assembling the article of footwear using the printed upper and at least one footwear component chosen from a sock liner, a midsole, and an outsole.

[0040] In accordance with the systems and methods described throughout this disclosure, there is provided a method of fabricating an article of footwear, comprising: designing at least a first three-dimensional pattern and a second three dimensional pattern for printing onto an upper; providing the at least first and second three-dimensional patterns to a print server; positioning at least a first portion of the upper on a tray in a three dimensional printing system, the first portion being positioned substantially flat on the tray; aligning the first portion of the upper with the first pattern; printing at least one layer of a first three-dimensional material having a first material property directly onto the first portion of the upper using the designed first pattern; allowing the at least one layer of printed first three-dimensional material to at least partially absorb into a first portion of a surface of the upper; curing the at least one layer of printed first three-dimensional material; positioning at least a second portion of the upper on the tray, the second portion being positioned

substantially flat on the tray; aligning the second portion of the upper with the second pattern; printing at least one layer of a second three-dimensional material having a second material property directly onto the second portion of the upper using the designed second pattern; allowing the at least one layer of printed second three-dimensional material to at least partially absorb into a second portion of the surface of the upper; curing the at least one layer of printed second three-dimensional material; removing the upper from the three-dimensional printing system; and assembling the article of footwear using the printed upper and at least one footwear component chosen from a sock liner, a midsole, and an outsole.

[0041] In accordance with the systems and methods described throughout this disclosure, there is provided a system for three-dimensional printing directly onto a fabric upper, comprising: a first nontransitory computer-readable medium encoded with a first computer program product loadable into a first memory of a first computer and including first software code portions for storing a three-dimensional pattern for printing directly onto the upper; a print server; a switching device; and a three-dimensional printer device, wherein the print server is in direct communication with the three dimensional printer device and the switching device, wherein the switching device is in direct communication with the three dimensional printer device and the print server, wherein the first nontransitory computer readable medium is in direct communication with the switch, wherein the print server comprises a second nontransitory computer-readable medium encoded with a second computer program product loadable into a second memory of a second computer and including second software code portions for instructing the three-dimensional printing device to print directly onto the upper through a sequence of printing steps; wherein the three dimensional printer device comprises a tray receiving the fabric upper, at least one printing head for printing onto the upper in the sequence, and at least one ultraviolet light for curing material printed onto the upper, and wherein the three dimensional printing system does not require a substantially flat surface for printing.

[0042] Additional features and advantages will be set forth in part in the description that follows, being apparent from the description or learned by practice of embodiments. Both the foregoing description and the following description are exemplary and explanatory, and are intended to provide further explanation of the embodiments as claimed.

[0043] An article of footwear generally includes two primary elements: an upper and a sole structure. The upper may be formed from a plurality of material elements (e.g., one or more layers of a textile, a natural fabric, a synthetic fabric, a knit, a woven material, a nonwoven material, a mesh, a leather, a synthetic leather, a polymer, a rubber, and a foam, etc.) stitched or adhesively bonded together to form a void on the interior of the footwear for comfortably and securely receiving a foot. More particularly, the upper forms a structure that extends over instep and toe areas of the foot, along medial and lateral sides of the foot, and around a heel area of the foot. The upper may also incorporate a lacing system to adjust fit of the footwear, as well as permitting entry and removal of the foot from the void within the upper. In addition, the upper may include a tongue that extends under the lacing system to enhance adjustability and comfort of the footwear, and the upper may incorporate a heel counter. For example, the upper may be a high tensile strength knit or mesh sockfit upper.

[0044] Various material elements forming the upper may impart different properties to different areas of the upper. For example, textile elements may provide breathability and may absorb moisture from the foot, foam layers may compress to impart comfort, and leather may impart durability and wear-resistance. Consistent with an embodiment, therefore, 3D printed materials disposed on the upper during assembly of an article of footwear may thus be used to customize the properties of the upper and hence article of footwear. As disclosed throughout this disclosure, for example, 3D printed materials may be disposed on the upper to impart customized material properties such as increased strength, rigidity, support, flexibility, abrasion resistance, or variations thereof, based on desired material properties for specific portions of the upper and the article of footwear as a whole.

[0045] A sole structure is secured to a lower portion of the upper so as to be positioned between the foot and the ground. In athletic footwear, for example, the sole structure includes a midsole and an outsole. The midsole may be formed from a polymer foam material that attenuates ground reaction forces (i.e., provides cushioning) during walking, running, and other ambulatory activities. The midsole may also include cushions, such as fluid-filled chambers, plates, moderators, or other elements that further attenuate forces, enhance stability, or influence the motions of the foot, for example. The outsole forms a ground-contacting element of the footwear and is usually fashioned from a durable and wear-resistant rubber material that includes texturing to impart traction. The sole structure may also include a sockliner positioned within the upper and proximal to a lower surface of the foot to enhance footwear comfort.

[0046] Consistent with an embodiment, an article of footwear **10**, throughout this disclosure referred to simply as footwear **10**, is depicted in FIGS. 1-3 as including an upper **20** and a sole structure **30**. For reference purposes, footwear **10** may be divided into three general regions: a forefoot region **11**, a midfoot region **12**, and a heel region **13**. Footwear **10** also includes a lateral side **14** and a medial side **15**. Forefoot region **11** generally includes portions of footwear **10** corresponding with the toes and the joints connecting the metatarsals with the phalanges. Midfoot region **12** generally includes portions of footwear **10** corresponding with the arch area of the foot, and heel region **13** corresponds with rear portions of the foot, including the calcaneus bone. Lateral side **14** and medial side **15** extend through each of forefoot region **11**, midfoot region **12**, and heel region **13** (as seen in FIG. 3) and correspond with opposite sides of footwear **10** that are separated by a lace region **16**, which extends along a length of footwear **10**. Forefoot region **11**, midfoot region **12**, heel region **13**, lateral side **14**, and medial side **15** are not intended to demarcate precise areas of footwear **10**. Rather, they are intended to represent general areas of footwear **10** to aid in this description. In addition to footwear **10**, forefoot region **11**, midfoot region **12**, heel region **13**, lateral side **14**, and medial side **15** may also be applied to upper **20**, sole structure **30**, and individual elements thereof.

