

Structure, constraint and sexual provocation

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Abstract

For centuries, the outerwear silhouette has been contrived by means of moulding, coaxing, squeezing, lacing, and effectively forcing the human form into a fascinating series of ‘unmentionables,’ ‘underpinning,’ and ‘foundation wear’ in order to achieve that ultimate silhouette which contemporary fashion demands. This paper will trace the necessity and consequent development of ‘foundation wear,’ specifically corsetry, and through this media, reveal the variances of gender application and social restriction of dress throughout the realms of status and rank. A journey through design development will reveal the idiosyncrasies of technological experimentation to remould the body to a preferred silhouette. The paper will examine breast augmentation – from ‘The Lemon Bust Improver’ to ‘Chicken Fillets,’ – the introduction of ‘Uplift Knickers,’ and the lengths to which women in particular are driven to reshape their bodies to meet the demands of fashion, and will include a look at key pieces from history: the Mantua, the Farthingale, and maternity corsets. The basis for much of my research is routed in my involvement as Advisor to ‘The Symington Collection,’ acknowledged to be the most notable Foundation Collection in the world, started by the Symington Corset manufacturing company based in rural Leicestershire, UK (Warren, 2001). The collection affords an insight into the wonderful world of ‘what lies beneath’ and inspires researchers and students alike to review fashion construction in a new and more architectural light. The paper will trace historical garments, from quirky one-off concepts and various commercial developments to the reinstatement of corsetry into the contemporary couture collections of designers such as: Galliano, McQueen, Mugler, and Gaultier. It will encompass the tight-lacing enthusiasts of Granger, Jung, and Pearl, and highlight contemporary work by Barre, Sonnenberg, Agent

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Provocateur, and *Eternal Spirits*, as well as the provocation of rediscovered structured form in fashion.

Introduction

“Without proper foundations there can be no fashion.”

Christian Dior

In 1830, R. & W. H. Symington established a family corset-making company in rural Market Harborough, Leicestershire, with 3 seamstresses in a small workshop, producing custom-made, hand-sewn “stays” for society ladies. Demand grew, as the introduction of the Singer sewing machine (after 1851) considerably aided corset construction and steam power resulted in increased productivity, lowered costs, and increased orders.



Figure 1. The blocking room, Symington's

As demand outstripped production, larger premises were sought and by 1880 the company employed 1,600 people utilising 500 sewing machines and dominated the market in design and manufacturing levels, exporting corsets to Australia, Africa, Canada, and marketing its products to

Practically every country in the world and interpreting to the designing staff the widely divergent needs of women varying in build and differing in their views of the latest fashion. The narrow-waisted women from Malaya must have different models from those sent to fashion-conscious Iceland. Enigmatically, the suspenders on the corsets for Manchuria must be inches longer than standard: while corsets bound for Colombia, deep in South America, must be contained in parcels

doubly wrapped and lashed for their journey by mule pack across the mountains. (Symington, 1956)

The Symington company was responsible for some innovative concepts: the 'Morn and Noon Corset,' sold as a boxed pair, acknowledged that women were required to change their corset as well as their gown depending upon their activity; the 'Pretty Housemaid' was aimed exclusively at women in domestic service; while the "strongest and cheapest ever made," was remarkable for its time as it recognised a consumer group with so small a disposable income.

Throughout its 130-year history, the Symington company collected corsetry examples worldwide which today comprises and is recognised as one of the most notable archives of its kind. The collection affords an insight into the wonderful world of 'what lies beneath' and has inspired researchers, collectors, and specialists worldwide to review fashion construction in a new and more architectural light.

Gender applications

In tracing the delectations of the fashionable silhouette, paintings afford us the most accurate documentary evidence of historical costume. Traditionally, men were more active and wore less restrictive clothing. Male dress defines wealth, power, and status, so portraiture depicts men accompanied by horses, hounds, and symbols of warfare, and often in front of country estates, such as Diego Velasquez's 1634 portrait of *The Count-Duke of Olivares on Horseback*. Any fashion excesses were largely limited to elements of padding, ruffs, or slashing. (In Greek and Roman sculptures, men are invariably revealed in all their naked glory.) The Victorians' prudish attitudes found these statues so offensive that they removed the penises and replaced them with fig leaves.

