

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this research report is to demonstrate the changes in the women's corset throughout history and how it has signified women's status in society during these time periods. Cunningham (2003) reports in documenting women's dress that clothing is a reflection of the times in which it is worn, and that efforts to change the status quo of dress is also a reflection of the times. She notes a linkage between the restrictive clothing women wore, like the corset, and the limited roles and inferior political position in society (Cunningham, 2003). The women's corset has gone through significant changes from different time periods and different cultures and it is important to note how these differences have reflected our attitudes of women. From the times of the ancient Egyptians to the reform dress movement at the end of the 18th century, the evolution of the women's corset throughout history has defined women's status in society.

Ancient Times

While many believe the corset to have derived from the 12th century when tighter fitting garments became fashionable, evidence of the first recorded corset comes from the Palace of Knossos, Crete where the Minoan civilization was known to live (Ewing, 1978). Women depicted here were seen wearing bodices made of bone that fully exposed the breasts emphasizing their roles as creators of life (Filip, 2009). The women of ancient Rome wore breast cloths called Strophium (Ewing, 1978), that was worn for athletic events which promoted women's equality in society to be involved in athletic events.

Curves Are Recognized

While both the ancient times of Rome and the medieval ages showed no signs of the curvatures of the women's body, it was during the Renaissance period that artists like Botticelli and Titian gave new light to the women's body by accurately depicting it in their art (Filip, 2009). By the late 16th century, the corset came into existence in women's intimate apparel, giving women the ideal hourglass shape, and began the trend enhancing women's sexual appeal for the first time (Filip, 2009).

Making A Name For Themselves

As Cunningham (2003) notes, while the constraining hourglass shape of the corset caused great discomfort for women, adversely affecting their internal organs and depleting their physical energies women between the 16th and 18th centuries were expected to wear the corset on a daily basis. Women were denied access to power within developing nations, and therefore to keep up with fashion was how women created a status for themselves (Cunningham, 2003).

Reform Dress Movement

After several health concerns in 1832 were reported by doctors like Dr. Andrew Combe, about the possible side effects of the women's corset (Ewing, 1978), changes in women's undergarments and attitudes began to change. The rise of the aesthetic dress, ruling that beautiful dress "shall not contradict the natural form of the human frame" (Ewing, 1979, pg. 91) brought the belief that what was natural was beautiful and led to the improvement of the status of women in their goals of achieving freedom and political recognition.

CHAPTER II

ANCIENT TIMES

Ancient Egypt

Like the corset, it is hard to say which clothing material came first and from where (Ewing, 12), but it is certain that both men and women draped their clothing in the same manner. Evidence of draped costume is found in Ancient Egyptian times around 3000BC. Women of this time period wore loose tunics that were supported by shoulder straps as seen in figure one, and lower class women wore either loin cloths or nothing at all (Filip, 2009). The fact that lower class women were not allowed to wear the lingerie of the upper class women shows how women were depicted by class based on their undergarments.



Figure 1

Support

Both the ancient times of Greece and Rome show evidence of women's undergarments being used for purposes of support and protection (Filip, 2009) depicting women's equality among men in that they were not confined to a corset but allowed freedom with their dressings. Greeks, seen as innovators in many different realms, can also be given credit for introducing the corset. The Greeks set the lead in women's underwear by developing the zoné which bound around the waist and lower torso to shape and control it (Ewing, 1978). The Romans also had a similar style called the

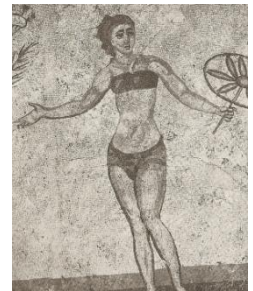


Figure 2

strophium (Symons, 1987), as seen in figure 2, which was a breast band that was worn for athletic events. The fact that both the Greeks and the Romans supported women's athletics shows their acceptance of women in society, as well, it is important to note that women's undergarments were meant at this time to "support" women not alter the form of their body.

Ancient Minoans

The "emergence of the waist was the start of fashion which, for centuries to come, was to consist of continually reshaping the outward appearance of the body" (Ewing, 1978, pg. 18). A Greek civilization known as the Minoan civilization, found on the isle of Crete, can be given credit for beginning the fashion of emphasizing the waist. Evidence of the first recorded corset comes from the Palace of Knossos in 2000 BC (Ewing, 1978). As seen in figure three in appendix A, you can see the typical costume of the Minoan woman. The Minoan woman is seen here wearing a zouave jacket (I. Markova, personal communication, September 13th, 2010), giving her a wasp waist figure (inward waist). These early depictions of women's corsets were often made of bone that fully exposed their breasts representing women's role as creators of life (Filip, 2009).