[0047] Upper **20** is secured to sole structure **30** and extends between the foot and the ground when footwear **10** is worn. The primary elements of sole structure **30** are a midsole **31**, an outsole **32**, and a sockliner **33**. A lower surface of upper **20** is secured to midsole **31**, and midsole **31** may be formed from a compressible polymer foam element (e.g., a polyurethane or ethylvinylacetate foam) that attenuates ground reaction forces (i.e., provides cushioning) when compressed between

the foot and the ground during walking, running, or other ambulatory activities. In further configurations, midsole **31** may incorporate fluid-filled chambers, plates, moderators, or other elements that further attenuate forces, enhance stability, or influence the motions of the foot, or midsole **31** may be primarily formed from a fluid-filled chamber. Outsole **32** is secured to a lower surface of midsole **31** and may be formed from a wear-resistant material (e.g., a polymer or a rubber) that is textured to impart traction and provide durability. Sockliner **33** is located within upper **20** and is positioned to extend under a lower surface of the foot. Although this configuration for sole structure **30** provides an example of a sole structure that may be used in connection with upper **20**, a variety of other conventional or nonconventional configurations for sole structure **30** may also be utilized. Accordingly, the structure and features of sole structure **30** or any sole structure utilized with upper **20** may vary considerably.

[0048] Upper **20** may be stitched or bonded together to form a void within footwear **10** for receiving and securing a foot relative to sole structure **30**. The void is shaped to accommodate the foot and extends along the lateral side of the foot, along the medial side of the foot, over the foot, around the heel, and under the foot. Access to the void is provided by an ankle opening **50** located in at least heel region **13**.

[0049] Lace **40** may extend through various lace apertures **41** and permits the wearer to modify dimensions of upper **20** to accommodate the proportions of the foot. More particularly, lace **40** may permit the wearer to tighten upper **20** around the foot, and lace **40** may permit the wearer to loosen upper **20** to facilitate entry and removal of the foot from the void (i.e., through ankle opening **50**). As an alternative to lace apertures **41**, upper **20** may include other lace-receiving elements, such as loops, eyelets, and D-rings. In addition, upper **20** may include a tongue **60** that extends between ankle opening **50** and lace **40** to enhance the comfort and performance of footwear **10**. In some configurations, upper **20** may incorporate a heel counter that limits heel movement in heel region **13** or a wear-resistant toe guard located in forefoot region **11**. In some cases, upper **20** may include a plurality of lace apertures **41**, including evenly spaced apertures on lateral side **14** of lace region **16** extending from ankle opening **50** to forefoot region **11**. Similarly, upper **20** may include a symmetrical, evenly spaced group of lace apertures **41** on medial side **14** of lace region **16**. Lace **40** may be interwoven through apertures **41** in any suitable configuration.

[0050] Still referring to FIGS. 1-3, upper **20** includes regions or patterns of printed material **70**. Consistent with an embodiment, printed material **70** may be formed by direct 3D printing and curing of material onto upper **20** in any desired pattern, shape, thickness, or coverage. Printing and curing of printed material **70** will be described in greater detail hereinbelow. As shown in FIGS. 1-3, printed material **70** is depicted in an exemplary manner as a pattern of interconnected strips and loops of predetermined thickness attached to various portions of upper **20** to provide structural support and/or aesthetic improvements to footwear **10**. Various portions of printed material **70** may be interconnected, but may also not be interconnected. Consistent with an embodiment, printed material **70** is adhered or otherwise bonded to upper **20**, may be at least partially absorbed into a surface of upper **20**, and may be formed in one or more contiguous or disjointed layers on upper **20**. Each of these features will be described in greater detail below.

[0051] Consistent with an embodiment, printed material **70** may be made of a material that includes an ink, a resin, an acrylic, a polymer, a thermoplastic material, a thermosetting material, a light-curable material, or combinations thereof. Also consistent with an embodiment, printed material **70** may be formed from printing of one or more layers in a sequence of depositions of material to any desired thickness, and may also include a filler material to impart a strengthening or aesthetic aspect to printed material **70**. For example, the filler material may be a powdered material or dye designed to impart desired color or color patterns or transitions, metallic or plastic particles or shavings, or any other powdered mineral, metal, or plastic, and may customize the hardness, strength, or elasticity of printed **70** depending on desired properties. Filler material may be premixed with printed material **70** prior to printing, or may be mixed with printed material **70** during printing onto upper **20**. Consistent with an embodiment, printed material **70** may thus be a composite material.

[0052] FIGS. 4 and 5 show a perspective cutaway view and exploded perspective cutaway view, respectfully, of section **4** of footwear **10** shown in FIG. 3, including sole structure **30** comprising outsole **32**, midsole **31**, and sockliner **33**. It will be appreciated that some illustrated portions of sole structure **30** may be optional, and certain portions may be omitted in some embodiments. Alternatively, sole structure **30** may optionally comprise additional layers. For example, sole structure **30** may additionally comprise one or more layers of material (not shown) printed in accordance with disclosed embodiments. Such materials may comprise, for example, one or more printed polyurethane layers to form an enclosed region of air or other gas or fluid in one or more regions of sole structure **30**, thus providing an enclosed cushioning region (not shown) in footwear **10**.

