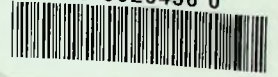


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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

THE CONCEPTUAL CORSET

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN
AND COMPLIMENTARY STUDIES

IN CANDIDACY FOR DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART
PAINTING

BY

DOROTHY ANN DALY

MARCH 1991

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Acknowledgements

I would to thank my tutor Christine Casey for her guidance and help throughout the year. I would also like to thank Aideen and Kate , who have been wearing these corsets for months!

The conceptual corset

Ideally whilst reading this thesis you should try on these ideas and see if they fit! I have been fascinated by the corset as an object and its role in the life of the nineteenth century woman. The nineteenth century texts, which intrigued me, were a source of mixed learning- the absurdity of the notions expressed within them, the derogatory approach to women, their antiquated style and approach to life. I have tried to understand the nineteenth century woman through the magazines that were available to her. Here I found her response rather than another factual account of her life. I used the corset which was such an intimate garment and such an integral part of that woman's life. 'Our clothes are too much a part of us for most of us to be entirely indifferent to their condition: it is as though the fabric were indeed a natural extension of the body, or even the soul.' (Bell 1976,p.19)

I do not believe that you can separate the nineteenth century woman from her corset, whether it was a self-imposed or socially constructed garment is something which will be discussed in the following chapters. We can take the corset as a symbol for the nineteenth century woman, study its external appearance and structure yet we cannot hope to completely (arguably partially) understand her. The idea that an outer layer has the potential to communicate more than the body is an integral part of this work.

The thesis has fallen into two parts, the first and second chapters deal with the corset and the fashionable woman throughout the nineteenth century and the corsets materials, construction and shape throughout the nineteenth century respectively. These chapters are historical chronological interpretations of the corset. To establish what the nineteenth century woman was wearing and when, how and from

what it was made. They serve to establish a knowledge of the century which allows the development of the following chapters which deal with the changing concepts of female beauty throughout the nineteenth century and the tight lacing controversy respectively. Chapter five deals with the main texts that I have used in the development of this thesis.

With a knowledge of the corset as a phenomenon the reasons why it was worn become clearer. Characters like Alexander Walker and Madam Caplin stand out; they maintained a didactic approach to the subject. (I have tried to distil and analyse their concepts of corsets.) I have found them interesting and amusing, but I do not think I could wear them! However it is arguable that they differ little from the conceptual corsetry of late twentieth century.

Chapter one

The Corset and the Fashionable Woman Throughout the nineteenth century

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the desirable shape for a woman was composed of high rounded breasts and long well rounded limbs. The flamboyant style of dress, the highheels, the elaborate head-dresses and hairstyles worn by women during the Ancien Regime disappeared together with petticoats, corsets and all superfluous under garments. These were replaced by the empire style of slim high waisted muslin or cotton gowns which were worn with the minimum of underwear and clung to the contours of the body. Contemporary writings refer both to the use and disuse of stays. Young women with slender figures had the facility to discard their stays others wore stays to maintain the fashionable figure.

Many of the muslin dresses of the early 1800's were mounted on a cotton lining with two separate side pieces which crossed over and fastened in front, passed under and supported the breasts. This was very definitely an attempt to adopt the classical style of the Greek tunic worn with little concealing underwear. The corset was a narrow band of material like that of the Greek zona, which was a length of linen or kid which was wound around the waist and lower torso to shape and control it. The fashionable woman at the beginning of the nineteenth century wore her's higher and used it to support the lower part of the chest. In England the whalebone stays of the late eighteenth century continued to be worn, these came right down over the hips and the eighteenth century tabs at the base were replaced by gussets. For the very thin the corset was padded and for heavier ladies it was heavily boned. A compromise more

common however, was a three inch belt that rose to a point between the breasts.

With the new emphasis on the breasts the corset began to have rounded cup-shaped bust sections inserted, instead of the flatness imposed on the breasts that had prevailed in the eighteenth century. False breasts were also fashionable these wax or stuffed cotton breasts were worn until the 1820's. Breasts were pushed up high with wadding and whalebone.

From 1810 there was a new type of corset which was a development towards a greater emphasis on the waist which now was visible as the skirt became fuller. This marked the evolution from the tubular empire style to the bell shaped skirt of the mid nineteenth century. The simple silhouette of the empire style consisted of a high waisted dress, with the waist line just below the bust. This required the entire torso to be wrapped by the zona-like corset. As the waist assumed its natural position the body length, from the top of the dress to the waist was longer and the skirt now flowed out from the waist. The corset consequently shortened. The sheath like corset was moving to a more typical Victorian silhouette of two cones, one inverted joining at the waist the other bell shaped cone. The shorter corset no longer enclosed the hips and abdomen, it differed from the whalebone stays of the eighteenth century as its emphasis was not on the latter's rigid straight body or on the fluid lines of the empire style. Its emphasis was on curved lines that flowed out from a small waist. The stay created a smooth hard outline, reduced the waist and accentuated the hips and the bust. Many women exaggerated the effect by tightly pulling the laces at the back. The eyelet holes were enforced with stitching and could only withstand limited pressure, beyond a certain point the cloth ripped.



Fig.1 Opera dress 1816.

Fig.2 Evening dresses circa 1840.

By the 1840's the corset extended over the bosom all over the abdomen and the back, down to the hips with a whalebone stiffening and a wooden, whalebone or metal busk passing in the front of the corset getting longer at the bottom. The gait of the woman was stiff and awkward because there was no bend in the corset. Day corsets of the 1840's had shoulder straps and were shaped to the breasts. It was at this time that the camisole first was worn. It was shaped at the waist and worn over the corset. Bust improvers were also worn.

It was around the mid 1850's that the word corset began to replace the word stay. The fashion was for the breasts to be low and the shoulders drooped. Tight sleeves were set into the dress just below the shoulder which made it difficult to raise the arms.

The fashionable lady would wear a long chemise over which they wore a long laced corset that strangled them from their shoulders to the thighs. The bottom of the corset was hidden by wide drawers into which the bottom of her chemise was tucked. Then the hoop of the petticoats were put over it. On top the corset was covered by a camisole which was embroidered and scalloped like the drawers. The crinoline did free women from the bulk of their petticoats with as many as six or seven linen or cotton ones worn with a horse hair petticoat previously.

The 1840's and 50's was a peak time in tight lacing. However corset makers did try and adapt healthy garments. One of the most successful was the hygienic corset which was devised by Madame Roxey Ann Caplin in 1841. Her hygienic corset 'gave freedom to the motion, afforded ample support to the yielding parts,' (Caplin 1856,p.XII) with the use of elastic panels.

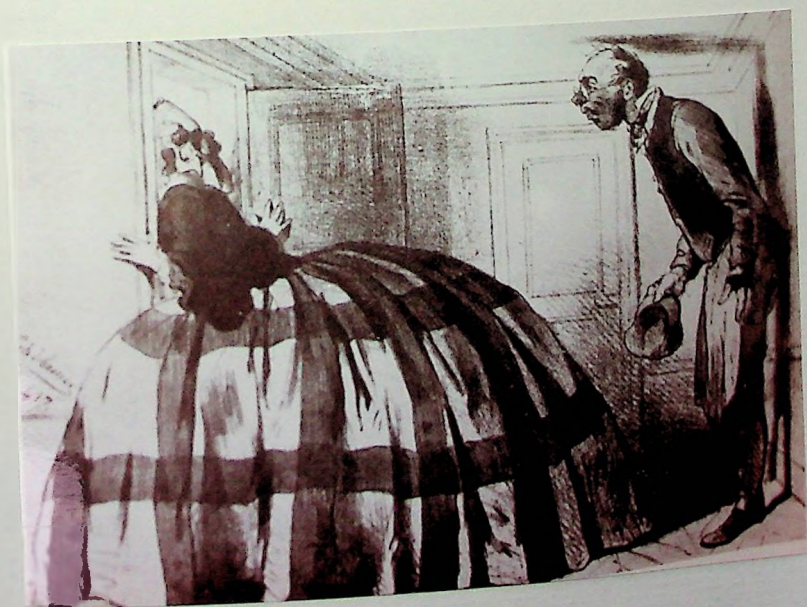


Fig.3 Crinoline circa 1860.

