The Shape of Women: Corsets, Crinolines & Bustles – c. 1790-1900

1790-1809 – Neoclassicism

In the late 18th century, the latest fashions were influenced by the Rococo and Neo-classical tastes of the French royal courts. Elaborate striped silk gowns gave way to plain white ones made from printed cotton, calico or muslin. The dresses were typically high-waisted (empire line) narrow tubular shifts, unboned and unfitted, but their minimalist style and tight silhouette would have made them extremely unforgiving! Underneath these dresses, the wearer would have worn a cotton shift, under-slip and half-stays (similar to a corset) stiffened with strips of whalebone to support the bust, but it would have been impossible for them to have worn the multiple layers of foundation garments that they had done previously.

There was public outcry about these “naked fashions,” but by modern standards, the quantity of underclothes worn was far from alarming. What was so shocking to the Regency sense of prudery was the novelty of a dress made of such transparent material as to allow a “liberal revelation of the human shape” compared to what had gone before, when the aim had been to conceal the figure. Women adopted split-leg drawers, which had previously been the preserve of men, and subsequently pantalettes (pantalons), where the lower section of the leg was intended to be seen, which was deemed even more shocking!

On a practical note, wearing a short sleeved thin muslin shift dress in the cold British climate would have been far from ideal, which gave way to a growing trend for wearing stoles, capes and pelisses to provide additional warmth. Hand-made shawls (mantles), often featuring a pine-cone shaped version of the Kashmir Boteh motif, now commonly referred to as “Paisley,” became very popular. With the dress silhouette being far less voluminous, the previous fashion of wearing pockets tied around the waist underneath your skirts (as a form of bag) became entirely impracticable and so they were replaced by a hand-held drawstring bag known as a reticule.
Soft muslin and ribbon headdresses, straw bonnets and elaborate ostrich plume head-dresses were the most popular forms of headwear worn, whilst the footwear (indoor at least) were largely slip on ballet pumps with very small heels.

1811-1820 – Regency Belles

With the advent of fashion plates and magazines, fashions began to develop more broadly and spread more quickly geographically, but also increasingly through different classes in society.

The ideal female silhouette changed at this time from the narrow Empire line to a more voluminous bell shape, with shorter dress lengths, though the waistline still remained artificially high. The gowns were more elaborately crafted now with embellishments such as frills, applique flowers, padded bands, decorative pin-tucking and vandyked (zig zag) hems, though the gowns themselves remained largely white in colour. Satin gowns with net overlays also grew in popularity at this time. Mature and married ladies tended to dress in stronger colours (which were easier to wear, as they were more forgiving than wearing white!) with the addition of fancy headwear which helped to elongate the body. For younger women, it was largely their outer garments: pelisses (long coat overdress) and spencer jackets, which provided colour accents to their outfits. In terms of foundation garments, long lined unboned corsets covering the hips were most frequently worn. A big development was the introduction of bustles: small rolls of fabric sewn into the back of the skirt. Later these became bustle pads, essentially detached sausage or crescent shapes which were sewn with tapes at each end and then tied around the waist, to accentuate the wearer’s bottom! (not entirely uncomfortable, as you were essentially carrying around your own small travel pillow!).

c. 1820s dress with "leg of mutton" sleeves, which were wider at the shoulder and tapered at the wrist

(on display in the Museum’s costume gallery)
1820-1837 – Hourglass

The 1820’s saw the introduction of shorter wider skirt hems, which by Victorian standards were deemed a bit racy, as they revealed footwear, and on occasion the glimpse of stockings and ankles. The introduction of wider waistbands lowered the waistline closer to its natural position. The soft bell shaped silhouette became broader and more defined, supported underneath by multiple linen petticoats stiffened with “crin” (horsehair), which must have been pretty itchy!

This period was ultimately defined by ostentatious decoration – feathers, bows, cording and fur hems. By the 1830s, colourful roller-printed Chinese silks were in vogue, in part due to the reduction in import taxes on silk.

Voluminous gown sleeves, described as gigot, became the height of female fashion, as did diaphanous almost cape-like collars and broad “boat” necklines. To accommodate these new styles heavily boned corsets were created without shoulder straps. They had triangular gores (panels) under each arm and on the hips, so that they could be more tightly laced through the metal eyelets. A long front busk pushed down on the embonpoint (plumpness of the stomach) creating a far narrower waist. All these factors created a false but very dramatic hourglass silhouette.