[0053] As shown in FIGS. 4 and 5, footwear **10** also includes upper **20** and tongue **60**, upper **20** being attached to sole structure **30** as previously described. Consistent with an embodiment, printed material **70** may be adhered or bonded on or in an exterior surface of upper **20**. It will be appreciated that some illustrated elements of printed material **70** may vary in appearance. Alternatively, other additional elements may be included. For example, printed material **70** may comprise one or more additional layers to constitute material of any desired thickness, which will be described in greater detail below.

[0054] A method for making an article of apparel or footwear may include provisions for direct 3D printing onto the article. Consistent with an embodiment, FIG. 6 shows an exemplary system **80** for 3D printing directly onto a fabric upper, such as, for example, upper **20** shown in any of FIGS. 1-5. System **80** may include 3D printer device **81**, computer/workstation **82**, print server **83**, and optional switching device **84**. 3D printer device **81**, computer **82**, print server **83**, and switching device **84** may be in communication and/or networked as shown in FIG. 6. One of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that portions of system **80** may be omitted in some embodiments.

[0055] Still referring to FIG. 6, computer **82** may be in direct communication with 3D printer device **81** and print server **83** via switching device **84**. For example, print server **83** may be in direct communication with 3D printer device **81** and switching device **84**, and switching device **84** may likewise be in direct communication with 3D printer device **81** and print server **83**. Print server **83** may include a second

nontransitory computer-readable medium encoded with a second computer program product loadable into a memory of print server **83** and include second software code portions for instructing 3D printer device **81** to print directly onto upper **20** through a sequence of printing steps to produce a 3D result of printed material **70** from CAD representation **89** on computer **82**. Consistent with an embodiment, one of ordinary skill will understand that system **80** may require both computer **82** and print server **83**, or may require just one of computer **82** and print server **83**.

[0056] Consistent with an embodiment, computer **82** may comprise a central processing device **85**, viewing interface **86** (e.g., a monitor or screen), input devices **87** and **88** (e.g., keyboard and mouse), and software for designing a computer-aided design (“CAD”) representation **89** of a printing output designed for upper **20**. The term “computer,” as used throughout the disclosure, means a single computer, the partial computing resources of a computer, or two or more computers communicating with each other. Computer **82** may thus include a first nontransitory computer-readable medium in central processing device **85** encoded with a first computer program product loadable into a memory of computer **82** and include first software code portions for storing a 3D pattern for printing directly onto upper **20**. Consistent with an embodiment, computer **82** may be used to prepare a CAD representation **89** for any desired printed pattern or chemistry for printed material **70** on upper **20**.

[0057] As shown in FIG. 7, 3D printer device **81** comprises a tray **90** for receiving upper **20** for printing. 3D printer device **81** also may comprise at least one printhead **92**, printhead maneuverability assembly **94**, and lid **96**. Printing material to be ejected from at least one printhead **92** may be stored or supplied in compartment **98**. Consistent with an embodiment, FIG. 7 illustrates a completed pattern of printed material **70** printed on upper **20**, in accordance with exemplary CAD representation **89** shown in FIG. 6, and implemented by print server **83** and/or computer **82**. Printhead **92** may also include, for example, a UV light producing mechanism for curing printed material **70** upon printing by printhead **92** as printhead **92** is moved over upper **20** via printhead maneuverability assembly **94**. Upon completion of printing onto upper **20**, lid **96** may be opened and upper **20** may be removed from 3D printer device **81**.

[0058] Contrary to what is known in the art, embodiments of the disclosed methods do not require a hydrophobic or otherwise non-wetting surface on which to print. One of ordinary skill in the art will understand that known 3D printing systems require a hydrophobic sheet or release layer on a tray or substrate prior to printing/building of a 3D object. Such a hydrophobic sheet or release layer may be preexisting on the tray or substrate, or may be a printed hydrophobic material provided by the 3D printing system itself. In known 3D printing systems, the required hydrophobic sheet or release layer prevents wetting of printed material onto the tray or substrate during printing/building of the 3D object and thus permits removal of the 3D object from the tray or substrate upon completion of printing. Consistent with an embodiment, however, 3D printer device **81** does not require a hydrophobic or otherwise non-wetting surface on which to print, because 3D printing is accomplished directly onto a material (e.g., upper **20**) placed on tray **90**. Upper **20**, if an exemplary fabric material, may also be hydrophilic. That is, wetting and adhering/bonding/curing of printed material **70** to upper **20** is desirable. After printing, upper **20** may be removed from tray **90**

with printed material **70** adhered/bonded/cured to upper **20**, and without concern for adhesion of upper **20** or printed material **70** to tray **90**.

[0059] Contrary to what is known in the art, embodiments of the disclosed methods also do not require not require a perfectly or near-perfectly flat substrate surface on which to print. One of ordinary skill in the art will understand that known 3D printing systems require a perfectly or near-perfectly flat substrate surface on which to print in order to allow the systems to print/build 3D objects on a planar surface. Consistent with an embodiment, however, upper **20**—even if laid substantially flat inside 3D printer device **81** on tray **90**—may still have an uneven surface due to either the knit or weave of its fabric, or irregular surface topology in general due to the need for subsequent working and assembly steps. Consistent with an embodiment, 3D printer device **81** may account for surface irregularities of upper **20**, and compensate for any such irregularities by adjusting one or more of the distance between printhead **92** and upper **20**, and the size/rate/distribution of material ejected from printhead **92** during printing onto upper **20**. That is, printing may occur directly onto a surface of upper **20**, such that upper **20** may be subsequently removed from 3D printer device **81** without any concern for surface irregularities in upper **20**.