Fig.4 Cartoon of crinoline circa 1860.

An adaptation of this hygienic corset was a gestation stay, even dress reformers considered that it was necessary to be corseted during pregnancy. It was recommended to have the busk removed also to have sufficient space at the breasts to avoid depression of the nipples. Gestation stays were the only maternity garments to be advertised. Most of the corsets were similar, most had adjustable hip gores and could be used to help restore the figure after the birth. They also had openings to allow breast feeding even rich and fashionable victorian mothers believed it was their duty to feed their own babies, rather than put them out to wet nurses.

With the huge crinoline skirts and rising waist lines of the 1860's the focus on the waist was reduced. Corsets became shorter and less constricting. The crinoline remained in fashion until about 1865, when it gave way to the bustle behind, the front became flatter and the great sweep of the skirt flowed out behind instead of all around.

The bustle required a similar amount of layers as the crinoline, several petticoats were tied around the waist. Now the corsets role was to restrict the bust and hips. The function of the skirt was to make the tangle of petticoats, chemise, drawers, garters and hump of the bustle on the buttocks fit as tightly as possible around the legs. The skirt was long and narrow, which forced a woman's thighs to be riveted together when she walked. The bustle of the 1870's shifted the direction backwards and downwards. The dress began to mould the figure in front and around the hips. from this time the shape of the corset became fundamental in the maintenance of the fashionable silhouette, it was no longer possible to make do with the home made corset consequently the corset industry boomed.

Corsets for sports wear were cut higher to allow greater hip



Fig.5 An example of the long waisted heavily boned cuirass bodice. 1870's.

Fig.6 Day dress with bustle 1880's.

movement, for social occasions, however the 's' shape or the gibbon girl shape; deriving its name from the drawings of Charles Dana Gibson, an American artist, with the fashion, for the mature voluptuous figure with ample curves at the bosom and the hips.

Edwardian bosoms were worn low and they overhung the waist. To obtain this shape women had to endure a corset with long metal supports which did not just flatten the stomach they crushed it. The bottom of the corset cut into the groin, so that the woman had to pull in the small of her back to be comfortable. It fastened with hooks and was still worn over the chemise which was stretched very tightly because it had to support the breasts. Women in the 's' curve corset looked as if they had no spinal column or abdomen only an enormous behind and a protruding bust. The years 1904 and 1905 were the peak years for the 's' curve, from then on the line began slowly to straighten. Though it was not until 1907 when the dresses began to lose their fullness did the new fashion line really take shape. By 1910 the 's' curve had disappeared. The hobble skirt was worn with a long straight corset creating a rigorously vertical line.

The demise of the empire style, in the 1820's marked the beginning of the Victorian era. The neo-empire style in 1910 marked the demise of the Victorian era. The evolution of dress throughout the nineteenth century was from the long tubular lines at the beginning of the century through to a greater emphasis on the waist with the bell shaped skirt and the crinoline of the mid century. The skirt flattened in front with the emphasis being placed on the back and the bustle which in turn gave way to the 1870's cuirass style of dress with a fitted bodice emphasising the bust and hips. The moulding of the body continued from that hour-glass figure through to the 's' curve and returning to the tubular style. These changes marking the shifting emphasis

and reflecting the changing attitude towards female beauty
through out the century.

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Fig.7 Day dress 1889.



Fig.8 Dress with leg of mutton sleeves, gave width to the shoulders to emphasise the waist. 1890's.



Fig.9 Edwardian blouses 1906.

Fig.10 The Edwardian clean line 1910.

Chapter two

The Corset: Shape, Construction and Materials

The corset of 1810 had a simple body bodice of strong cotton material usually cotton jean with a high waist. Two pieces of cotton were used for the front and two for the back with shaped centre seams at the front and back. Roundness was given to the bust by inserting two or more gussets on each side at the top of the corset and one or more at each side at the base to accommodate the hips. As the waist gradually lengthened and became more defined extra side pieces were added. In 1816 the 'divorce' corset appeared it separated one breast from the other by means of a padded triangle of iron or steel which was inserted in the front of the corset with the point upwards.

From about 1835 a shaped piece of fabric was fitted into the corset at the top of the hips called a basque this helped to accentuate the curves of the figure. A busk was inserted into a pocket down the centre front of the corset for support and to keep the body upright. A busk was a long slightly curved piece of wood or whale bone, which varied from one inch to about two or three inches in width.

In the late 1840's in France where lighter weight corsets were preferred, a new cut was introduced, a corset without gussets made from seven to thirteen separate pieces with each one being shaped into the waist. This method of construction became popular in England in the 1850's.

The lightly boned corsets of the 1850's were stiffened with cording and sometimes quilting. They were worn over the petticoat and crinoline, with the centre front and back bones curved into the waist. Corsets came high over the waist and contained the bosom. White corsets were more

desirable but grey, putty, red, and black ones were more economical. They were made from coutil and lined in white. The crinoline fastened onto the sides of the corset, it imprisoned women in a hemisphere with a much longer corset whose cup-shaped supports crushed the breasts.

The corset of the 1860's was made from separate pieces of material and could follow the contours of the body more closely. shoulder straps were no longer necessary.

Every town and village had its own stay maker who produced corsets to order. Corsets were also made at home with patterns and instructions for their construction found in ladies magazines, which were now printing more detailed accounts of various dresses. Advertisements for corsets became more frequent they too were rarely found in magazines until then.

Until the mid nineteenth century corsets were made by hand, hand stitched with small back stitches and decorated with embroidery, however as the century progressed a series of technical innovations paved the way for the mass production of the corset. Between 1800 and 1850 only seventeen patents were taken out in the corset trade from 1867 to 1900 five hundred were granted. 1828 saw the development of metal eyelets. A patent was taken out by Rodgers of London for metal eyelets for corset lacing, with the modern style of lacing devised by Daude of Paris. These were much stronger and made lacing and unlacing easier, they also allowed the corset withstand far greater pressure from tight lacing without the fear of the fabric ripping. The first steel front busk fastening was produced a year later which also added to the strength of the corset. In 1830 an elastic stiffening of a vegetable substance had been invented. Elastic was used to make the corset less restricting as a substance it did not fully realise its potential until 1920.

Doctors Recommend
REAST'S Patent
INVIGORATOR
CORSET

For Figure, Comfort, and Elegance.



It holds the figure erect.
 It prevents and cures round
 shoulders and stooping.

PRICES: Ladies', 5/6, 8/8, 12/8, 22/6;
 Boys', Girls', and Maids', 5/6.

Don't be put off with old shapes. If
 difficulty in obtaining, write **REAST**,

CORSETS FOR ENGLAND'S DAUGHTERS!!

Ladies purchasing direct save 20 to
 40 per cent. No Agents.

**Best Quality & Finish
 Guaranteed.**

Single Pairs Sold.

**THE BEST AND CHEAPEST
 IN THE WORLD.**

SCALES' PERFECT FITTING CORSETS.

These Corsets are home manufactured of the
 finest materials and cut from a general **FRENCH**
SHAPE, admirably suited to the present
 Fashions, for adding grace to the figure, com-
 bined with perfect ease, adequate support, and
 durability, they surpass any hitherto offered at
 the price. The numerous letters continually
 received from ladies in all parts of the country
 expressing satisfaction, prove the sterling quali-
 ties which have so long recommended them.

