

EVOLUTION OF CORSET

Deepali B Mudalgi,
B.Sc (FAD), M.Sc (FAD)

INTRODUCTION

A corset is a close-fitting piece of clothing that has been stiffened by various means in order to shape a woman's (also a man's, but rarely) torso to conform to the fashionable silhouette of the time. The term "corset" is attested from 1300, coming from the French "corset" which meant "a kind of laced bodice." (2)

The term "stays" was frequently used in English from c. 1600 until the early twentieth century. The front of the corset is made-up of one piece of metal and its shape suggests that it ended under the bust line with two upward points beginning at arm level and extending towards the shoulders. Initially the back of the corset is made out of two pieces of metal with a V shaped opening in the middle of the back with hinges at the bottom of the V. The top parts of the V are shaped to cover the shoulder blades. On one side of the corset there are hinges for opening and closing it and a lever at the bottom for holding it in place when worn. As the time passed, the corset was made of various materials instead of the rigid metals. (4)

The corset first became popular in sixteenth century Europe, reaching the zenith of its popularity in the "Victorian era". It was a must for all the women precisely adding the pride and dignity to the women. The circumference of the waist line of the corset was restricted but as the time evolved the circumference did not become an important matter. As the time passed the corset pattern became a centre of inspiration for all the designers. The pattern was adopted in traditional to all the western wears in the world. (1)

Origin:

- The earliest image of a corset was recorded in 2000 BC, the image is of a crete women, and the article of clothing that was worn was what we would perceive to be a corset. However it was worn as an outer garment. While typically the corset has been used as underclothes, there have been instances where it is used as outer garments. Corsets are still seen as outer garments in the national dress of many European countries.



Earliest form of the corset:

- The earliest form of the corset, that was used, as it is present day, was the Cottee. The Cottee was a tight elongated bodice that was worn under clothing. It was made up of stiff linen and worn under bodice, as fashion evolved, so did the Cottee; it became tighter and stiffer to better serve the fashion of the time.

Elizabethan fashion was famous for very stiff bodices, thus in the 16th century whalebones began being used in corsets for the purpose of keeping its structure. It became the staple tool in the fashion as it gave a geometrically straight line in the bodice. They also began using an additive to the corset called Busk, which was an artificial edge that was given to the bodice. The busk was typically made out of wood, horn, metal or whalebone, it was then carved and shaped into a thin paper knife shape and inserted into the Elizabethan bodice and was faceted and held into place by lace. The lace was used so that the Busk can easily be placed and removed and it was often used for special occasions and events. (2)



15th Century:

- 1490–1510: In Europe, the skirt and bodice are separated into two garments, and stiffened undergarments are introduced to keep the upper body erect. Tight bodices raise the bust line and push the busts into a unified bosom.
- 1500–1550: The first true corset is invented. Corsets are made out of rigid materials such as whalebone, horn, and buckram and are referred to as "whalebone bodies". A stay or busk is placed vertically in the center of the torso to keep it straight. Commonly worn with shoulder straps, the corset extends the length of the torso, stopping just above the pelvic bone. Catherine de Medici (1519–1589) is credited with introducing the fashion to France.



“Hans Holbein the Younger, Two Views of an Unknown English Lady, ca.1535. The British Museum, London”

- 1500–1599: Aristocratic women wear whalebone bodies with attached hoopskirts or farthingales. The bodice and underlying corset reach extremes in length, and the sleeves are enlarged to make the waist look small in comparison. The upper body is an elongated conical shape that tapers to a small waist.



“Elizabeth I, mid-1590s. Hardwick Hall, the Devonshire Collection, The National Trust, Derbyshire”

- 1595–1620: The ideal female figure continues to be a conical form. The stays remain long in the front and short at the sides, exposing the hips. The neckline lowers, revealing the tops of the busts. (3)

16th Century:

- 1595–1620: The ideal female figure continues to be a conical form. The stays remain long in the front and short at the sides, exposing the hips. The neckline lowers, revealing the tops of the busts.