[0060] For example, with reference to FIGS. 8 and 9, known 3D printing techniques require printing on flat substrate **100** having a release layer **102** placed/formed/printed thereon. To prevent printed object **104** from adhering to substrate **100**, release layer **102** is interspersed therebetween. Release layer **102** could be a wax paper, for example, or a layer of hydrophobic printed material to facilitate removal of printed object **104** from substrate **100**. As shown in FIG. 9, removal of printed material **104** may thus be accomplished by removing release layer **102** from substrate **100** as shown by motion **106**, followed by removal of printed material **104** from release layer **102** as shown by motion **108**. Thus, known 3D printing techniques require both a flat surface on which to print, and a release layer to prevent adhesion of the printed material to the substrate after printing is complete.

[0061] Contrary to what is known in the art, FIGS. 10 and 11, and likewise 12 and 13, illustrate a portion of a 3D printing technique consistent with an embodiment. For example, FIGS. 10 and 11 show a cross sectional view of upper **20** placed on tray **90**. Upper **20** is depicted as comprising threads **22**, which may be placed in different directions, although threads **22** could be configured in any manner, such as any density or thickness, to form upper **20**. Printed material **70** may comprise one or more layers of material sequentially printed onto upper **20**. Consistent with an embodiment, printed material **70** may be at least partially absorbed into a surface region **110** of upper **20** after printing and prior to curing. Partial absorption in surface region **110** of printed material **70** may aid in adhesion/bonding of printed material **70** to upper **20**. FIGS. 12 and 13 likewise illustrate a perspective view of upper **20** placed on tray **90** and having printed material **70** printed thereon.

[0062] As shown in FIGS. 11 and 13, and consistent with an embodiment, removal of upper **20** containing printed material **70** may be accomplished by simply lifting upper **20** away from tray **90**, as shown by motion **115**. Because printed material **70** is printed/deposited onto upper **20**, and may be at least partially absorbed into a surface region **110**, upper **20** may thus serve as a “substrate” such that there is no need for a release layer interspersed between upper **20** and printed mate-

rial 70, or between tray 90 and upper 20. That is, wetting and adhering/bonding/curing of printed material 70 to upper 20 is desirable and accomplished. After printing, upper 20 may be removed from tray 90 with printed material 70 adhered/bonded/cured to upper 20, and without concern for adhesion of upper 20 or printed material 70 to tray 90. Consistent with an embodiment, a release layer may be optionally used, however unlikely, for example if upper 20 is so thin or contains a particularly low density of threads 22 such that portions of printed material 70 might pass between individual threads 22 of upper 20 and directly contact tray 90.

[0063] Consistent with an embodiment, FIGS. 14-17 illustrate cross sectional views of a printing sequence of multiple 3D layers of printed material 70 on upper 20. For example, FIG. 14 illustrates first layer 71 of printed material 70 deposited onto upper 20. Printed material 70 may be ejected or otherwise emitted from printhead 120 via nozzle 122 in the form of droplets 124. One of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that the form of droplets 124 may vary depending on the actual material ejected or otherwise emitted from nozzle 122. Droplets 124 may thus be any viscosity liquid material, or even a semi-solid material. Consistent with an embodiment, droplets 124 may be any desired material or phase of material suitable for use in 3D printing system 80.

[0064] Still referring to FIG. 14, in some embodiments, first layer 71 may be cured by UV light 126, however, in other embodiments, first layer 71 may be deposited without the need to cure the deposited material. Depending on the material used for printing of printed material 70, the material may be deposited in a liquid, semi-liquid, or otherwise gel-like or viscous phase. The material may then be solidified, at least partially, or cured, for various reasons, or to achieve desired properties, for example, to enhance durability, adhesion, or bonding of printed material 70 to upper 20. FIGS. 14-17 thus illustrate UV light 126 as an exemplary curing agent for use after deposition of printed material 70. One of ordinary skill in the art will understand that UV light 126 may be activated/applied either immediately after deposition of first layer 71, or at any desired time thereafter, depending on the nature of the desired patterns/chemistry/thickness of printed material 70. For simplicity, exemplary FIGS. 14-17 illustrate UV light 126 applied to cure printed material 70 after deposition of each layer. Depending on the material used for printing of printed material 70, one of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that curing of printed material 70 may be optional.

[0065] Still referring to FIG. 14, and consistent with an embodiment, printed material 70 may be at least partially absorbed into a surface region 110 of upper 20 prior to curing. For example, printed material 70 may be allowed to absorb into upper 20 for a predetermined amount of time after deposition and prior to curing with UV light 126. One of ordinary skill in the art will understand that such a predetermined amount of time will vary depending on the material used for printed material 70, as an absorption rate may be affected by the wettability or permeability of upper 20 to the deposited material, the viscosity or temperature of the material during printing, and the pressure or speed at which the material is ejected from printhead 92 onto upper 20. Consistent with an embodiment, therefore, such a predetermined amount of time after deposition and prior to optional curing with UV light 126 may be essentially immediately after deposition, or may be contemplated seconds or minutes thereafter.

[0066] Consistent with an embodiment, FIG. 15 illustrates second layer 72 of printed material 70 deposited onto layer

71, and cured by UV light 126. Second layer 72 may or may not be partially absorbed into a portion of first layer 71 prior to curing. Consistent with an embodiment, second layer 72 (and any subsequent layers) need not be deposited solely on the immediately underlying layer. One of ordinary skill in the art will understand that variations in printing patterns/thicknesses layers are contemplated. For example, second layer 72 may be deposited on any desired portion of upper 20, which may include partial or complete coverage of layer 71, or may include no coverage of layer 71. For example, if second layer 72 is partially deposited on layer 71 and partially deposited on upper 20, second layer 72 may or may not be partially absorbed into a portion of first layer 71 and a portion of upper 20 prior to optional curing.