All orders sent by return, post free in the United
 Kingdom on receipt of waist size and P.O.

ILLUSTRATED PRICE LIST ON APPLICATION.

RICHARD SCALES & CO.,
 The Works, Newark-on-Trent.
 (LATE 12, FURNIVAL STREET, LONDON.)

No. 89.
 Black, 5/9, 7/3, 10/6
 No. 81. Black, White,
 or Dove, 4/6

No. 90. Tubed and
 White 6/9. Dove 7/9




Fig.11 English corset advertisement 1896.

Fig.12 English corset advertisement 1889.

Elastic was primarily made from a fine rubber thread covered by a lapping of cotton or silk. One of the first products of the first rubber manufacturer Thomas Hancock, was an elastic strip cut from blocks of raw rubber and used for stitching round gloves and the cuffs of garments. The earliest patent for an elastic fabric, also made from strips of raw rubber was granted in London to J.V. Desgrand in 1832, and an elastic webbing industry was established in Leicester in 1845 by C. Bedells. The introduction of the metal clasp busk in the early 1860's provided front fastening and figure support at the same time. This method of a metal loop fastening onto a metal stud remains today. The back lacing allowed for extra easing and fit with the fastening in the front.

The invention which produced the most dramatic results was the sewing machine. The first patent was taken out by Singer in 1851 and he established the company I. M. Singer. There had been several attempts to perfect the sewing machine since 1790. Singer's success in perfecting the technique of the continuous stitch made it possible for the corset to be marketed commercially. In 1855 the first Singer sewing machines were brought to England by Mr. Robert Symmington, a member of the market Harborough family who were already involved in the stay making business and developed it into an immense corset company.

The invention of the sewing machine and the mechanisation of corset manufacture in factories was responsible for a new concept in clothing. A new era of mass production helped develop the corset and underwear manufacture into a major industry with a turnover of many millions annually. With the sewing machine and improved cutting and construction techniques the unyielding tight waist was maintained. By the end of the 1860's the sewing machine had developed from self operation to being powered by a steam driven shaft under

long work benches. It was now capable of high speeds and was operated by highly skilled girls.

During the crinoline era of the 1860's the industry flourished and by 1868 the British turnover was reckoned to be one million pounds a year for three million corsets. Huge quantities of steel, more than half of the whale bone that reached the market, horn, ebonite, wood, gutta perch and hardened brass were used for stiffening for busks and for eyelets. Up to two million corsets were imported from France each year.

Whale bone played a significant role in the history of the corset. The output of whale bone for the whole of the nineteenth century exceeded ninety million pounds. In the first decade of the twentieth century the increasing rarity of the bow-head whale caused prices to soar, in one year as much as two thousand pounds was paid per tonne. Whale bone is the name given to the long horny plates or blades which in some species of whales take the place of teeth. As many as four hundred of these plates may be found, they are about ten to twelve inches in diameter at the base and from nine to thirteen feet in length.

The basic construction of the corset was using a facing cloth, with an inter-lining of hessian and finally a stiff white cotton lining. These together with whale bone supports and a front fastening busk provided firmness and durability. With the fashion in 1870 for sheath like dresses the waist and hips became more important and as a result the corset extended. The busk lengthened and the tight waist was emphasised by anything up to forty narrow strips of whale bone fitted into meticulously stitched outer casing.

Ornamentation had always been an important part of the corset, before the sewing machine hand embroidery would



A PERFECT FIGURE.

WHITE'S Patent
CORSET ATTACHMENT.



With Attachment.

BY the use of this ATTACHMENT a high Corpulent Figure becomes slight, with comfort to the wearer, as it yields to every movement of the figure. It can be attached to any Corset. No sewing required. Send measurement round hips.

Price, post free, 5/9.

To be obtained only from the Manufacturer,
Mrs. WHITE,
18, Victoria Street, Westminster, S.W.



Without Attachment.

Fig.13 American medical corset 1890.

Fig.14 English corset advertisement 1896.

decorate the corset. In some instances the corset was machine embroidered and then hand finished in gold and other colours. Black was the most popular colour of the period with corsets also available in French grey, drab and scarlet. The corset of the 1840's and 50's were usually white and dull shades the introduction of colour came with the discovery of aniline dyes in 1860.

A much more improved shape was achieved through the use of the steam moulding process. This consisted of a series of hollow torso forms, hand beaten in copper or made from ceramics. These were screwed onto a steel-topped bench. Steam was fed into the hollow space and this heated the copper forms which were of various sizes and fittings, when the correct heat was reached the corset linings were brushed with cold wet starch and wrapped around the appropriate form by lacing at the top and bottom and then being allowed to dry which gave the corset its permanent shape.

Whale bone was used as the main stiffener since the eighteenth century. It was cut into the required length and size of strip by hand and inserted between the facing cloth and the inter-lining, stitched either side and held in place using decorative stitches. The ends of the whale bone were cut with a trimming scissors when the body of the corset was finished in readiness for the binding and trimming.

By 1870 it was difficult to obtain large quantities of whale bone so substitutes were sought. In 1875 horn from the American buffalo which was also being hunted to near extinction was processed into a similar substitute. A more successful substitute was reed, which was dried and processed and supplied in bundles. Its main advantages were that it was a good form of boning and that the machine needle could stitch through it safely, whale bone and horn were too hard to allow the needle to stitch through them.

There were constant experiments to find a flat steel that would eventually replace the whale bone with rust proofing and suppleness being the most necessary requirements for the ideal corset.

Cording became an important design feature in the 1880's. Cording gave a measure of suppleness to the corset while still conforming to the desired rigidity of figure control. It was important in the commercial production of the corset because it provided support and lessened the need for the use of the more expensive whale bone. It also made the corset long wearing and easier to wash. There were three different types of cording processes; cotton, string, and cane cording. String cording was the most successful, it appeared at the end of the 1870's. Hemp twine or a string made from machine twisted paper of various thicknesses were used in this process. The string was placed between pieces of facing cloth and lining these were stitched in continuous lengths. String cording was flexible, durable and also was an attractive feature in itself. It was used to give supple curved insets to give uplift to the bust and also for hip control. Cane cording was used from 1880 cane was obtained from a Mexican plant, consequently it was expensive to import. Cane cording provided supple support and was almost unbreakable it was used to a limited extent with string cording.

The great difficulty of the 1870's corset was finding ways to prevent the corset from riding up and wrinkling and trying to prevent the bones from breaking at the waist, which was frequent owing to the exaggerated curve of the bust and hips from the small waist. The two main styles of cutting the corset continued either with gussets and a basque or in separate shaped pieces. In 1873 a shaped busk which was narrow at the top curving into the waist, and widening out in a 'pear-shaped' base was introduced. This

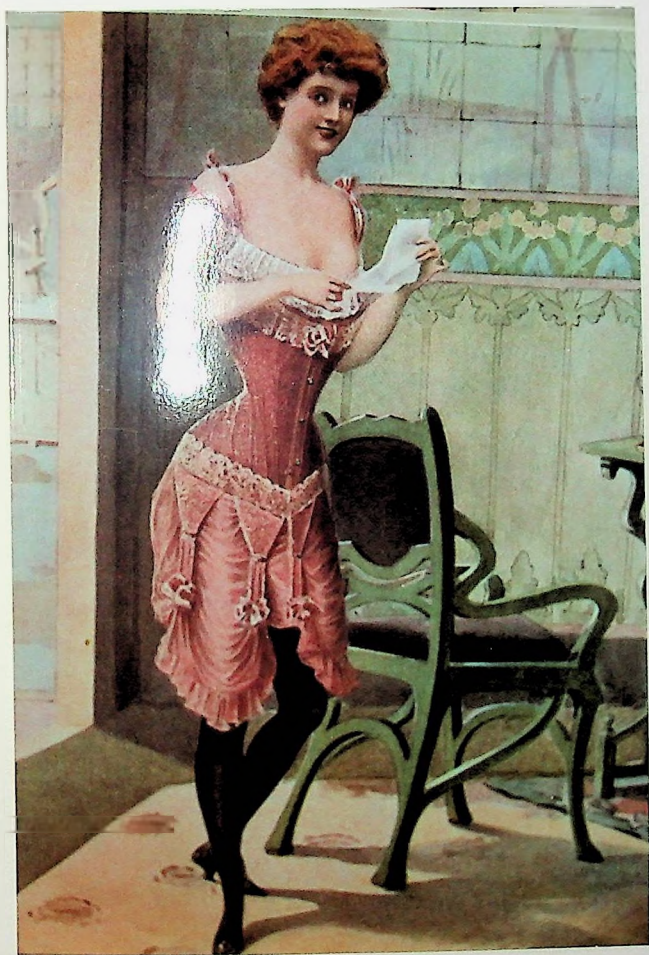


Fig.15 French corset advertisement 1900.