Women were traditionally organisational and invariably depicted surrounded by children, dogs, and servants, occasionally semi-nude or draped in soft furnishings with a promise of seduction and fertility, as seen in Ingres's *Odalisque*. Women were propelled to pursue the idiosyncrasies of the silhouette to achieve distinction in fashion, incorporating elements of whalebone, padding, steel, horsehair, and lacing. These extremes fluctuated until the outbreak of World War 1 when issues of practicality allowed for the discarding of extreme garment props.

The evolution of the silhouette

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"On the soft wax of the Human Body, each society stamps its impress."

Phillip Perrot



Figure 2. Polaire

For centuries, the outerwear silhouette has been contrived by means of moulding, coaxing, squeezing, lacing, and effectively forcing the human form into a fascinating series of ‘unmentionables,’ ‘underpinning,’ and ‘foundation wear’ in order to achieve that ultimate silhouette which contemporary fashion demands.

For over a thousand years, the shifting erogenous zone and resulting silhouette has defied stages of evolution: protection, practicality, modesty, and sexuality, an irresistible fantasy irrespective of gender; inevitably, the corset played a major role. Although the earliest example is a Minoan sculpture from 1600 BCE (*The Snake Goddess of Heraklion*, a symbol of fertility, representative of the bare-breasted priestesses who officiated during rites of female divinities), the first ‘corset’ as we know it was “a torturous device of steel,” attributed to Italian Aristocrat, Catherine de Medici (Steele, 2001).

The medieval silhouette demanded a balance of slenderness and verticality, with tubular dresses, trailing sleeves and hemlines (to cover the hands and feet – most provocative), and high pointed headwear. Breasts were small and high with rounded stomachs signifying fertility and desirability. In van Eyck’s *The Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* (1434), the bride appears pregnant but is in fact merely en vogue.

A tightly laced tunic, or 'bliaut,' supports the breasts (a forerunner to the later corset). By contrast, the Elizabethan ideal was exaggerated, opulent, and voluminous. Male dress and undress centred upon the sexual power source, the loins (i.e., breeches, calves, and codpiece). A much exaggerated piece, the codpiece was constructed of horsehair, wood, and padding, and was the symbol of male potency. A fine example is shown in Jakob Seisenegger's 1532 portrait of *Emperor Charles V with Hound* (McDowell, 1997).



Figure 3. Seisenegger's *Emperor Charles V with Hound*

Gaultier reaffirmed the codpiece with his 'Baroque Western Collection,' as did Westwood's 'Dressing Up Collection' (1991), whilst the 2006 *L'Homme paré* exhibition at Les Arts Decoratifs in Paris featured contemporary embellished codpieces by Shirtology. Has this remained, however, a purely male domain? Westwood's collection featured codpieces for both male and female, whilst Eric Kroll's 'Phallic Woman' (1990s) directly addresses the gender exchange with a female in male underwear sporting a fake phallus.

Calf pads were thrust into a gentleman's stocking to attract many a girlish glance, for without a well-turned leg, how would a gentleman's breeches be seen to good effect? Breeches were exaggerated and invariably slashed to purvey masculinity, intimidation, and volume in dress, as depicted in Isaac Oliver's 1616 *Portrait of Richard Sackville, 3rd Earl of Dorset*, which features voluminous, embellished breeches, a well-turned calf featuring ornate stockings with embroidered clocks, and pom pom detailing for garters and shoes.

Women favoured the 'Farthingale,' a stiffened bell-shaped petticoat formulated with wooden batons and wire that shifted the erogenous focus to the hips. These voluminous skirts invoked a swaying hip action, and a very provocative walk. This was counterbalanced with a long, funnel-shaped bodice, or *basquine*, which tapered to a point created by the insertion of a 'busk,' a rigid strip of carved bone or ivory worn between the breasts. (See the *Armada Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I*, attributed to George Gower, circa 1588.)