[0067] Consistent with an embodiment, FIG. 16 illustrates a third layer 73 of printed material 70 deposited onto layer 72, and optionally cured by UV light 126. Third layer 73 may or may not be partially absorbed into at least a portion of second layer 72, at least a portion of first layer 71, and/or at least a portion of upper 20 if so printed, prior to curing. FIG. 17 likewise illustrates a fourth layer 74 of printed material 70 deposited onto layer 73, and optionally cured by UV light 126. Fourth layer 74 may or may not be partially absorbed into at least a portion of third layer 73, at least a portion of second layer 72, at least a portion of first layer 71, and/or at least a portion of upper 20 if so printed, prior to optional curing. Consistent with an embodiment, any number of layers may be printed to form printed material 70. Also consistent with an embodiment, upper 20 may be removed from tray 90 upon completion of printing, as shown in FIG. 13.

[0068] One of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that the printed layers forming printed material 70 may originate with different materials, colors, chemistries, optional fillers, etc., in order to fully customize the desired properties of upper 20. Printed material may also comprise layers having gradients of colors blended amongst the layers, or may comprise gradients of elasticity due to variations in material ejected from printhead 92 during printing of printed material 70. For example, printed material 70 may comprise layers of low elasticity printed material alternated or in conjunction with layers of high elasticity material. Consistent with an embodiment, exemplary moduli of elasticity for printed material 70 may range from about 10 MPa to about 4,000 MPa. Consistent with an embodiment, exemplary flexural strength for printed material 70 may range from about 35 MPa to about 300 MPa. Consistent with an embodiment, exemplary flexural moduli for printed material 70 may range from about 1,200 MPa to about 12,000 MPa. And, consistent with an embodiment, exemplary tensile strength for printed material 70 may range from about 0.5 MPa to about 150 MPa.

[0069] One of ordinary skill in the art will also recognize that the printed layers forming printed material 70 may comprise layers of material having at least a first color alternated or in conjunction with layers having at least a second color. For example, printed material 70 may be designed to impart high strength and low elasticity in heel region 13, while maintaining high elasticity and flexibility in toe region 11, and such properties may be accomplished by varying the properties of printed material 70 through printing of different combinations of materials and layers in any desired manner on any surface of upper 20.

[0070] Consistent with an embodiment, FIG. 18 illustrates an overhead view of upper 20 placed on tray 90 prior to 3D printing in system 80, and FIG. 19 illustrates a cross sectional

view of the indicated portion of FIG. 14 showing upper 20 on tray 90. As shown in FIGS. 18 and 19, upper 20 may be positioned substantially flat on tray 90 in 3D printer 81. Upper 20 may further be positioned and aligned with fiducial marks (not shown) to coordinate alignment with CAD representation 89 from computer 82 to facilitate accurate printing. [0071] Consistent with an embodiment, FIG. 20 illustrates an overhead view of upper 20 placed on tray 90 after 3D printing in system 80, and FIG. 21 illustrates a cross sectional view of the indicated portion of FIG. 20 showing exemplary printed material 70 on upper 20. As shown in FIGS. 20 and 21, printed material 70 is deposited on upper 20 in any desired pattern or number of layers, in accordance with a desired CAD representation 89 from computer 82 in implementation of system 80 shown in FIG. 6. It will be recognized that printed material 70, shown in FIG. 21, may appear to be one continuous deposit of material as shown, although it may actually comprise multiple layers of sequentially printed material to form a desired printed pattern resulting in printed material 70 as shown.

[0072] For example, consistent with an embodiment, FIG. 22 illustrates an exemplary printing job 300 using system 80 to produce printed material 70 as shown and described with reference to FIGS. 20 and 21. Printing job 300 in FIG. 22 will be further described consistent with exemplary process flow 400 shown in FIG. 23.

[0073] FIG. 23 shows an exemplary process 400 for 3D printing onto upper 20, consistent with an embodiment. It will be appreciated that some or all steps in the process may be completed by a footwear, apparel, or equipment manufacturer or proprietor. In other cases, some steps could be accomplished by a manufacturer and other steps could be accomplished by another party including another manufacturer, proprietor, retailer, or any other entity. In some cases, one or more of the steps may be optional. In other cases, some steps may be completed in a different order.

[0074] As shown in FIG. 23, exemplary process 400 for 3D printing onto upper 20 begins with step 410. In step 410, computer 82 may be used to design a print pattern and form CAD representation 89 shown in FIG. 22. CAD representation 89 may be any desired printing job on any surface, such as upper 20.

[0075] In step 415, CAD representation 89 may be provided to print server 83 via optional switching device 84. Print server 83 may process CAD representation 89 into any number of slices 310 designed to accomplish 3D printing of print material 70 to any desired pattern or thickness in 3D printer 81. One of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that slices 310 may be representations designed to correspond to actual printed layers of material forming printed material 70, such as, for example, layers 71-74 shown and described with reference to FIGS. 14-17.

[0076] In step 420, a fabric material such as upper 20 may be positioned in 3D printer device 81 on tray 90, as shown in FIG. 7. In step 425, fabric material such as upper 20 may be aligned as described above with respect to FIG. 18 to facilitate accurate printing of any desired CAD representation 89 and any number of slices 310.