'spoon-busk' was used on fashionable models until 1889.

Corsets became particularly strong in construction, with the elaborate cutting in sections and boning with some being reinforced with bands of leather. With the addition of the spoon busk, more cording and steam moulding, the corset became a much heavier and restricting garment. A model from the early 1880's has twenty shaped pieces with sixteen whale bones at each side and a spoon-busk.

Usually front busk fastening was used but there was also some corsets made with lacing only, either centre front or centre back to preserve an unbroken line under the smooth tight fitting dresses. The corset was worn over the petticoats which were arranged on a shaped band to avoid any unnecessary bulk around the waist.

Corsets were made of figured silks and satins and were trimmed with layers of lace threaded with ribbon. There are some examples of 1880's corsets made from black satin machined with yellow, blue, pink or green with the bones held in position by a variety of embroidery stitches. Black and red and red and orange were common combinations used. In 1890 acid yellow appeared. A typical example of a more expensive corset was made of pale blue silk with yellow stitching, tied with yellow lacing and trimmed with white lace and a blue satin bow. Out of date models usually in grey or putty drill with cording instead of whale bone continued to be manufactured for the cheaper trade.

It was difficult to clean a corset, they were too thick and heavy to wash. A recommended method of cleaning plain white ones was to brush the corset over with a mixture of soapy water and ammonia, the problem was of all-over wetting which would have affected the stiffening and spoiled the corset's shape. The corset was in fact, never in direct contact with

the body. A chemise was always worn underneath it and usually there was some sort of camisole bodice between the corset and the outer clothing. To ensure absolute cleanliness the wearer usually tacked on an artificial lining or a thin calico loose cover which could be taken off and washed separately.

In 1900 a straight fronted busk was used, it started lower on the bust-line and continued down over the abdomen without dipping into the waist. With the wide spread adoption of cycling by women appropriate dress styles were adapted. the corset supported the abdomen and left the thorax free to assist breathing during exercise. As a result of the desire to maintain the small waist, exaggeration again took place, resulting in the famous 's' shape. The bust billowed out over the low front, and the superfluous abdominal flesh pressed flat by the heavy front busk, swelled out at the sides, hips, and on the behind.

This corset was a very complicated construction consisting of as many as ten to fifteen pieces on each side, plus gussets and stiffened with a quantity of whale bone and steel. The length of the corset varied and were both lined and unlined.



Fig.16 French corset 1896.

Chapter three

The changing Concepts of Female Beauty

One of the functions of the corset was to create an idealised female figure, which varied throughout the nineteenth century. Changing concepts of ideal beauty were intimately connected with ideas of women's proper role in society, as defined by men. Beauty was a woman's duty, both for her husband and society. It was perceived as an innate desire. An article written by a female writer, a Lady of Rank which appeared in the Quarterly Review in 1847 reiterated this male perception of beauty.

We should doubt, in the first place, whether the woman who is indifferent to her appearance be a woman at all. At all events she must be either a hardened character, or an immense heiress, or a first rate beauty or think herself one.

Women were subjugated throughout the century, they were seen as the property of their Fathers or Husbands with no autonomy. Their duty was to to be beautiful, to please and to marry. 'She dresses herself to please him, and he dresses her to please himself.' (A lady of Rank 1847,p.379) In 1837 Mrs A. Walker wrote a book on female beauty. Women were working in the more traditional male areas during the nineteenth century, many of whom are only briefly mentioned in secondary sources, which helps to preserve the myth that Victorian women were submissive. Mrs Walker like her contemporaries does not present an extremely radical view she remains within the boundaries of contemporary opinion.

Mrs Walker maintained that the ladies of England, Scotland and Ireland were among the most beautiful in Europe, and dedicated her book to them. She hoped that they would 'preserve and improve that beauty...because it is the accompaniment and sign of invaluable bodily and mental qualities.' (Walker 1837,p.I) She equated dress with art and hoped that through a knowledge of scientific facts about

fashion women would use it to its best advantage. It would assist with the enhancement of beauty and be a powerful expression of the qualities which it dictates. Those qualities were firmly dependent on male interpretation. Victorian definitions of beauty were prejudiced in favour of a specific type of woman, with a combination of physical attractions and moral sensibilities. The corseted body represented the female physical ideal. Which was also seen as a moral device. To be without a corset was improper. This contradiction between the corsets role as a sexualizing device and also as a moral device is a typical example of the hypocrisy of the era, 'both the symbolism of the corset and the ideal of femininity were ambiguous, embracing at the same time the erotic and the respectable. (Steele 1985,p.161)

Alexander Walker was an influential writer on feminine beauty. In his study Beauty : Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Women 1836, he describes the ideal woman and defines her role in society. He believed that,

ideas of goodness of suitableness, of sympathy of progressive perfection and much happiness, are by an intimate and inevitable association connected with the first impression made by the sight of beauty.²

He addresses his book primarily to men because, it is through man's selection of a partner that nature's plan is fulfilled. He brings an analysis of women to men because it is, 'attention from men,...who exercising the power of selection, have alone the ability to ensure individual happiness and ameliorate the species.' (Walker 1836,p.12) He wishes to reassure us that this is not to be taken to exclude or to reject women but it serves to help men by giving 'a reasoned guidance in man's choice to the greater suitableness of all intermarriages, and to the greater happiness of women as well as men. (Walker 1836,p.13) He claimed that the most perfect forms of female beauty were

created by greek art. The nineteenth century's obsession was exemplified by the Venus de Medici. Writers praised the 'softness of the flesh, the delicacy of the shape, air and posture and the correctness of the design.' (Huskell & Penny 1981,p.325) In 1840 John Ruskin declared that the Venus de Medici was 'one of the purest and elevated incarnations of woman conceivable. (Huskell & Penny 1981,p.328)

Alexander Walker divided classical beauty into three categories - locomotive as exemplified by the goddess Diana which was 'striking and brilliant', the thinking beauty as exemplified by Minerva 'characterised by intellectuality and grace' and the Vital or the Nutritive beauty as exemplified by Venus, which was 'soft and voluptuous.' (Walker 1836,p.226) He believed that it was to the latter that all the more feminine women belong. According to Mr. Walker the vital system is peculiar to women and that 'any great employment of the locomotive or mental organs deranges the peculiar functions of women and destroys the characteristics of her sex. (Walker 1836,p.226) With the particular functions of women being child birth and child rearing, to all functions which are most essentially 'feminine, impregnation, gestation and parturition,...she fulfils her first duty, namely to please him to whomever she has united her days.' (Walker 1836,p.6) He elaborates on the attributes of the Nutritive beauty all of which he sees as obvious signs of her proper role,