The busk was also a useful place to carry a dagger. Busks were given as love tokens, as the item worn closest to the heart. The significant neck ruffs, narrowed waists, huge skirts, and ballooned sleeves created massed volume and consequently restricted movement, which must have been particularly cumbersome to small children dressed similarly. (See Gheeraerts's *Portrait of Lady Sidney and Six of Her Children*, 1596.)

Structure and seduction

Excesses of dress style echoed the immorality and *deshabillé* associated with the Restoration period. The busk was replaced by whalebone and, despite being more malleable, compressed the breasts, forcing them to bulge upwards and in danger of escape at any moment. Claims were made that the corset "contains the strong, sustains the weak, brings back those who have strayed," with bawdy names like 'The Hussy,' a French inspired corset of 1730, which claimed to "contain the large, support the small, and uplift the drooping" (Fontanel, 1992). It was worn with three petticoats: 'the modest,' 'the secret,' and 'the tumble' (presumably referring to the stages of seduction).

The disappearance of the Farthingale led to numerous innovative forms of padding such as 'tempters,' 'squeakies,' and 'tumbles.' The most recognisable of these were 'the pannier' and 'the mantua.' The pannier was a boned underskirt originally bell shaped, but eventually flattened at the front to allow for manoeuvrability and padded with horsehair.

This capacity for exaggeration included a trend of commemorative dress codes (e.g., 'La Belle Poule,' 1780) and the employment of architectural applications to achieve a headpiece 4-feet high (the galleon hat crowning the powdered wig to commemorate Nelson's naval battles). Such stylisations became easy fodder for cartoonists of the day. The pannier has reemerged as a popular focus of contemporary dress, as



Figure 4. Pannier and stays, 1700

revealed by Gaultier's leather dress with panniers in 1998 and Yamamoto's back-laced pannier dress in 2000. The 'bustle' emerged from a demi-pannier (late 1860s) and featured pads of horsehair or springs worn in the small of the back to project the bottom, much like earlier 'bum rolls.' The *derrière* became the focus of sexual allure. The bustle was constructed from bands of whalebone and later Swedish flexible steel and covered in calico, and its effect was a swaying rearguard action.

The bustle

The bustle evolved into the *crinolette* or the *cul*, which reduced the silhouette to a padded cushion tied above the *derriere* at the back of the waist. Some European corsets had padded rolls attached to the hip area to exaggerate this trend. These bum enhancers became a favourite theme of Vivienne Westwood's '5 Centuries Ago' and 'On Liberty' collections (early 1990s), a theme that she integrated into the classic suit and that was further purveyed by Kawakubo and Chalayan early in the 21st Century.

The *crinoline* was an extreme structure which relied upon a system of whalebone hoops decreasing in circumference, was tied at the waist, and was designed to be collapsible to allow sitting, after earlier designs failed to consider this eventuality. These skirts entailed numerous metres of cloth, weighed heavily, and required the assistance of several ladies' maids to aid in dressing. *Punch* cartoons had a field day with the idiosyncrasies of this structure, including *The Perils of a Windy Day* and

How To Escort a Lady Downstairs. The crinolene has continued to reemerge into contemporary catwalk shows, including a version featured in Gaultier's 'S & M Collection,' a version in wicker by Krizia, Gruppo Para's mini version with suspenders, and Moschino's 1999 version constructed from carrier bags.



Figure 5. Moschino's "carrier bag" crinolene, 2000

The close of the 20th Century – 'La Belle Epoque' – was significant in the development of structural foundation wear as it signified the end of extreme artificial clothing and relied more on the human form. The era was dominated by the infamous 'S-Bend' corset that was popularised by actress Lillie Langtry, mistress of Edward VII. The 'S-Bend', an entirely deformed silhouette, thrust the bosom forward (resembling a pouter pigeon chest) and the hips backwards, hence the term. A stylisation emulated by John Galiano in 1997, particularly in his 'Circus Collection,' was the inspiration for Kylie Minogue's 'Showgirl' costumes for her recent tour.