[0077] In step 430, 3D printer 81 executes printing onto fabric material such as upper 20, using slices 310 provided by computer 82 and print server 83 as guides for printing and curing multiple layers of material to form printed material 70, such as those shown in FIGS. 10-13. As discussed above, printing may include printing a resin, acrylic, or ink material

onto a fabric, where the material is adhered/bonded to the fabric and where the material does not generally delaminate when flexed, rolled, worked, or subject to additional assembly processes/steps. Consistent with step 430, printed material 70 may be an ink, a resin, an acrylic, a polymer, a thermoplastic material, a thermosetting material, a light-curable material, or combinations thereof. Printed material 70 may also include a filler material (not shown) to impart a strengthening or aesthetic aspect to printed material 70 in one or more layers printed using slices 310. For example, the filler material incorporated in printed material 70 may be a powdered material or dye designed to impart desired color or color patterns or transitions, metallic or plastic particles or shavings, or any other powdered mineral, metal, or plastic. Consistent with an embodiment, printed material 70 printed in step 430 may thus be a composite material.

[0078] In step 435, progress of printing in 3D printer 81 may be periodically evaluated. For example, one may evaluate the progress of printing after several layers of material are printed and cured, as shown, for example, in FIGS. 14-17.

[0079] In step 440, if desired printing is not complete, or if adjustments are desired during printing, fabric material such as upper 20 may be repositioned on tray 90 and realigned to facilitate printing of desired CAD representation 89 by proceeding back to step 430.

[0080] In step 445, if desired printing is complete, fabric material such as upper 20 may be inspected and removed from 3D printer 81 by lifting upper 20 off of tray 90 by motion 115 shown in FIGS. 11 and 13. In step 445, desired printing may appear as shown in FIGS. 20 and 21, where printed material 70 is formed to any desired pattern and thickness, and may or may not be partially absorbed into a portion 110 of the surface of upper 20.

[0081] In step 450, for example, shoe assembly may subsequently be completed by securing a sole structure 30 to a lower portion of upper 20 so as to be positioned between the foot and the ground, as shown, for example, in FIGS. 1-5.

[0082] Consistent with an embodiment, FIG. 24 illustrates an approximately plan view of upper 20 including tongue 60 and lace apertures 41 laid substantially flat after printing of printed material 70 and prior to assembly of footwear 10 shown in FIGS. 1-5. Similarly, FIG. 25 illustrates upper 20 including tongue 60, lace apertures 41, and printed material 70 disposed on sockliner 33 during a portion of an exemplary assembly process of manufacturing footwear 10. It will be appreciated that some illustrated elements of assembly of footwear 10 may vary or not be shown in the interest of simplifying illustrations throughout this disclosure. Alternatively, other additional elements or assembly steps may be included. For example, upper 20 may be joined to sockliner 33 using thermoforming applications, such as polymer heat seal seam tapes as disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 8,028,440, which is incorporated herein by reference.

[0083] Consistent with an embodiment, FIG. 26 illustrates a perspective view of upper 20 after 3D printing of alternative patterns and prior to completion of footwear assembly, similar to FIGS. 7 and 24. FIG. 26 thus illustrates first printed material 510 and second printed material 520 on upper 20, printed using system 80 and process 400. For reference, exemplary printing directions XY and Z are shown in FIG. 26. Consistent with an embodiment, first printed material 510 and second printed material 520 may be different materials. For example, first printed material 510 may be a thin, abrasion-resistant material. Also, for example, second printed material

520 may be a thicker, stiff material designed to provide structural support to a portion of upper **20**. First printed material **510** and second printed material **520** may be disposed on any desired portion or portions of upper **20**.

[0084] First printed material **510** and second printed material **520** may be printed to upper **20** to impart customized properties such as increased strength, rigidity, support, flexibility, abrasion resistance, or variations thereof based on desired properties for specific portions of the upper and the article of footwear as a whole. For example, FIGS. 27-30 illustrate footwear **10** with first printed material **510** and second printed material **520** disposed on upper **20**. Consistent with an embodiment, first printed material **510** and second printed material **520** may be formed by direct 3D printing and curing of material onto upper **20** in any desired pattern, shape, or coverage. Printing and curing of first printed material **510** and second printed material **520** may be performed in accordance with exemplary system **80** and exemplary process **400**. Likewise, as discussed with respect to FIGS. 1-5, various portions of first printed material **510** and second printed material **520** may be interconnected, but may also not be interconnected. While first printed material **510** and second printed material **520** are generally shown in FIGS. 27-30 in forefoot and heel regions, respectively, of upper **20**, one of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that first printed material **510** and second printed material **520**, or one or more additional printed materials (not shown), may also be printed in the midfoot region or any other region of footwear **10**. Consistent with an embodiment, first printed material **510** and second printed material **520** are adhered or otherwise bonded to upper **20**, may be at least partially absorbed into a surface of upper **20**, and may be formed in one or more contiguous or disjointed layers on upper **20**. After printing, upper **20** may be shaped for assembly of footwear **10** similar to the depiction in FIG. 25.

[0085] As shown in the various views of footwear **10** in FIGS. 27-30, for example, footwear **10** may comprise first printed material **510** as one or more abrasion resistant pads located in either or both of forefoot region **11** and midfoot region **12**, and may be useful for protecting footwear **10**, for example, while engaging in soccer. Likewise, second printed material **520** may be a strengthening rigid material customized to provide strength and support to heel region **13** of footwear **10**. Consistent with an embodiment, moreover, first printed material **510** may be thinner than second printed material **520**. One of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that the thickness of first printed material **510** and second printed material **520** may differ or be the same, however, depending on the desired application or use of footwear **10**.

