



Western Michigan University
ScholarWorks at WMU

Honors Theses

Lee Honors College

4-20-2016

Historical Corsets Retrospective 1558-1890

Jacquelyn Marks

Western Michigan University, jacquelyn.marks@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors_theses



Part of the Fashion Design Commons, and the Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons

Recommended Citation

Marks, Jacquelyn, "Historical Corsets Retrospective 1558-1890" (2016). *Honors Theses*. 2769.

https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors_theses/2769

This Honors Thesis-Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Lee Honors College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



Historical Corsets Retrospective 1558-1890

Jacquelyn Marks

Undergarments throughout history served the purposes of additional warmth, support of the silhouette in the world of fashion, promoting cleanliness, sexual uses and bringing distinction between classes (Cunnington, 1992). Corsets are considered as an undergarment. But, even though both men and women wore them throughout history, I will focus primarily on the significance of women's corsets and underclothes.

In the Middle Ages, like the corset I made worn in the years 1558-1609, undergarments purposed themselves to be more than an additional layer of clothing. That use was exemplified in the Medieval times but it also was used as support for outer garments and to separate the classes. Women's undergarments had to support the increasing skirt sizes that showed the class rank.

Corsets were worn to make the wearer's waist look smaller and both men and women donned the garment. The article became sturdy with the use of wood or whalebone placed inside the casings of the corset. Some corsets that appear to be made out of metal can be found during this time. But later historians discovered they were for orthopedic reasons and no evidence shows that women wore them (Cunnington, 1992). Earlier Europeans created corsets by gluing several layers of fabric together- this formed a sturdier textile and gave to support the wearer (Tortora, 1998).

During the time period between 1791-1820, information regarding underclothes scarcely remained available to the general public. Luckily, fashion magazines took their places in many homes where people could riffle through pages to learn more

about fashions of the times. Underclothes did not have spotlight for a while in the articles but eventually, possibly due to the need of ownership, they made their way into the pages. Also during this time period, prudery came into effect and made underclothes become less about physical attractiveness and more about protecting and covering the body.

Most corsets, if worn at all, were short. A small time period opened opportunity for the long corsets to come back, but then short styles returned. Long corsets used whalebone and covered the hips while pushing breasts up. Lacing closed the corset's back and eyelet holes were sewn in at this time. The short corset of the time was also stiff and closed in the back. Having small hips and full and lifted chest was a desirable look and the suggested procedure to lace up the corset required the wearer to lie face down while the dressing assistant put her foot on the small of the back and pull back the laces to tighten. "Divorce Corsets", or a corset that separated the breasts with a curved metal triangle, and "Pregnant Stays" that minimized the look of pregnancy in women could also be worn (Cunnington, 1992).

Stays worn during the Regency or Romantic period, exemplified in the corset I made worn in 1805-1840, created a streamlined look. Mostly the chemise was worn during this time to encourage a natural appearance to achieve the sought after tube shape in dresses (Tortora, 1998).

Genteel language and behavior dominated this time frame, which, in turn, affected dress. Women did not discuss underclothes and if items were seen as unattractive, the more godly the illusion it gave. White was the preferred color for

undergarments. With women being so well covered, it made the curiosity of what created the wearer's silhouette even more intriguing and gave the impression that all of the layers used helped protect her fragility. This gave the idea to men that women were dainty and less powerful in comparison to them.

Tightly laced corsets remained crucial at this time to give the wearer a small waist and symbolized strictness to correct the behavior from the "loose morale habits" of the Regency. Inserted pads remained on the corset if the wearer needed assistance filling in the garment but the danger of overstuffing and causing wrinkles between the chest and shoulders became an issue. These tight corsets forced women to lose their mobility and some later learned that their posture became dependent on the garment. Often they were not strong enough to sit up on their own without the garment's support. Night stays were also worn to help support the body. Demi- corsets, a corset around eight to ten inches high, were worn while working around the house, which allowed an increased range of motion (Cunnington, 1992).

A later time period in the 1800s called for fashions changing about every decade due to the increased use of technology which eased the process to make textiles, clothing and news about upcoming fashions. The Bustle Period and the Nineties' fashions made women wear a variety of undergarments in order to create the fashionable look. The corset helped distribute the weight of the garment so the woman could be more comfortable (Tortora, 1998).

The later parts of the century made fashions accommodate movements while people worked. Hygiene and outdoor activities became a factor that demanded practical undergarments. During this time, some groups were eager for changing times and their outfits reflected the mindset. Others were unwelcome to change. The clashing thoughts from the groups made the fashions look mismatched. Society wanted modesty in clothing and avoided talking about the majority of the human body in order to act properly. Clothing almost served as armor from natural instincts associated with attraction.

Corsets remained long and often constructed with fancy fabrics like silk, satin, brocade and often in a variety of colors. In the 1890's, the favorite color worn was yellow. Women favored their corsets decorated with lace frills and colored rosettes. During this time, the small middle was sought after and women would measure their waist. By marriage, their measurement should not exceed their age. Marriage before twenty-one was the desired preference as well. Luckily, large sleeves rested on a their dresses that aided an illusion of the small middle. Even bike riding and other exercises popularized the time; women put padding on hips and bust as well to ensure the hourglass shape (Cunnington, 1992).

Resources

Cunnington, C. W., & Cunnington, P. (1992). *The History of Underclothes*. NY: Dover Publications.

Tortora, Phyllis G., and Keith Eubank. *Survey of Historic Costume: A History of Western Dress*. 3rd ed. New York: Fairchild Publications, 1998. Print.