Constraint

During the late 1800s, corset mania had spread. Manufacturers' catalogues offered a breadth of corsets suitable for mornings, afternoons, weddings, and balls, along with travelling corsets, riding corsets with elasticized hips, dancing corsets, summer corsets, winter corsets, and even bathing corsets. A woman of 'Society' could change her corset up to 8 times a day, depending upon her activities.

Inevitably, corsets caused irrevocable damage to the spine and internal organs by putting pressure upon the stomach and solar plexus,

resulting in fainting fits particularly after eating. Many critics, including the ‘Dress Reformers’, tried to ban the corset. Some Doctors blamed corset wearing for innumerable ailments: “chest complaints, deformities, inability to nurse, sagging breasts, inadequate nipples” (Fontanel, 1992).

During the early 1800s, the ultimate female silhouette demanded a tiny, hand-span waist referred to as the “wasp waist,” achieved by severe and cumulative corseting enhanced with steel supports. Daughters were often told, “you’ll never make a good marriage unless you pinch in your waist”!



Figure 6. *The wasp waist*

Easier than one would assume since children of both sexes were corseted from the age of 4, when bones were considered sufficiently grown as not to damage them irrevocably, but pliable enough to train. Corsetry and ‘Stay Bands’ for children were a major part of Symington’s production and considered essential in supporting infants’ bodies and correcting deformities of posture (but not as a means of controlling the waistline). These were replaced by the ‘Liberty Bodice’ in 1908.

Corrective corsets – of Moorish origin and design, and made from iron – had been introduced into Europe as early as 1500 and reproduction pieces were copied accordingly.

The ‘ideal’ waist measurement was 18 to 20 inches, but the *Guinness Book of Records* has recorded the 13-inch waist belonging to Mrs Ethel Granger of Peterborough, UK as the ‘World’s Smallest Waist.’ Granger began reducing her waist measurement in 1928 (encouraged by her fetishistic husband) from 23 to 13 inches, which she retained until her death in the late 1970s, aged 82.

The current 'living' record holder is American tightlacer Cathy Jung, at 15 inches. The undisputed Contemporary Couture Corsetiere is Mr. Pearl, famous for his 18-inch waist, who has produced pieces for Mugler, Lacroix, McQueen, Berardi, and 'Posh Spice' for her wedding to David Beckham. Pearl divides corset wearers into three types: Firstly, 'corset nonconformists,' including himself, "who want to change the shape of the body...and realise some kind of aesthetic ideal"; secondly, the "corset identificationists," who associate corsets with "femininity and feminine undergarments"; and thirdly, the "corset masochists" who tight lace "to create erotic discomfort" (Steele, 2001). Naturally, some corset wearers overlap Pearl's classifications, but the fact remains that it requires 4 years of 'corset training,' usually worn 24/7, to reduce a waist measurement by 2 inches.

Corsets continued as everyday wear, even during pregnancy, where side lacing on maternity corsets allowed for expansion into the final month. Postnatal corsets were, of course, essential to regain one's figure.

Men were not exempt from the corset and proved as vain as women. George Cruikshank's 1819 cartoon, *Lacing a Dandy* (cited in Steele, 2001) is one of many humorous anecdotes of the period. Men continued to corset up until the outbreak of the 1st World War. Women persevered, but since steel for corsets became unobtainable, and substitutes such as wood or bamboo unsuitable, attitudes to corsetry altered and alternatives were sought. Women employed in wartime work reverted to the Liberty Bodice, which was notably worn by children and supplied by Symington.

The elongated silhouette of 'La Belle Epoque', the immediate pre-war years, demanded a knee-length, tubular corset nicknamed 'The Spat' which restricted walking and complimented the 'hobble skirt.' This combination meant that women were incapable of walking naturally and were obliged to totter, or as illustrated in *Punch* magazine, were reduced to hopping like kangaroos.