“Elizabeth Vernon, Countess of Southampton, ca.1595–1600. His Grace Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry, K.T.Boughton House”

- 1620–1640: Short corsets are worn under shortwaisted bodices. The waist remains ideally small.
- 1660–1680: The bodice with off-the-shoulder sleeves returns to an elongated form, and the corset reflects this neckline and silhouette. Highly boned bodices are sometimes worn in lieu of a corset.
- 1680–1700: The new angular silhouette continues to lengthen, emphasizing a straight, vertical line. Corset straps return to the shoulders. (3)

17th Century:

- 1700–1770: Stays, as corsets are termed, continue to be conical in shape and generally lace up the back. Decorative stomachers are worn on the outside of the stays as part of the gown ensemble. The stays separate at the base into tabs that splay over the hips and accentuate a tiny waist.(8)



“Nicolas Arnouet, The Staymaker, ca. 1690s”



“Stays, bodice, and stomachers, ca. 1720, published in M. Leloire, Histoire du costume, 1938”

- 1770–1789: A tight-laced, wasp waist prevails both in practice and as a cultural concept. While more prevalent in England than in France, tight lacing is seen as a sign of morality. In France, the wearing of stays begins to fall out of fashion.

- 1780–1789: The corset adopts a rounded form that accommodates the natural contours of the busts. Over the remaining years of the century, the waist gradually shortens.
- 1789–1810: During the French Revolution aristocratic styles are frowned upon, including the wearing of stays. High-waisted, neoclassical gowns bring the focus from the waist to the bosom.
- The earliest corsets were called “payre of bodies” and were usually worn with a farthingale that held out the skirts in a stiff cone.
- The payre of bodies, later called Stays, turned the upper torso into a matching cone or cylinder.
- They have shoulder straps and ended in flaps at the waist. They flattened the bust, and in so doing, pushed the busts up.
- The emphasis of the stays was less on the smallness of the waist than on the contrast between the rigid flatness of the bodice front and the curving tops of the busts peeking over the top of the corset. (3)

18th Century:

- 1810: After a short respite, the corset reappears in fashion. A new corset that separates the busts is patented in France.
- 1815: The waistline is at its highest point in the history of Western dress; between 1815 and 1830 it progressively lowers.
- 1820–1830: Corsets are worn long over the hip and conform to the contours of the body using gussets.



“Charles Philippon, Marchande de Corsets, 1830”

- 1828: Metal eyelets are invented, allowing the corset to endure greater stress during lacing.
- 1830–1840: The hourglass figure—emphasizing a full bust, a small waist, and full hips—becomes the idealized silhouette. The corset remains long, extending over the hips. The waistline is at its lowest point in two decades, resting at the natural waist.
- 1840–1850: The severe silhouette of the 1830s softens. The small waist and hourglass figure remain desirable. The waist drops below its natural position.
- 1848: Joseph Cooper invents the front-fastening busk, which allows the corset to be taken off without being unlaced, only loosened. The front-fastening busk increases the ease of wearing a corset and is widely adopted from the 1850s onward.(8)
- 1850–1860: Women wear full skirts supported with crinoline frames, which accentuate a small waist. The corset begins to shorten at the sides and lengthen at the center front.
- 1860–1870: Hoop skirts are worn high on the waist, and the corset shortens in response. Corset construction changes, as the patterns are created out of shaped pieces rather than being shaped with gussets.
- 1870–1880: The corset remains short in the first part of the decade but begins to lengthen after 1875. The skirt tightens at the hip, creating a long, slim silhouette.
- 1880–1890: A curvaceous female figure with rounded shoulders, a full bosom, and a small, low waist becomes the ideal form. The corset pushes the busts forward while accentuating the natural waist and hugging the hips.



“Trade card for the Bortree Corset Co., ca.1880”

- 1890: An angular shape is popularized, with a tiny waist and an emphasis on the bust and hips—the idealized hourglass shape. (3)



“Trade card for Kabo Corsets, ca. 1890”

19th Century:

- 1900: A new corset is introduced in Paris that noticeably changes the silhouette. An S-bend shape is created, with the torso held straight in the front and the hips pushed back. The undergarment is marketed as the “health corset” for alleviating the pressure on the ribs and supporting the abdomen.
- 1902: The top of the corset falls to meet the nipples. The S-bend shape is further exaggerated, and the wasp waist becomes extreme.



“Advertisement for Weingarten Bros, 1902”

- 1902–1908: Corsets begin to slip below the level of the bust and extend downward on the hip. Decorative suspenders for stockings are attached to the corset at the center front and side back.
- 1908–1914: With the bust unsupported, brassieres are worn along with the corset. By 1914 the corset extends from under the bust down to the middle of the thigh, its longest point in history. The silhouette dramatically changes to a straight and narrow line, with little distinction between the waist and hips.
- 1914–1917: During World War I women enter the workforce, and corsets go out of favor.
- 1917–1939: Few women continue to wear corsets. A shorter, lightly boned corset with a front-opening busk is worn to help slim the hips. These corsets begin to be refashioned as girdles with elastic panels.(5)



“Advertisement for the Jurna corset, 1918”

- 1939–1947: All-in-one foundation garments are popularized. These corsets combine a brassiere and girdle for all-over shaping.
- 1947–1954: Christian Dior reintroduces the wasp-waist corset to women’s underwear with his New Look line. His fashions emphasize a fitted bodice and a tiny waist reminiscent of the late 19th century.