[0086] One of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that printed materials consistent with an embodiment may have a structural aspect, a visual or aesthetic aspect, or both. For example, printed materials consistent with an embodiment may be a visual or decorative indicia, logo, graphic, or reflector in the midfoot region or any other regions of footwear **10**. Likewise, for example, printed materials consistent with an embodiment may be a structural material, to impart strength, abrasion resistance, protection, or stiffness to one or more regions of footwear **10**. Consistent with an embodiment, printed materials may have a first characteristic for a first portion of footwear **10**, and a second, third, etc., or other additional characteristics for one or more additional regions of footwear **10**.

[0087] Thus, for example, as shown in FIGS. 26-30 and generally in the other figures, and consistent with an embodi-

ment, footwear **10** may be fabricated by designing at least a first three-dimensional pattern and a second three dimensional pattern (such as one or more CAD representations **89** shown in FIG. 6) for printing onto upper **20**; providing the at least first and second three-dimensional patterns to print server **83**; positioning at least a first portion of upper **20** on tray **90** in 3D printer device **81** of system **80**, the first portion being positioned substantially flat on tray **90**; aligning the first portion of upper **20** with the first pattern (as shown, for example, in FIG. 18); printing at least one layer of first printed material **510** having a first material property directly onto the first portion of upper **20** using the designed first pattern; allowing the at least one layer of first printed material **510** to at least partially absorb into a first portion of a surface of upper **20**; curing the at least one layer of first printed material **510**; positioning at least a second portion of upper **20** on tray **90**, the second portion being positioned substantially flat on tray **90**; aligning the second portion of the upper with the second pattern (as similarly shown, for example, in FIG. 18); printing at least one layer of second printed material **520** having a second material property directly onto the second portion of upper **20** using the designed second pattern; allowing the at least one layer of second printed material **520** to at least partially absorb into a second portion of the surface of upper **20**; curing the at least one layer of second printed material **520**; removing upper **20** from 3D printer device **81**; and assembling footwear **10** using the printed upper and at least one footwear component chosen from sock liner **33**, midsole **31**, and outsole **32** (as similarly shown, for example, in FIGS. 5 and 25).

[0088] One of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that the systems and methods described throughout this disclosure can be used to 3D print any desired patterns, layers, or materials directly onto a fabric material, which allows building of a structure on the fabric for use in apparel applications.

[0089] While various embodiments have been described, the description is intended to be exemplary, rather than limiting, and it will be apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art that many more embodiments and implementations are possible that are within the scope of the disclosure. It is intended that all such additional systems, methods, features and advantages be included within this description and this summary, be within the scope of the disclosure, and be protected by the following claims.

1. A method of direct three-dimensional printing onto an article of apparel, comprising:

- designing a three-dimensional pattern for printing onto the article;
- positioning at least a portion of the article on a tray in a three-dimensional printing system, the portion being positioned substantially flat on the tray;
- printing a three-dimensional material directly onto the article using the designed pattern;
- curing the printed material; and
- removing the article from the three-dimensional printing system.

2. The method according to claim 1, wherein the printing onto the article further comprises printing at least one layer of the material.

3. The method according to claim 1, wherein the printing onto the article further comprises allowing the printed material to at least partially absorb into a surface of the article prior to the curing.

4. The method according to claim 1, wherein the printing onto the article further comprises:

- printing a first layer of the material;
- allowing the first layer of printed material to at least partially absorb into a surface of the article;
- curing the first layer of printed material;
- printing at least one additional layer of the material on the cured first layer; and
- curing the at least one additional layer.

5. The method according to claim 4, wherein the printed first layer has a first modulus of elasticity and the at least one additional layer has a second modulus of elasticity different than the first modulus.

6. The method according to claim 4, wherein the printed first layer has a first color and the at least one additional layer has a second color.

7. The method according to claim 1, wherein the article of apparel is chosen from a textile, a natural fabric, a synthetic fabric, a knit, a woven material, a nonwoven material, a mesh, a leather, a synthetic leather, a polymer, a rubber, a foam, clothing, footwear, hats, caps, shirts, jerseys, jackets, socks, shorts, pants, undergarments, athletic support garments, gloves, wrist/arm bands, sleeves, and headbands.

8. The method according to claim 1, wherein the portion of the article has at least one nonflat surface.

9. The method according to claim 8, wherein the at least one nonflat surface is a substrate on which the printing occurs.

10. The method according to claim 1, wherein the removing the article does not require a release layer disposed between the printed material and the tray.

11. The method according to claim 1, wherein the printed material is chosen from an ink, a resin, an acrylic, a polymer, a thermoplastic material, a thermosetting material, and a light-curable material.

12. The method according to claim 1, wherein the printed material further comprises a filler material.

13. The method according to claim 1, wherein the printed material is adhered or bonded to the article.

14. A method of fabricating an article of footwear, comprising:

- designing a three-dimensional pattern for printing onto an upper;
- providing the pattern to a print server;
- positioning at least a portion of the upper on a tray in a three-dimensional printing system, the portion being positioned substantially flat on the tray;
- aligning the portion of the upper on the tray with the pattern;
- printing a three-dimensional material directly onto the upper using the designed pattern on the print server and the three-dimensional printing system;
- curing the printed material;
- removing the upper from the three-dimensional printing system; and
- assembling the article of footwear using the printed upper and at least one footwear component chosen from a sock liner, a midsole, and an outsole.

15. The method according to claim 14, wherein the printing onto the upper further comprises printing at least one layer of the material.

16. The method according to claim 14, wherein the printing onto the upper further comprises allowing the printed material to at least partially absorb into a surface of the upper prior to the curing.