Inevitably, after the practicalities of wartime activities, the corset began to redefine itself and gradually evolved into shorter variations resembling a girdle. The tango rage introduced by Rudolph Valentino in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* resulted in a new corset style cut high on the hip to allow side leg action, referred to as the 'Tango' or 'Dancing Corset.'

'Tight lacing,' as we know it, became confined to corset specialists and the realms of sadomasochism.

Innovative creations

By the mid 19th Century, advances in engineering and industry began to merge, heralding a myriad of foundation 'enhancing' and 'restraining' products. The introduction of the sewing machine, consequent mechanisation, textile production, and technical processes led to a new age in Fashion. A prime example is the 'India Rubber Inflatable Petticoat,' an alternative to the more cumbersome crinoline, and the introduction of collapsible steel wires and spring-aided crinolines and petticoats (reiterated by Junya Watanabe's 'Ensemble,' 1998). Steel eyelets, invented in 1829, made corset lacing more efficient and helped maintain the tension of a corseted silhouette. The mid-19th Century saw a rise in popularity for sea bathing so woollen bathing suits were devised, a distant memory for Coco Chanel's 'Beach Pajamas' or today's contour-conscious swimwear. Breast enhancement was not a new issue: Bust bodices of layered frills to enhance the chest gave way to the 'Lemon Cup Bust Improver' of 1890, a lemon-shaped pouch containing horsehair pads with coiled springs anchored to whalebone which were attached to a corset or camisole and emulated a fuller bust. In 1914, American debutante Mary Phelps Jacobs (later Caresse Colby) invented the 'brassiere' and Rosalind Klein, of lingerie manufacturer Kestos, refined Colby's earlier attempt. The result was not a bra, but a 'Kestos.' The launch of 'Rayon,' by Courtaulds in 1930, 'Lastex,' by the Dunlop Rubber Company in 1929, and DuPont's introduction of 'Lycra' in 1950 and 'Spandex' all revolutionised underwear (Bressler, Newman, & Proctor, 1998).

During the 1940s, years of food rationing had taken their toll and postwar Britain's women no longer needed Warner's rubber girdle which promised to help you 'sweat off extra pounds' (Bressler et al., 1998, p. 44). The introduction of Dior's 'New Look' heralded a fashionable silhouette which British women could only long for. Clothes rationing was maintained until 1957, which restricted the acquisition of cloth. Hollywood, unaffected by rationing, was promoting the advent of the 'Sweater Girls': Jane Russell, Lana Turner, Gina Lollobrigida, and Marilyn Monroe. In 1952, a UK Lingerie Convention discovered that 3 out of 5 women attending were reduced to wearing padded bras or

falsies. The marketplace was flooded with new technology to rectify this. Symington also held the patent for the ‘Très Secrete,’ an inflatable bra designed by the US-based La Resista Corset Co., whose advert claimed “The exciting new bra that answers every bustline problem!” The Tres Secrete contained a rubber pad that was inflated using a plastic drinking straw. ‘Spirella’ launched its ‘Spiral Bra,’ a padded, spiral conical-shaped bra to counteract the problem. On the set of the 1952 film *Outlaw*, Jane Russell’s ample breasts were causing a problem. Aeronautical engineer Howard Hughes designed an aerodynamic bra based on the cantilevered system of the San Francisco Bridge. The resulting up-thrust of Russell’s breasts was such that the American League of Decency banned the movie for 5 years.

“The launch of the contraceptive pill revolutionised women’s attitudes to their sexuality”. In 1968, feminist Germaine Greer called upon women to burn their bras as a symbol of Feminist revolt. Mary Quant had banished stockings and suspenders to the boudoir with the introduction of tights, the miniskirt ruled, and women had never had such sexual or dress freedom.