The bosom, a vital organ, in its luxuriance seems laterally to protrude on the space occupied by the arms;-the waist though sufficiently marked is as it were, encroached on by that plumpness of all the contiguous parts which the nutritive system affords;- the haunches are greatly expanded for the vital purposes of gestation and parturition.³

He gives examples of coarse and masculine women who greatly occupy the locomotive organs, dancers who live apart from their husbands. He is also critical of women who are intellectual, 'as to intellectual ladies they either seldom

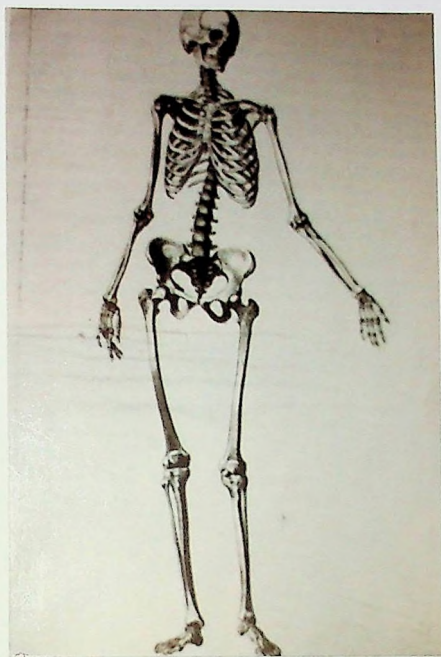


Fig.17 Female skeleton Thomas Soemmering 1796.

Fig.18 "It's exactly the size of Venus" by Octave Tassaert 1830.

become mothers, or they become intellectuals when they cease to be mothers.' (Walker 1836,p.226) These few facts according to Mr. Walker are 'worth a thousand hypothesis and dreams however amiable they may be. (Walker 1836,p.226)

During the nineteenth century there was a marked difference between the public and the private spheres. The industrial revolution and the growth of the suburbs helped to make the separation of work and the home more definite. With a domestic ideology which relegated middle-class women to the private sphere, 'the cult of domesticity was strong among the middle class by the 1830's emphasising the sancity and purity of family life, and the moral task of women as mothers and wives.' (Wolff 1990,p.12) The corset operated on three different levels - mechanical, aesthetic, and functional. The corset according to Thorstein Velben; the foremost portraitist of the leisure class,

is an economic theory substantially [an instrument of] mutilation for the purpose of lowering the subject's vitality and rendering her personally and obviously unfit for work. It is true, the corset impairs the personal attractiveness of the wearer [he is referring to the naked woman] but the loss suffered on that score is offset in the gain in reputability which ⁴comes of her visibly increased expensiveness and infirmity.

This theory of conspicuous leisure is one which is signifant in the definition of beauty in the nineteenth century. Women had to maintain a social position , a lifestyle devoid of work which established her husband in a specific social rank. Throughout the century there were many quasi-medicial and scientific reports produced by recognised physicians and cranks alike. These claimed to represent specific scientific facts which defined women's inadequacies compared to men. One such dubious fact was the reported correct proportions of the woman's body, 'twice round the thumb should be once round the wrist, twice round the wrist should be once round the neck, twice round the neck should be once round the waist.' ('Tip' 1867,p.501) Drawings of the female skeleton were used to define women's role in society. In 1796 the

German anatomist Samuel Thomas von Soemmering claimed that he was publishing the first illustrations of the female skeleton (even though Andreas Vesalius had made drawings of the female skeleton in the sixteenth century). It was an interest in defining sex differences in eighteenth century Europe that produced these drawings. A French anatomist, Maire-Genevieve-Charlotte Thiroux d'Arconville published drawings of the female skeleton in 1759. Ironically she portrayed the female skull as much smaller than the male's, and the female's pelvis as much larger than the male's. This was used to maintain the idea that women's intellectual capabilities were inferior to men's and that they were structured specifically to produce children.

Thomas Soemmering was adamant in his condemnation of tight lacing, chose his ideal for his model for his illustration of the female skeleton he stated that,

above all I was anxious to provide for myself the body of a woman that was suitable not only because of her youth and aptitude for procreation but also because of the harmony of her limbs, beauty and elegance of the kind that the ancients used to ascribe to Venus.

Debate over the exact character of the female skeleton reflected prejudice regarding the female form. Soemmering was attacked by one critic for showing the incorrect proportion of the ribs to the hips. 'Women's rib cage is much smaller than that shown by Soemmering, because it is well known that women's restricted lifestyle requires them to breathe less vigorously. (Barclay, cited Schiebinger 1987,p.59) Many of the doctors were studying deformed bodies, women had been wearing corsets from early childhood. It was believed that as well as the woman's skeleton being different her breathing also functioned differently to men's. Havelock Ellis writing in 1910 stated that,

until recent years it was commonly supposed that there is a real and fundamental difference in breathing between men and women, that women's breathing is thoracic and men's abdominal. It is now known that under natural and healthy conditions there is no difference, but men and women

breath in a precisely identical manner.⁶

Clearly therefore the representations of the human body in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was laden with cultural values, reflecting contemporary ideals of masculinity and femininity.

Anatomists and writers continued to subjugate the female sex. Mr. Alexander Walker developed his theories about women using dubious facts. He claimed that women had 'frequently a smaller number of molar teeth than man, those called wisdom teeth not always appering.' (Walker 1836,p.228) The inference here of women lacking and of having lesser intellectual abilities. He reiterates woman's passivity in the belief that 'mastication is also less energetic in women.' (Walker 1836,p.228)

Alexander Walker informs the reader that 'the stomach in woman is much smaller, the appetite for food is less, hunger does not appear to press her so imperiously and her consumption of food is much less considerable.' (Walker 1836,p.228) serving to establish that woman's very existence was inferior to man's. It is important to realise that he based his accounts of women's eating habits and stomachs from statistical results in relation to the supply of food in hospitals and prisons. 'Women prefer light and agreeable food which flatter the pallet by its perfume and its savour.' (Walker 1836,p.228)

The reason that Mr. Walker gives for the digestive system being smaller in women because,

the great purpose in women is secretion, whether it regards the formation of the superficial adipose substance which invests her with a beautiful and attractive form, or the nutrition of the new being which is the object of her attraction and of her life.

Consequently women 'naturally and instinctively affect abstemiousness and delicacy of appetite. Hence it is that they endeavour to make it [their waist's] slender.' (Walker

1836,p.229) This is his first reference to corset wearing, with the Venus de Medici's ample form a corset would function to emphasise her bosom and hips which emphasised her beauty in terms of motherhood which he saw as being as the epitome of a beautiful woman. He states the necessity of the corset,

if in youth the upper part of the trunk...does not form an inverted cone, whose apex is the waist, because in that case the lightness and beauty of the locomotive system is destroyed by the unrestrained expansion of the vital.⁸

The corset was a necessary garment to maintain or restrain the figure. Opponents to the corset argued that there was an intrinsic antagonism between contemporary fashion and true beauty. They maintain that the waist of beauty was not the slender corseted waist but rather the classical waist based on Greek art. The small compressed waist which resulted from tight lacing was condemned as,

reversing all the type - harmonies of form and graceful fitness of the woman's structure... we make bold to assert that Praxiteles would have deemed her hideously unworthy of reproduction by his chisel and her statue by his masterly hand would never have graced the temple of Delphi.⁹

Feminine beauty it seemed needed to be assisted by art to create the perfect form, using classical sculpture as a model and the corsets (sculptures in themselves). The typical Victorian silhouette was two cones, the long full, structured skirt and the tailored boned bodice intersecting at a narrow and constricted waist.

The victorian ideal of beauty aspired toward classicism and was exemplified by Venus de Medici. Fashion dictated an ideal of beauty which was far removed from the former. To allow for this discrepancy the belief was that the body was in a state progressive towards perfection. Contemporary opinion deemed corset wearing necessary.