“Christian Dior, Tulipe, spring/summer 1953. Photograph by Henry Clarke”

1983: In his famed Dada collection (spring/summer 1983), Jean Paul Gaultier presents his first corseted dress and successfully transforms the corset from underwear to fashionable outerwear. This would become one of Gaultier's iconic looks throughout his career.

1987: Using 18th-century patterns, Vivienne Westwood presents her own version of the corset and joins Gaultier in freeing the corset from its connotations of female oppression, transforming it instead into a form of female empowerment. (3)

Most Popular and Influenced Era:

- **The Victorian corset**

When the exaggerated shoulders disappeared, the waist itself had to be cinched tighter in order to achieve the same effect. The focus of the fashionable silhouette of the mid- and late 19th century was an hourglass figure with a tiny waist (16-18 inches). It is in the 1840s and 1850s that tight lacing first became popular. The corset differed from the earlier stays in numerous ways. The corset no longer ended at the hips, but flared out and ended several inches below the waist. The corset was exaggeratedly curvaceous rather than funnel-shaped. Spiral steel stays curved with the figure. While many corsets were still sewn by hand to the wearer's measurements, there was also a thriving market in cheaper mass-produced corsets. (1)



- **The Edwardian corset**





The straight front corset, also known as the Swan-bill corset, the S-bend corset or the health corset, was worn from circa 1900 to the early 1910s. Its name is derived from the very rigid, straight busk inserted in the centre front of the corset. This corset forced the torso forward and made the hips jut out in back.

The straight-front corset was popularized by Inez Gaches-Sarraute, a corsetiere with a degree in medicine. It was intended to be less injurious to wearers' health than other corsets in that it exerted less pressure on the stomach area. However, any benefits to the stomach were more than counterbalanced by injury caused to the back due to the unnatural posture that it forced upon its wearer. At this time, the bust lowered and corsets provided much less support for the busts.

By ca. 1908 corsets began to fall from favor as the silhouette changed to a higher waistline and more naturalistic form. Early forms of inners were introduced and the girdle soon took the place of the corset which was more concerned with reducing the hips rather than the waist. (1)

Highlights:



“Magnetic corsets”



“Maternity corsets”

GOOD SENSE CORSET WAISTS



BEST FOR HEALTH, COMFORT, WEAR AND FINISH.
 MADE OF BEST MATERIAL THROUGHOUT. PERFECT IN FIT.
 Style 212 for Infants.
 Style 212, Children 4 to 6.
 Style 212 or 214, Misses 7 to 12.
 Style 217, Misses 13 to 17.
 Style 218, for Ladies.
 Buttons front instead of clasps. "GOOD SENSE."
 Be sure your Corset is stamped
BLOOMINGDALE BROS. and all other first class Retailers
 everywhere.
FOR SALE BY
FERRIS BROS. Manufacturers, 81 White St., New York.

“Family corsets”



“Corsets for Men”

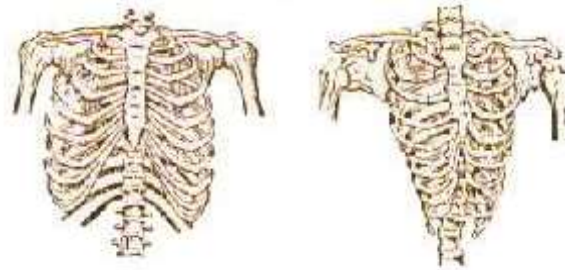
Impact of Corsets on Health:

In reference to women’s dress before the 19th century, Sichell (1977) states that the human body inside these costumes was subjected to “tortuous aids; nothing was natural or simple, shoulders, waists, stomachs, and hips were constructed, corseted and padded, wired, distorted, molded into man’s fashionable style”. According to Lee (2003), women at that time were slaves to fashion and were certainly misguided souls when it came to the wearing of extreme corsets. There are many anecdotes of women gasping for air and fainting because of their tightly laced corsets. The corset was undoubtedly a danger to health as it pushed against the rib cage, dug into the stomach, and likely put

pressure on the organs. In the early 1800s, Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), Emperor of France, had commented to his physician Corsivart (1755-1821) that the corset “is the murderer of the human race”.

