
TRANSPARENT WOMEN

Exploring Outdated Aesthetics on the Modern Woman's Body

By: Jillian Gregory

Fashion is an often-overlooked response to what is happening within a society at any given moment. It reflects the political climate, socio-economic state, and expectations placed upon citizens. Women, in particular, face harsh criticism if they do not conform to the expected clothing of their era, including foundational garments such as corsets¹, crinolines², or any variation of these. These garments were used to manipulate women's bodies and force them into unnatural shapes in order to achieve the ideal silhouette of the time. The use of these pieces oppressed women and led to outrage from early feminists in the 1800s. This sparked a dress reform movement in the latter half of the nineteenth century which greatly affected women's clothes by moving toward a healthier and more free dress. As women became freer through their clothes, they desired to gain more freedom on a political stage.

Significance

In August 2020, The United States will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote. As we move toward this celebration of women's rights, it's also important to look back and understand the struggles women went through before this. Fashion gives us a key glimpse into the lives of these women. By investigating and recreating five garments from the 1840s to the 1920s, I hope to educate people on how fashion was used to distort and oppress women's bodies and how the Women's Suffrage Movement empowered women to take charge of their clothing. In particular, I will focus on how foundational structures evolved in order to reflect a new era for women.

¹ corset: a woman's close-fitting boned supporting undergarment that is often hooked and laced and that extends from above or beneath the bust or from the waist to below the hips (Merriam-Webster)

² crinolines (also referred to as a hoopskirt): a full stiff skirt or underskirt made of crinoline; a skirt stiffened with or as if with hoops (Merriam-Webster)

When corsets were first utilized in the sixteenth century, they were used as a supportive garment that masked a woman's figure entirely by transforming her torso into an inverted-cone shape. This eliminated the appearance of a defined bust and waist. These early corsets were typically made from a stiffened fabric with channels sewn in for whale bone to be inserted. They weren't meant to restrict movement at this point in history, although they did prevent women from bending at the waist (Caelleigh; "Corset Timeline"). As we moved into the nineteenth century, however, the corset, and in turn women's bodies, changed drastically.

Starting in the 1800s, women's clothing developed in order to accentuate a wasp, or thin, waist and wide bust and hips. This is when the hourglass figure came into fashion. In the 1820s and 1830s, tightlacing³ became a popular and dangerous practice that put tremendous strain on women's bodies. Ribs were compressed which reduced lung capacity, irritated skin, weakened muscles, and caused fainting (Goldberg). The dresses placed on top of these corsets also restricted women. The large and heavy clothes hampered movement and were extremely unhealthy. Long, billowing skirts would gather filth from streets, and wide hoop skirts would make maneuvering difficult. During the 1850s, feminists fought for dress reform because of health, economic prosperity, and female happiness. Women's suffrage pioneer Susan B. Anthony stated, "I can see no business avocation, in which women in her present dress can possibly earn equal wages with men." (Riegel, 390-391).

As I move forward in my career as a costume designer, it's important for me to examine the clothes of these eras in order to accurately recreate them for stage performances. After I build these dresses, I plan to display them and explain how these garments affected the women wearing them.

Outcome

Through research of construction techniques and aesthetic principles of the 1840s-1920s, I will create five dresses from the five prominent silhouette eras. These eras are the 1840s Crinoline, 1880s Bustle, 1900s S-curve, the 1910s Suffragette uniform, and a 1920s flapper dress ("History of Fashion"). These five distinct silhouettes directly reflect the progress made by women in the path towards suffrage.

³ tightlacing: cinching a corset to achieve a very small waist (Goldberg)

I plan to use solid, cream-colored undergarments such as chemises⁴, corsets, and crinolines as the foundational pieces to build upon. On top of these, I will build the coordinating dresses out of a sheer material to give the impression of the period dress while still allowing the undergarments to be seen. By using this sheer fabric, the structure of the dresses will be visible; and therefore, the restrictions will be visible.

These dresses will be modeled by diverse modern women. In my research, a majority of the photographs or illustrations I have found are those of thin white women. I want to bring modern women's bodies into this examination of women from the past in order to understand how all women were affected by these garments.