Let anyone make a fair and unprejudiced trial, such as this: let him get a standard statuette of some celebrated antique, the Venus de Medici or the Greek slave, and have it dressed in an ordinary dress of the present day, and

see what the affect really is. Until fashion, in its ever-changing round, returns to the costume of ancient Greece or Rome, we can never expect to persuade ladies not to compress their waists on the score of beauty.¹⁰

Footnotes Chapter three

1. A Lady of Rank, 'The Quarterly Review', 1847, p.379.
2. Alexander Walker, Beauty; Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Women. 1836, p.3.
3. Ibid p.225.
4. Thorstein Velben, cited in The Unfashionable Human Body, Bernard Rudofsky, 1972, p.103.
5. Thomas von Soemmering, cited in The Making of the Modern Body, Londa Schiebinger. 1987, p.62.
6. Havelock Ellis, cited in The Unfashionable Human Body, Bernard Rudofsky, 1972, p.108.
7. Opsit 2, p.229.
8. Opsit 2, p.374.
9. Stella Mary Newton, Health, Art and Reason; dress reformers of the nineteenth century. 1974, p.43.
10. 'Another artist' 'English Woman's Domestic Magazine', September, 1867, p.502.

ancient inhabitants of Minonan Crete who had developed a high civilisation more than 2000 years B.C. indulged in extreme waist restriction in both sexes; produced not by corsets but by tight metal belts. Throughout the nineteenth century there were periods of abuse of the corset's role which was support, with exaggeration of the figure through extreme tight lacing, notably between the 50's and the end of the century.

A letter appearing in the English Woman's Domestic Magazine by 'Fair Play' who was an advocate of the moderate use of the corset and admired the slender figure dismissed any concern about injury caused by tight lacing, because at the waist the body has only 'the dorsal vertebra, which does occupy an eighth part of the circumference of the body at that part.' ('Fairplay' 1867,p.389)

With the rest of the waist composed of 'yielding organs, which accommodate themselves readily to any position if gradually trained to do so.' ('Fairplay' 1867,p.389) Without any injury to health as several correspondence to the magazine stated. 'Fair Play' believed that the ribs were not compressed by the corset, that they did not occupy the whole interior of the chest but were 'long curved bones, fastened by movable joints to the spine.' ('Fairplay' 1867,p.389)

Debate in the English Woman's Domestic Magazine centred around whether or not one could have the fashionable figure without injury to health. The consensus accepted that some degree of pain was inevitable to obtain the fashionable waist and that it was quite worth suffering to achieve.

I quite admit that slender waists are beautiful- in fact, my own waist is so much admired that I sometimes forget the pain I underwent in attaining it. I am also quite ready to confess that I am not in ill health.² (emphasis mine)



Fig.19 "Polaire" (17 inch waist) 1904.

Fig.20 The effects of tight lacing.

Fig.21 The effects of tight lacing.

She reports that she experienced dizzy spells and a lacked energy, yet these complaints are dismissed as normal and of no consequence. This woman wishes to inform readers that if stays are not worn from an early age they cause absolute torture for the first few months. She was forced to wear corsets in school from the age of fourteen. Stories of schools where young ladies were forced to tight lace were common, with reported reduction in size from seventeen inches to fourteen inches, 'Nora' writes in the English Woman's Domestic Magazine that she was placed when she was fifteen in a fashionable school in London where it was the custom for the waists of the pupils to be 'reduced one inch per month until they were what the lady principal considered small enough.' ('Nora' 1867,p.334) She left two years later with waist measuring thirteen inches which formerly measured twenty-three inches.

'Stay Lace' was in favour of the practice of tight lacing and describes the sensation of being tight laced as superb and claims no ill effects consequently.

I rejoice in a quiet collection of these much abused objects in silk, satin and coutil of every style and colour, and I never feel prouder or happier...than when I survey in myself the fascinating undulations of this outline that art in this respect affords to nature.

A waist that two hands can easily clasp according to 'Another Correspondent' is a marvel. He admired figures which had attained the greatness slenderness.

Although reading these magazines was fascinating, these accounts cannot be accepted as the typical behaviour of women at that time. It is questionable whether the accounts of waists from twelve to seventeen inches really existed. Measurements from the corsets available in the corset collection of the Leicestershire Museum and Art Gallery with the average size of the laced corsets available from twenty inches to twenty-one inches, with one corset from the 1890's measuring eighteen inches, another eleven corsets measured



Fig.22 A cartoon for tight lacing circa 1830.

nineteen inches with the majority measuring between twenty and twenty-six inches. These are more realistic sizes, yet they do not indicate how tightly women may have laced their corsets. In Leach's Family Dressmaker, (a woman's magazine which contained fashion features and patterns for garments), from December 1896 give three sizes for waist measurements ; twenty-two inches, twentyfive and twenty-nine inches. The actual corset measurement would have been at least two inches smaller. Prolonged use of the corset was able to reduce the waist to one third of its natural size.

The objections to the use of the corset were equally as dramatic in replying to those glorifying its use in the English Woman's Domestic Magazine. An account of extreme cases of tight lacing appeared in Womanhood in 1903, called 'Fatal Corsets: or the Perils of Tight Lacing'. Reports were made of women fainting at balls and recovering only when their stays had been slit, others not recovering consciousness at all. An autopsy held upon the body of a fashionable lady who had collapsed on a hot summer morning, revealed that,

the whale bone of her stays was well marked into her flesh, and the body moulded into their shape...the liver and the spleen being almost divided and the viscera so forced downwards and out of place that it is a marvel that she could have lived so long.

In the account of 'Fatal Corset' Elise Maynard reports that there were seven verdicts in the United Kingdom of death from tight lacing in the first six months of 1898. Doctors were frequently blaming the corset for all types of illnesses. By lacing the waist tightly the lower ribs were forced upon the liver and stomach and these to escape this pressure pressed down upon the bowels and partly up against the diaphragm. This was said to have caused,

softening of the bones...disordered functions of the lungs...heart and abdominal viscera...and unless arrested in its progress deformity will be established, producing a scene which terminates in suffering and calamity, and often through neglect, in premature dissolution.⁵

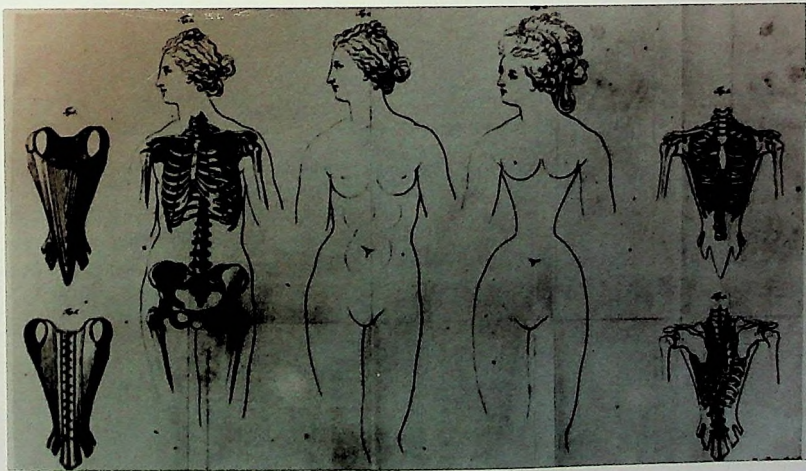
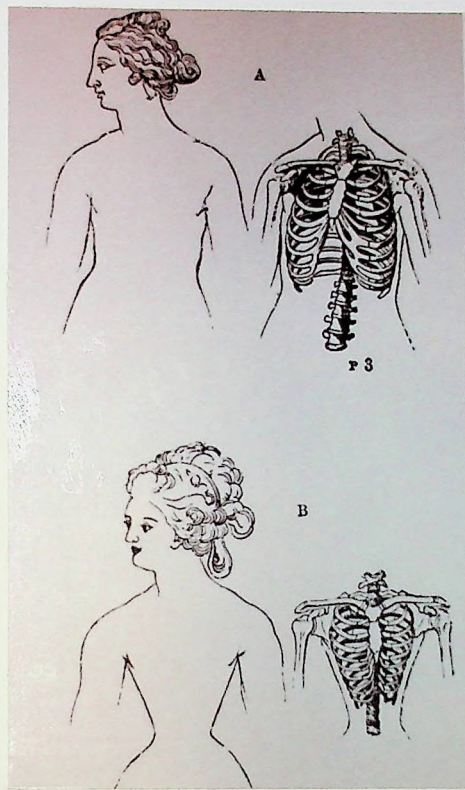


Fig.23 "The effects of the coset" Thomas Soemmering 1785.
 Fig.24 "The effects of the corset" Thomas Soemmering 1785.