The side effects of wearing tight-waisted clothing can include breathing problems, achy muscles and joints. Dr. Octavio Bessa, a physician in Stamford, Connecticut, argues that tight clothing can also create digestive troubles such as heartburn and distension. Ken Biegeleisen, M.D., a Manhattan vascular specialist, hypothesizes that there may be a link between tight-waisted clothes and the blocking of blood flow that can pool in the veins causing varicose veins. (4)

Effects of Tight Lacing of Corsets



Current Scenario:

Corset is still in fashion. Yes, it may have passed the years of demise but like the Renaissance, it literally gain rebirth. Today, the controversial garment remains a very present item in the contemporary wardrobe. So to speak it continues to find a resonance in the modern societies and perhaps the significance has changed and evolved. The decline and comeback of the corset in the fashion of twentieth century seem to be connected to the recurring changes of female figures, particularly to the waist being concealed or enhanced. During this century, the corset has frequently been revitalized as outer garment when part of the revival, or simply recommended by designs that attempt to get the hourglass shape taken from it.

One of the most popular trendsetters who brought back corset into the spotlight is Madonna. In the 80's, the “Material Girl” integrated into his videos and photos the idea of wearing corsets which pulled in massive interest not just from fashion folks but also from the mainstream. Since Madonna was stealing the crowd in the music industry, corset has also taken a ride to fame. It is evident on the collection of photos and classic videos attributed to the renowned queen of pop. Influence is the word, when Madonna conquered the music scene and by just incorporating corset attires on her productions, the object of fascination was even more introduced to the people of the 80s. Americans became creative in improving the controversial dress and it gained various reinventions until it spread out to the later years. The fashion industry came up with contemporary designs that showcased both casual and classy styles of corset. Fashion expert Valerie Steele said in his book that the wearing of corset by Madonna and other mega pop stars revolutionized the aspect of fashion and freedom as it gives women the chance to enhance their figure and improve their style. In India the corset pattern has been an inspiration to all the designers and they have adapted them in all the categories of clothing. They have been implemented in traditional wear, bridal wear, casuals etc. The celebrities and designers around the world have helped in the revival of the history in fashion. (7)



Conclusion:

The precursor of the corset was likely the tightly laced cote worn by women of the Medieval Period. The cote is an outerwear bodice with two layers of fabric stiffened by glue. In the early 16th century, when corsets first made their appearance in Europe, they were constructed out of stiff material but later on steel stiffeners were sewn into the lining. From the 16th to the 19th centuries, stiffening materials such as steel, whalebone, wood, or cane were inserted into the seams or linings of different types of corsets and bodices. In the 1500-1600s, when fashion dictated rigidity in dress, European women donned a corset or bodice created to flatten the curves by compressing the stomach and the bust until they almost disappeared. After the 16th century, women's corsets and bodices were designed to slim the waist and uplift the bust so that they would swell out, resembling to some degree, the exaggerated curves of a modern day "Barbie" Doll". (4)

The gowns worn by women in the past centuries are very colorful and sophisticated in appearance. They dreamily bring back to Cinderella at the ball, but we all know the health problems caused due to the use of corset. Resulting in the tight and rigid corsets, many women died due to the fracture in the ribs and breathing problems. But in the present scenario, the corset pattern is adapted not the rigidity and circumference of the historic corset. Application of these corset patterns in fashion designing has steamed up the history back but avoiding the health hazards. Many of the international designers have brought the touch of corset in the collections in their fashion shows segmented under Haute Couture, Autumn wear. (6)

References:

- 1) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_corsets
- 2) <http://www.marquise.de/en/themes/korsett/korsett.shtml>
- 3) <http://deyoung.famsf.org/blog/corsets-context-history>
- 4) <HTTP://WWW.FASHIONINTIME.ORG/HISTORY-OF-WOMENS-CORSETS-PART-1/>
- 5) <HTTP://WWW.FASHIONINTIME.ORG/HISTORY-OF-WOMENS-CORSETS-PART-2/>
- 6) <HTTP://WWW.FASHIONINTIME.ORG/HISTORY-OF-WOMENS-CORSETS-PART-3/>
- 7) <http://corsetglam.com/articles/the-influence-of-pop-stars-in-the-evolution-of-corset/>
- 8) "History of the corset", Richa Gupta.