17.-39. (canceled)

40. The method according to claim 14, wherein the printing onto the upper further comprises:

- printing a first layer of the material;
- allowing the first layer of printed material to at least partially absorb into a surface of the upper;
- curing the first layer of printed material;
- printing at least one additional layer of the material on the cured first layer; and
- curing the at least one additional layer.

41. The method according to claim 40, wherein the printed first layer has a first modulus of elasticity and the at least one additional layer has a second modulus of elasticity different than the first modulus.

42. The method according to claim 40, wherein the printed first layer has a first color and the at least one additional layer has a second color.

43. The method according to claim 14, wherein the upper is chosen from a textile, a natural fabric, a synthetic fabric, a knit, a woven material, a nonwoven material, a mesh, a leather, a synthetic leather, a polymer, a rubber, and a foam.

44. The method according to claim 14, wherein the portion of the upper has at least one nonflat surface.

45. The method according to claim 44, wherein the at least one nonflat surface is a substrate on which the printing occurs.

46. The method according to claim 14, wherein the removing the upper does not require a release layer disposed between the printed material and the tray.

47. The method according to claim 14, wherein the printed material is chosen from an ink, a resin, an acrylic, a polymer, a thermoplastic material, a thermosetting material, and a light-curable material.

48. The method according to claim 14, wherein the printed material further comprises a filler material.

49. The method according to claim 14, wherein the printed material is adhered or bonded to the upper.

50. A method of fabricating an article of footwear, comprising:

- designing a three-dimensional pattern for printing onto an upper;
- providing the pattern to a print server;
- positioning at least a portion of the upper on a tray in a three-dimensional printing system, the portion being positioned substantially flat on the tray;
- aligning the portion of the upper on the tray with the pattern;
- printing a first layer of three-dimensional material directly onto the upper using the designed pattern on the print server and the three-dimensional printing system;
- allowing the first layer of printed material to at least partially absorb into a surface of the upper;
- curing the first layer,
 - wherein the cured first layer has a first modulus of elasticity;
- printing at least one additional layer of the material on the cured first layer;
- curing the at least one additional layer,
 - wherein the cured at least one additional layer has a different modulus of elasticity than the first modulus;
- removing the upper from the three-dimensional printing system; and
- assembling the article of footwear using the printed upper and at least one footwear component chosen from a sock liner, a midsole, and an outsole.

51. The method according to claim 50, wherein the printing the first layer further comprises printing the material having a gradient in modulus of elasticity within at least a region of the printed material.

52. The method according to claim 51, wherein the printing the at least one additional layer further comprises printing multiple layers having varied moduli of elasticity as a function of depth or length of the printed material.

53. The method according to claim 50, wherein the upper is chosen from a textile, a natural fabric, a synthetic fabric, a knit, a woven material, a nonwoven material, a mesh, a leather, a synthetic leather, a polymer, a rubber, and a foam.

54. The method according to claim 50, wherein the portion of the upper has at least one nonflat surface.

55. The method according to claim 54, wherein the at least one nonflat surface is a substrate on which the printing occurs.

56. The method according to claim 50, wherein the removing the upper does not require a release layer disposed between the printed material and the tray.

57. The method according to claim 50, wherein the printed material is chosen from an ink, a resin, an acrylic, a polymer, a thermoplastic material, a thermosetting material, and a light-curable material.

58. The method according to claim 50, wherein the printed material further comprises a filler material.

59. The method according to claim 50, wherein the printed material is adhered or bonded to the upper.

60. A method of fabricating an article of footwear, comprising:

- designing at least a first three-dimensional pattern and a second three-dimensional pattern for printing onto an upper;
- providing the at least first and second three-dimensional patterns to a print server;
- positioning at least a first portion of the upper on a tray in a three-dimensional printing system, the first portion being positioned substantially flat on the tray;
- aligning the first portion of the upper with the first pattern;
- printing at least one layer of a first three-dimensional material having a first material property directly onto the first portion of the upper using the designed first pattern;
- allowing the at least one layer of printed first three-dimensional material to at least partially absorb into a first portion of a surface of the upper;
- curing the at least one layer of printed first three-dimensional material;
- positioning at least a second portion of the upper on the tray, the second portion being positioned substantially flat on the tray;

aligning the second portion of the upper with the second pattern;

printing at least one layer of a second three-dimensional material having a second material property directly onto the second portion of the upper using the designed second pattern;

allowing the at least one layer of printed second three-dimensional material to at least partially absorb into a second portion of the surface of the upper;

curing the at least one layer of printed second three-dimensional material;

removing the upper from the three-dimensional printing system; and

assembling the article of footwear using the printed upper and at least one footwear component chosen from a sock liner, a midsole, and an outsole.

61. A system for three-dimensional printing directly onto a fabric upper, comprising:

- a first nontransitory computer-readable medium encoded with a first computer program product loadable into a first memory of a first computer and including first software code portions for storing a three-dimensional pattern for printing directly onto the upper;

a print server;

a switching device; and

a three-dimensional printer device,

wherein the print server is in direct communication with the three-dimensional printer device and the switching device,

wherein the switching device is in direct communication with the three-dimensional printer device and the print server,

wherein the first nontransitory computer readable medium is in direct communication with the switch,

wherein the print server comprises a second nontransitory computer-readable medium encoded with a second computer program product loadable into a second memory of a second computer and including second software code portions for instructing the three-dimensional printing device to print directly onto the upper through a sequence of printing steps;

wherein the three-dimensional printer device comprises a tray receiving the fabric upper, at least one printing head for printing onto the upper in the sequence, and at least one ultraviolet light for curing material printed onto the upper, and

wherein the three-dimensional printing system does not require a substantially flat surface for printing.

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