The of complaints attributed to tight lacing ranged from nose bleeds to hysteria, with any injury to the unborn child or inability to suckle being viewed with the most concern, any undermining of the woman's role as mother was not to be encouraged. Women were encouraged to accept their natural shape on one hand, while being told that they needed to wear the corset on the other.

If different parts of our body could perform their various functions properly in a smaller space than in which they are placed, would he who in the beginning made everything perfect have created them in that smaller space.⁶

Women were supposed to maintain a happy home environment, which would not have their husbands in their clubs, instead of reducing their waist size.

One nineteenth century woman opposed to tight lacing but an advocate of the corset believed that women should learn to understand how their bodies worked. This was Madam Roxey Ann Caplin, author of Health and Beauty 1856. An interesting figure, Caplin was a progressive writer of this period. The book was based on her ideas about female beauty and her newly invented hygienic corset. In it she gives reasons why her design is far superior to other contemporary corset designs and why she believed women needed to wear corsets. Madame Caplin was the proprietress of a stay making business and was involved in the establishment of a Lady's Anatomical Gallery at 58 Berners Street, London.

Caplin is most famous for her hygienic corset of 1841. Conventional corsets made the mistake of making a corset 'for the body to be fitted into and not fitted to the body.' (Caplin 1956, p. XI) The hygienic corset was designed to benefit all types of women using materials that were not prejudicial to health. Madame Caplin stated the effects of constraint on a compressed chest as being 'low and feeble circulation - weakness, languor or idleness for the brain and other organs'. (Caplin 1856, p. 19) She was not alone in

linking corset wearing with consumption. The annual report of the Registrar General on births and deaths stated that,

in the year 1839 thirty-one thousand and ninety English women died of consumption. This high mortality is ascribed partly to the door lifestyle they lead and partly to the compression preventing the free expression of the body by costume.

The importance of freedom for young ladies growing bones is essential according to Caplin, who insists,

that there be no cutting with strings or garters; no compression of the centre of the body by badly constructed corsets; no slipping off the clothes from the shoulders and resting on the arms; no constriction in any part of the whole costume, but absolute freedom of action for every organ and muscle.

She wanted to design a corset which could be practical and yet not damage the woman's health. The whalebone stiffening and busk of contemporary corsets were usually not sufficiently inserted and protruded in an unsightly manner, the corset's shoulder straps were unnecessary and slipped off the shoulders and the arms to the sides. Due to the protruding busk the body bent which produced an awkward stance. Madame Caplin believed that curvature of the spine resulted because of insufficient support to the back. She attributes her success to her scientific approach to the body and geometric measurements of it and through the introduction of a new method of lacing from the middle of the corset upwards and downwards which helped to regulate the amount of pressure on any one region.

Although she objected to badly made and tightly laced corsets, Madame Caplin believed that women needed to wear them because of 'the delicacy of the intercostal muscles, the falling of the breasts, the spreading of the frame at certain periods of life.' (Caplin 1856,p.25) Her second triumph was her success in developing a 'muscular envelope which whilst it gave freedom to the motions, afforded ample support to the yielding parts' (Caplin 1856,p.XII) which avoided pressure yet provided greater flexibility due

The "R.S." Patent Reducing CORSET,

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 Reduces Corpulency. Improves the Figure. Prevents Abdominal Weakness. Affords Binding Support.

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Real 10/6 Whitebone.
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We fit any figure.
 Should the Corsets not fit, we exchange, and make a pair with any alterations required, 1/6 extra. Sent post free on receipt of waist size and P.O. Colonial Orders, 1/6 extra.

R. SCALES & Co.,
 Corset Manufacturers,
 Newark-on-Trent, England.

Thousands of Testimonials.



Fig.25 An English corset advertisement 1908.

Fig.26 American corset for pregnant or nursing mother 1908.

elastic used in the waist which allowed easy breathing.

Madame Caplin aspired towards a Grecian ideal. She modelled her corset on the Venus de Medici, refers to Alexander Walker in her book and quotes his analysis of the types of beauty. It seems paradoxical considering her criticism of other corset makers fitting the body to the corset, she fits the corset to the body - the body of a greek statue!

As the incarnation of all that is beautiful in woman the Venus de Medici is universally acknowledged the most perfect specimen of female loveliness, and grace and we have accordingly taken it as our model.

Her main contribution was the hygienic corset which was a solution to the problem of injury to the body due to badly constructed corsets. The greater emphasis that she placed on women's education and self assertion has also to be acknowledged as a great achievement in the mid nineteenth century. Unfortunately she merely represents a male opinion of female beauty, she accepted it without question or debate and did little to change the way women were perceived throughout the century. She affirms Mr. Walker's opinion of woman's role as child producers and minders by citing the Nutritive beauty as the ideal.

The women who rebelled against corset wearing were in the minority, the rational dress society (founded in 1881 by Viscountess Heirberton in England) and the aesthetic dress movement. One such group of women were artists living in Glasgow and involved in the Lady Artist Club and the art school. They refused to wear clothes that limited their activities. Margaret Swain wrote about Jessie Newberry, the head of embroidery at Glasgow School of Art, 'She never wore a corset in her life and she deplored the tight lacing imposed by current fashion.' (Burkhauser 1990,p.50) The rational dress movement promoted the freeing of woman's bodies from the restrictive laces of imposed fashion whose ideas were only adapted into general use with the popularity

of tennis and cycling.

The demise of the corset heralded the demise of the Victorian era, it was the end of the era, a way of life which placed women in a very particular role. The corset gradually changed shape and evolved into other undergarments such as the brassiere and girdle, the facility for extreme tight lacing was no longer available.

Footnotes Chapter four

1. Caplin Madame Roxey, Health and Beauty. 1856. p. 36.
2. 'A Responce to Staylace', English Woman's Domestic Magazine, (E.D.M.) June, 1867, p. 334.
3. 'Staylace' (E.M.D.) April, 1867, p. 224.
4. Elise Maynard, 'Fatal Corsets: or The Perils of Tight Lacing', 'Womanhood', April, p. 319.
5. 'Distortion by tight lacing', Chambers Miscellany of Useful and Entertaining Tracts, 1846, p. 1.
6. 'Brisbane', (E.D.M.), June, 1867, p. 334.
7. Opsit 5 p. 11.
8. Opsit 1 p. XII.
9. Opsit 1 p. 4.