With the combined size of the sleeves, necklines and skirts putting on a pelisse-robe (coat) or cloak must have been a dramatic undertaking even with the help of a lady’s maid! For more practical activities, pelisses were re-fashioned as walking dresses (Redingotes) and they still wore long flowing riding habits for horse-riding with a veil. Dresses became more colourful adopting pastel pinks and purples and the public mourning of George IV’s death in 1830 popularised lavender-grey colours. For older women, turbans became a popular accessory for going out to dinner, the opera and parties.

1837-1855 - Demure

Queen Victoria’s marriage in 1840 made the image of wife and mother the fashionable ideal. Waistlines returned to their natural position, skirts widened further, hemlines lowered to conceal the feet and sleeves adopted a narrower “pagoda” style. Depending on the season, 4-6 plain cambric petticoats were worn underneath the dresses now, with quilted versions worn in Winter.

Despite the wider skirts, underneath, the corsets were even more tightly laced and more constricting than ever before, to retain the desired upper body structure. Gowns became more colourful incorporating blues, greens and purples.

1850s dresses can definitely be characterised as the fully upholstered look! Dress skirts became heavily embellished with elaborate trimmings and there were often several tiers of skirts, which emphasised even more the width of the skirts. It’s pretty clear when you see the fashion plates of the day that the aim was to appear as meek and submissive as possible. The accessories were dainty and feminine: beadwork purses, ermine muffs and parasols. Bonnets became very close fitting concealing the wearer’s cheeks.

At this time girls were often dressed as miniature versions of their mothers. Young boys also tended to wear dresses until they were “breeched” (first dressed in breeches or trousers) which was usually around 4-8 years old.
1856-1869 – Crinolines & Bustles

The nature of 1860’s fashion was dictated to a large degree by the designer Charles Frederick Worth (1825-1895) who founded the Maison Worth in Paris in 1858 and is credited with having created the French tradition of Haute Couture (made to measure, designer’s own label clothes). In Britain there was some resistance to this movement, which resulted in an alternative fashion led by the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood which promoted medieval inspired wrap-over garments.

For the most part however the typical 1860’s fashion for women was the artificial caged crinoline which helped to support the ever growing skirts to create a fully dome-shaped silhouette. Their introduction meant that fewer heavy petticoats were required. These frames were much lighter, but they were also extremely awkward to wear. A linen chemise, corset and open drawers were worn under the frame which was made from watch spring steel and tape. The dress was then lowered over the head. Again necessitating a lady’s maid to help!

Crinolines were definitely a sign of social standing because you had to move extremely slowly and carefully. Negotiating doorways, small furniture and open fires in close proximity must have been very problematic and anxiety inducing. They are extremely uncomfortable to sit in and the wearer was limited to remaining standing or perching precariously. Crinolines brought some consolations though, as the tight corset lacing could be eased because the size of the skirts made almost any waist look narrow by comparison. The dresses tended to be less embellished now, as the volume of the skirts were sufficiently dramatic without any extra additions.

The 1860s saw the introduction of new chemical dyes, a technical advance which significantly developed fashion. Crinolines began to be phased out and the tight lacing of corsets (which by this point had got much shorter) returned as the need to preserve the narrow waisted look again became a high priority. As one publication of the time stated the body ideal now was “slender waisted and lithe as a serpent” and tight lacing was (worryingly for modern readers) intended to be “an ever-present monitor indirectly bidding its wearer to exercise self restraint; evidence of a well-disciplined mind and well-regulated feelings.”

This was definitely a period in which comfort was sacrificed for elegance and social rank. The concept of adapting fashions to the wearer’s physical needs just wasn’t a normal concept at this point.

The consequences of wearing tightly laced corsets for long periods of time were widely reported in the press, with concerns that they resulted in the internal organs significantly shifting and fainting fits were commonplace, so the smelling salts always had to be close at hand! Some critics claimed that corset wearing induced hypochondria and depression in the wearer. They nevertheless remained hugely popular. Adverts from the time show that some manufacturers even used the new research and negative press, as a form of selling point to promote their specific “healthier” corset design.
1870-1879 – Soft bustles and fishtails

By comparison the fashions of the 1870s were softer and far more delicate, in pastel colours with frivolous trimmings and decoration. Bodice necklines were square, sleeves were ¾ length with lace cuffs or sleeveless for evening wear. Around 1875 the colours became deeper and a new more streamlined silhouette emerged, consisting of a smoothly fitted bodice, with the waist and hips more defined.

Over time the dome-shaped silhouette was replaced by a more pyramidal shape, with the bulk of the gowns projected backwards. Corsets became longer in length at this time and were more frequently back fastening now. Bulky front fastenings were felt by designers to ruin the line of a close fitting bodice.