Figure 7. Thierry Mugler’s ‘Robot Couture,’ 1995

The design concept of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, then just a dream, heralded space – not the final frontier, but no less innovative. Jane Fonda’s appearance in Courrèges’s fetishistic plexiglass costumes in 1968’s *Barbarella* and Paco Rabanne’s ‘Chain Mail & Cyber Dress’ launched a rage of quirky and offbeat fashion concepts, inspiring key designers in their wake. Yves St. Laurent’s elongated, tubular breast shapes in his 1967 ‘African Collection’ could

have inspired Gaultier's costume for Madonna's 1990 'Blonde Ambition Tour,' as well as his infamous 'Transvestite Dress.' Much credit for the under- and outerwear styling is laid at the feet of Madonna, her open sexuality, associations with cross-gender dressing, and the overlaps with S & M design. Corset Catwalk King, Thierry Mugler, dominated the 1980s catwalks with his futuristic and fetishistic corsets, from his 'Harley Davidson' (1992) and 'Built like a Buick' (1989), to his 'Carapace Armadillo Embossed Leather Corset' (1988).

Issey Miyake, Hussein Chalayan, Alexander McQueen, and Junko Koshino all famously experimented with various industrial techniques to reform the female torso without the reliance upon traditional textiles or tailoring technicalities. Fibreglass, coated and contoured precious wire, leathers, plexiglass, wood, and various moulds have sought to redefine the traditional corseted silhouette. (See Miyake's 'Wire Bustier,' 1983, and McQueen's 'Cossack Ensemble & Silver Wire Top,' by Shaun Leane, 2001.)

Vivienne Westwood took a more virtual approach with her 'Queen of Sheba Dress,' modelled by Demi Moore, a literal 3-dimensional translation of the female torso in beaded embellishment. Contemporary corset companies have evolved worldwide; some, like Britain's Axfords and Vollers, France's Cadolle and Nuits de Satin, and America's Dark Garden, produce Victorian-styled corsets from traditional pattern blocks, whilst Hubert Barre, Dean Sonnenberg, Agent Provocateur, and Eternal Spirits cater to the growing demand for corsets as an acceptable experiment with eroticism and sexual display.

The 21st Century saw the introduction of Groupo Para's 'Bum Enhancer' briefs, BBC TV's Trinny and Susannah launched their 'Magic Knickers,' the 'Bum Uplifter' brief was introduced by Spanx, whilst Blue Cult's 'Butt Lifter Jeans' flooded the US markets. Whilst 'Pammy and Jordan' advocated breast augmentation, others resorted to "Chicken Fillets" and numerous bra inventions to boost cup sizes. These are merely a few of the Contour Industry's extensive restructuring products (even Marks & Spencer are currently producing bum-reducing and uplift tights).

Summary

Have we become complacent with our bodies? How effectively has the structure of clothing served us? Are we now sufficiently constrained to evolve through diet and exercise? Or is it that our bodies themselves are destined to change to accommodate our dress? The growing threats of anorexia, bulimia, and Size “0” catwalk models echo the outcry levelled at Calvin Klein’s 1995 ‘Obsession’ ad campaign featuring a skeletal Kate Moss and continue to rail against eating disorders. Size 16 (Size 14 US) British model Sophie Dahl, famously praised for upholding the figure of ‘real women,’ soon bowed to pressure and lost weight.

This is the age of breast implants, face-lifts, botox, and even of designer vaginas. The demands of Fashionable Society to alter, improve, update, or simply start over is becoming predominant.

Many will continue to become, ostensibly, ‘remodelled,’ but others will be seduced by the contouring potential of the corset, and receive that immediate rush of pleasure at seeing their waists reduced, their breasts lifted, and their hips emphasised, all without breaking a sweat on a treadmill. Movies like *Moulin Rouge* and *Marie Antoinette*, burlesque celebrity Dita von Teese, as well as Pop Princess Kylie Minogue’s recent ‘Showgirl’ costumes by Pearl all serve to influence the maintenance of interest in body reshaping. You only need to find right undergarment! As Christian Dior stated, “Without proper foundations there can be no fashion.”

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