Research Plan

My project will investigate how the aesthetic principles of the 1840s-1920s changed in response to the Women's Suffrage Movement. I plan to examine dresses from this period with specific emphasis on the undergarments worn with these dresses. I will use volunteers as models, and I will examine and record how they move with and without the garments on. I will use online resources (such as the Victoria and Albert Museum in England) and books written by professionals who have studied garments from this period. I will also examine the interior structure of the dresses themselves. This includes boning⁵, tailoring, and closures. After looking at these items, I will plan out how I can recreate them.

A challenge that may come up is lack of access to the actual pieces. While several museums have a detailed picture catalog of existing garment, it would be extremely difficult for me to interact with a dress or corset from over 100 years ago as they have to be carefully preserved. I plan on reaching out to archivists and curators at fashion exhibits and requesting access to detailed photographs of garments.

⁴ chemise: a woman's one-piece undergarment; a loose straight-hanging dress (Merriam-Webster). These are slips, or dresses worn under main garments, that protect the modesty of the woman wearing it.

⁵ boning: a thin, stiff length of material, typically steel or synthetic whale bone, used to give shape to a garment

Cost of Implementation

Dresses worn in these eras took a considerable amount of fabric to create. The 1840s and the late 1880s dresses will each use roughly twenty-five yards of fabric for both the overdress and the petticoat. The Edwardian dress of the 1900s and the Suffragette-style dress will require approximately fifteen yards each. The 1920s flapper era would take the least amount of fabric but would still need about five yards to create. I will need eighty-five yards of fabric to carry out this project. The average cost for silk organza, the material I plan on using, is \$15.00 per yard. The cost for fabric would be \$1,295. I will also require the same amount of fabric for mock-ups. The cost for mock-up⁶ fabric is expected to be \$400. Notions, such as buttons, thread, boning, and decorative trim will cost approximately \$500 for all five dresses. In order to pattern and fit the dresses appropriately, I would have to purchase two dress forms that coordinate to the sizes of the models I have found at the cost of \$275 each. My projected final cost of materials for this project is \$2,745. This is all a conservative estimate and cannot be determined until after the pattern drafting process.

Timeline

I will start in January 2020 by finding volunteers from the University of Central Arkansas (UCA) to model the garments. I feel that it is important to represent modern women as we look back at the women of the past. I want to find five women who are diverse in both body size and ethnicity. I will reach out to people by posting a casting call for models in the theatre building. Once I have found models, I will start on the pattern-making process. With my standing school schedule, I can feasibly work eight to ten hours per week during the spring semester. I would aim to have all the dresses patterned by the middle of March 2020. After that, I will proceed with mock-ups. I anticipate finishing a mock-up every two weeks.

All five mock-ups will be completed by the end of May. I will take the following three months to construct the final dresses. Since I will not be taking classes during the summer, I will be able to devote much

⁶ mock-up: a preliminary first version of a garment, typically made out of a cheaper fabric called muslin

more time to this project. Final fittings will happen in mid-August and I will use the following four weeks before the event to add finishing touches to the dresses, such as hemming, trims, and closures.

Final Product and Dissemination

In September of 2020, The University of Central Arkansas is hosting a Women's Suffrage Centennial Celebration. At this event, the history of the Women's Suffrage Movement will be put on display. A part of this display will be the transparent garments worn by the five diverse models. Afterwards, the display will be moved to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas for a weekend. In the following spring, I plan to take this project to the United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT) Convention and present my project to fellow students and professionals in the area of costume design. USITT is a national convention with attendees from colleges and theatre companies from across the nation. I will display the garments on dress forms and have a video accompaniment that chronicles the construction process, the event held on UCA's campus, and at the Crystal Bridges exhibit.

Resources

At UCA, I have access throughout the year to the UCA Theatre costume shop which is fully equipped with the technology I need to complete this project. My mentor, Shauna Meador, MFA, has worked with theatrical costumes throughout her career and will help guide me in the pattern drafting process. I have the support of the Associate Dean of the College of Fine Arts and Communication, Dr. Gayle Seymour, on this project. I have access to, and have received permission to, pull from the UCA Theatre's costume storage for some of the undergarments and shoes I will need for this project.

For resources outside of my campus, such as books, I plan on utilizing interlibrary loans to acquire books about period garments. There are also several online articles with information specific to my research.

I see this project as an invaluable examination into our history as we commemorate the women of the Suffrage Movement. The SURF Grant would allow me to carry out this project and present it to the public so that people can understand the hardships that led to the freedom of women in the United States.

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