Historiography

The nineteenth century texts that I have dealt with manifest a number of distinct characteristics. Firstly writing largely reflects a male point of view with male superiority tacitly accepted. This view was maintained even by women authors. The nineteenth century magazines that I have dealt with depict women in the home, as homemaker and child minder. The reports are extremely derogatory towards women. They were directed towards women with the emphasis on fashion features and how one should look. For example an article by a Lady of Rank from the Quarterly Review March 1847, praised contemporary fashion and criticised women who did not follow fashion. This opinion was echoed by Campbell Dauncey in the Contemporary Review May 1911. Medical reports claiming the ill effects of the corset were directed towards a more general audience. Correspondents to the English Woman's Domestic Magazine accepted the corset and those in favour of tight lacing disclaimed any ill effects. The account of 'Fatal Corsets' by Elise Maynard in Womanhood April 1903 was critical of fashion and of women who foolishly follow it slavishly to the detriment of their health. Maynard reported on the abuse of the corset with horrific stories of unnaturally small waists, such as twelve and thirteen inches. She believed that women could go no further in their self sacrifice. This debate on whether or not such small waists existed or how women could wear corsets so small can be found throughout the pages of the English Woman's Domestic Magazine 1867. This magazine appeared monthly and in the letters to the editor there were reports from actual tight lacers and replies by those who did not agree with the practice. This continual referencing is an unusual source of information.

Articles such as 'Distortion by tight lacing' published in Chambers Miscellany of useful and entertaining tracts 1846

gave lists of complaints and illnesses attributable to the corset. These are as melodramatic as Elise Maynard's 'Fatal Corsets' yet they accept the moderate use of corsetry. Interestingly in Fashion and Deformity, as illustrated in the customs of barbarous and civilised races 1881, by Sir William Henry Flower equated customs of tatooing and body decoration with Chinese foot binding and corset wearing. Maintaining however, the strictest division between the custom of **civilised** corset wearing and other practices among savage people. His arrogant and demeaning approach to other cultures was symptomatic of an imperialist vision.

Two books have been key texts for this thesis: the first by Alexander Walker, Beauty; illustrated chiefly by an analysis and classification of beauty in women 1836. Walker undoubtedly had some absurd notions on classification. He set out to define beauty and did so in three categories; the Locomotive, Intellectual, and the Nutritive. Walker favoured the latter due to her wide hips and large bosom which were signs of her suitability for motherhood. He defined woman's role as mother, child producer and minder and also for man's sexual gratification. He marshalled a series of improbable theories to support his argument.

The second key text for this thesis was Health and Beauty 1856, by Madam Roxey Ann Caplin. It is surprising that Walker's ideas were accepted by Madam Caplin. Caplin was a progressive thinker and developed a hygienic corset ironically she modelled her corset on his ideal Nutritive beauty.

In the twentieth century the earliest documentation of corsetry was in a straight chronological and historical vein. Most deal with how the corset was made throughout different periods and describe how the construction of the corset has developed. They are interesting when dealing with

the corset as an object. The History of Underclothes by Drs. C. Willet and Phyllis Cunnington 1951 is usually referred to in other books on the subject. These were practising doctors who became interested in nineteenth century dress by chance in the 1930's. They then began to collect clothes, books and magazines from the last century which are now a part of the collection in Platt Hall, Manchester, England. While they did posit reasons for fashion change this was not where their real interest lay. In Dress and Undress - A history of women's underwear 1978 Elizabeth Ewing adopts a similar approach, she also wrote Fashion in Underwear 1971. Her accounts of the development of the sewing machine and the industrial revolution were useful. Corsets and Crinolines 1954 by Nora Waugh was more specific about the corset and develops its history through each period with the use of contemporary quotes. A most comprehensive guide to the corset from 1856 can be found in The Foundations of Fashion: The Symmington Collection. Corsetry from 1856 to the Present Day. 1981 Based on the collection of all the corsets the firm produced, with descriptions of how they were made as the processes were updated during the century, with numerous illustrations throughout.


In the later twentieth century, writers have taken the original sources and historical texts and have dealt with them from a sociological view point. Valerie Steele adopts a Marxist feminist approach and deals with the corset in Fashion and Eroticism; Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz age 1985. She locates the corset in terms of a critical debate, and assesses it as a nineteenth century phenomenon. David Kunzle in Fashion and Fetishism 1981 states that women who tight laced in the nineteenth century, were more progressive and assertive than generally has been accepted. Neither of these writers accept the corset as a symbolic instrument of women's oppression or willingness to submit to any imposed ideology of femininity.

Valerie Steele quotes David Kunzel who believed that the enemies of the corset were primarily socially conservative and sexually puritanical males, whereas the tight lacers were primarily sexually assertive women. Valerie Steele maintains that women were not accepting the role laid out for them by men and attributes the popularity of tight lacing during the nineteenth century to its anti-maternal significance in an age that prescribed maternity. This is also established in Women and Fashion 1989 by C. Evans and M. Thornton. Steele and Kunzel see the corset as a liberation garment signifying a self-determined sexuality distinct from the demands of procreation with Victorian women assuming self-control and self-liberation they accept the corset as a legitimate form of sexual expression, self-assertion and female emancipation.

Quentin Bell proposes in On Human Finery 1976 that our clothes are an integral part of our very being. He explains his theories for fashion changes which are in four groups - firstly those who explain change in fashion as the work of a few individuals, secondly those who believe it is the product of human nature, thirdly those who believe that it reflects political or spiritual events and lastly those who believe that changes in fashion result from the intervention of a higher power. He states that, 'no one can create a fashion, for we are born into a society in which fashion already exists; it exists because it pleases and, because it pleases, our aesthetic affections, are predetermined for us.' (Bell 1976, p.90) He believed that fashion is easily equated with beauty because the fashionable way of presenting something is usually the most attractive way. Yet the most attractive way changes with the fashion! Although J.C. Flugel's book The Psychology of Clothes was first published in 1930, Flugel placed clothing in terms of change and suggested reasons for wearing particular garments, which are important when trying to understand the phenomenon of

the corset.

Thus sociological interpretations have clearly dominated the historiography of underwear during the past decades. This thesis has drawn upon the various approaches to the subject in the hope of casting further light on the subject.



LADIES
To secure a good figure should ask their Draper for
KIRBY'S
POPULAR "J.K." CORSET
 Made to suit the present fashion of dress. Perfect Shape and Busks. Guaranteed not to break, and to keep the lower part of the body shapely. Worn by the Elite of Society. See each Corset is stamped.

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Super White or Black, with Whalebone.	Fawn.	Black.
12/6	4/11½	5/11½
15 deep.	15 deep.	15 deep.

Or all Drapers, or, on receipt of Postal Order and size of waist, of the Manufacturers,
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"PLATINUM" ANTI CORSET

FITS LIKE A GLOVE

READILY WASHED

THE SUBSTITUTE FOR STAYS.

LACES DOWN BACK.

Every Bone Removes for Washing.
ABSOLUTE FREEDOM FROM COMPRESSION.
 Perfect Ease of Respiration.
A GRACEFUL FIGURE ENSURED.
 High and Low Neck.

4/11, 6/11, 8/6, *12/9, &c.
 *Specially recommended. Elegantly finished.)
 Can also be had with the "Platinum" Unbreakable Busks instead of Buttons 1s. extra.

Explanatory Pamphlet Post Free, or Samples sent on approval through a Draper.

HERTS, SON & CO., Ltd.,
 Wood St., London, E.C.

Fig.27 English corset advertisement 1896.

Fig.28 English corset advertisement 1896.

Conclusion

I see the nineteenth century corset as similar to the ideological corset of the twentieth century, both were dependent on constructs that society placed on them. One manifested itself in the corset, the other is not quite as easy to define. A certain figure type is still an ideal objective, now through obsessive exercise and dieting not through such an obvious restrictive garment as the corset in the liberated 1990's.

The dichotomy between the corset as an object of excitement and repulsion is one which I have satisfied through the research for this thesis. Through the wide range of source materials I have tried to draw these parallels to the surface. The natural body does exist, it is conditioned and moulded by society.

At the beginning of this thesis I hoped one would try on these conceptual corsets, I think one finds that the concepts have not changed.

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