Around 1874-1875, Bustle pads were worn under the skirt to provide support. Tapes fixed them into the inside of the skirt allowed the skirts to be gathered up at the back. The wearer could then choose whether to loosen or tighten the tapes to alter the length of the skirts as required. Corsets which corresponded with these dresses were cut shorter to accommodate the bustle.

The Rosenthal’s Sanitaire corset was advertised as being “constructed to obviate the debilitating effects of ordinary corsets….the distressing effects of tight lacing neutralised.”

Diagram showing how tight corset lacing caused the internal organs to be positioned unnaturally –

(Left) artificial corseted waist

(Right) natural waist position
By 1876 dresses were shaped in a “princess line” (all-in-one petticoat) with a cuirasse over-bodice, to narrow the waist further. A fishtail train was created at the back, which was complex to create and again very difficult for the wearer to manage. Black or ivory satin high-heeled boots began to be worn, which altered the body’s posture, tipping it forwards slightly, showing the bustle skirts to greater effect.

![Mauve silk dress worn by a wedding guest c. 1875](image1)

![Yellow & cream silk gauze day dress; c. 1875](image2)

**1880-1888 – the rise and fall of the bustle**

By 1880 there was no discernible bustle and fishtail trains were now deemed de rigueur. The most popular foundation garments were now cotton combinations, usually chemise and drawers, supplemented by knitted woollen garments in the colder months. Extremely tight whale-boned corsets (now front-fastening and later with the addition of steel spoon-shaped busks) forced a rigid
upright posture, with even more boning added to reinforce the bodices. The look was stiff and angular, perfect to achieve their extreme hourglass ideal.

After 1883, bustles grew in size and the style was for them to stick out very artificially at almost right angles, some examples can be seen to have an almost “chicken tail feather” flourish at the back! Synthetic dyes and machine stitching were undoubtedly this periods greatest fashion developments.

(Left):
This illustration from the Graphic from 1883 shows the old season’s trend (1870) compared to the new bustle style on the right (c. 1883).

Does my bum look big in this?!

(Left):
This advert from the Graphic in 1885 for a “Gladys” mantle (oversize shawl) shows just how outrageously pantomime these bustles actually got.
1890-1899 – High Ruffs & Wasp Waists

Economic depression at this time resulted in more sombre dressing. Womenswear in the last decade of the Victorian era was characterised by a “school ma’am” look; all high collars, collar stays and long lined flat fronted bodices and corsets using stiff steel boning, which pushed the hips backwards. The ideal figure was an extreme hourglass with the hips padded to emphasise the look further. Early bras, cup-shaped wire structures then commonly known as “bust improvers” were also introduced around this time.

Mid decade, tiny wasp waists were emphasised by enormous leg of mutton sleeves as well as the pyramid skirts with smooth fronts and pleating concentrated at the back. The use of ruffs, tight corseting, padded sleeves and cone-shaped skirts popular in mainstream fashion at this time harked back to the Elizabethan period. Whilst features such as tailored waistcoats and overdresses was a nod to 18th century masculine style tailoring. For daywear barely any flesh was revealed below chin level. It was only ball dresses that tended to have lower necklines. Dark colours persisted in this period, soon to be replaced by pinks and creams during the Edwardian period. Coloured stockings and high heels were particularly popular in this period. The use of exotic bird feathers and even whole birds as part of hats and head-dresses became such as issue that the RSPB was founded to campaign against any feathers bar ostrich ones, being used in future.

(Left):
Separate bodice and skirt, with removable collar, made in black silk gros-grain, dating from 1880-1890s; most probably worn in mourning
At the turn of the century outdoor sports became increasingly popular for women, which required more freedom of movement in their clothing, for them to be able to actively take part in walking, cycling, horse-riding and tennis. Formal wear remained tightly restricted, but some more informal clothing options were created. Real concern was voiced that this would arouse unwelcome sexual interest! But designers nevertheless persisted in creating bespoke lawn tennis dresses, riding habits, bathing dresses, cycling suits, nautical dresses and walking suits. By modern standards these outfits

(Left) c. 1890s dress shown in The Graphic – their ideal of the elongated hourglass figure. The aspidistra plant pictured was also very typical of this period.

(Right)
Lilac silk & white organza lace dress, with boned bodice, worn by a wedding guest c. 1895, note the ruff neckline, harking back to Elizabethan fashion!

(Right) More practical riding habits were introduced for women in the late 19th century, although you can the bodices were still very structured with boning so they would still have been very restrictive by modern standards.
still look ridiculously restrictive and cumbersome, but in the context of their time this was a huge step forward and even greater change was on the horizon!

References