It is important to note the positivity seen by these corsets. They were not meant to infringe upon women's status in society but rather represent women for the importance that they give to life.

Medieval Ages

The support women were given during the times of ancient Greece and Rome were not to be found during the periods of the Middle Ages. Between the 10th and 13th centuries the body was considered something sinful and therefore underwear should also

be considered shameful (Ewing, 1978). Evidence of one the first corsets in found in 12th century manuscript in the Cottonian Collection as seen in figure 4.

The picture depicts a woman represented as the devil wearing a tight-fitting bodice that is laced closely up the front. This depiction of a woman as the devil shows how women were seen as sensuous by nature and devil like. Women's sexual liberation was not seen at all during this time period, and women were very subservient to men (Ewing, 19).



Figure 4

It is important to note the changes in women's status through history up to this point as seen through the changes of the women's corset. In Ancient Egypt the wearing of women's breast support denoted class status in society. In the times of ancient Greece and Rome, breast bands were used to offer women comfort and protection during athletic events in which they were allowed to be a part of.

Changes rapidly occurred during the Middle Ages when women's fashion changed to loose, shapeless dresses (Ewing, 1978) that hid women's curvatures. Women were seen as sensuous and sinful during this time period. These ideals of women will change drastically through the centuries as the corset gains popularity in fashion.

CHAPTER III

EMERGENCE OF THE WAIST

A Renaissance of Curves

The waist for many centuries has been the center of women's fashion. Women's fashion has been dictated by narrowing, lowering, raising, or literally obliterating the waist (Ewing, 1978). Rarely has the fashionable waist been seen in its natural form and rather it has been altered in some way by outlining or emphasizing it (Ewing, 1978). First evidence of the use of the corset we know today was seen in the Minoan period around 3000 B.C. While the emergence of the waist was seen in the 12th century as women began wearing loose tunics that drew close to the figure (Ewing, 1978), it wasn't until the late 16th century that the corset became the centerpiece of intimate apparel (Filip, 2009). The corset emerged as an elite garment for women. They were usually sewn from stiff fabric with whalebones that gave the corset extra stiffness (Vincent, 2009). The corsets, or bodies as they were known at this time as, were not sewn with darts or gussets and therefore flatten and compressed the breasts giving the woman a long, slim and tapering torso (Vincent, 2009). As seen in figure five of appendix A the corset instead of emphasizing a woman's curves, it instead created an inverted triangle shape, making her appear larger on top and smaller at the waist.

Limited Waist, Limited Freedoms

The construction of the corset maintained its shape throughout the 17th and 18th century, however their complexity and boning increased give the structure more rigidity (Vincent, 2009). The rigidity of the clothing was a reflection of the times in which it was

worn. Women had limited roles in society and were not allowed political freedom (Cunningham, 2003). The only way in which women gained any sort of social standing in society was through fashion. Status achievement was not only a goal of upper class women, “dress, along with demeanor, etiquette, and hygiene was a primary means of status distinction” (Cunningham, 2009, pg. 24). Even in today’s society, clothing is often seen as a means of class distinction. For the women of these times, keeping up with fashion denoted a sense of self worth and achieving of the American dream of wealth and prosperity (Cunningham, 2003). In order to make themselves equals to men, women had to subject themselves to tight fitting, and harmful garments, in order to appeal to man’s licentious nature and his sensuality (Cunningham, 2003).

Freedom in the Air

It seems though that the constricting roles of women during the 16th and 17th centuries began to change at the end of the 18th century. Hope for women’s roles were on the horizon as the French Revolution broke out. Due to luxury fabrics such as silks, satins, and velvets being banned, all class distinctions were suppressed, giving women the opportunity to be looked at as equals for the first time (Ewing, 1978).

Women’s styles changed to high waisted muslin gowns as seen in figure six. The new styles of dress had similarities to those seen in the straight robe styles of ancient Greece. As well, the “devotees of the new French regime rejoiced in harking back to the first famous Republic, that of ancient Greece,” (Ewing, 1978, pg. 54) which they regarded as the birth place for the ideals of freedom that the revolutionists were fighting for.



Figure 6

As women fought for their freedoms, their use of underwear declined greatly, from the rigid corsets that they were so accustomed to. Many women wore no corset at all, and just wore a simple band of cloth, similar to the Greek zoné, over their breasts. Women's freedom from the corset is a direct representation of their fights for freedom in society. It wouldn't be until the 19th century that we would see further action against the woman's corset.

CHAPTER IV

REFORM DRESS MOVEMENT

Return of the Corset

By 1837 return to the restriction of the corset was in full play with now the bodice being boned at the back and on the sides (Bradfield, 1968). Corsets became more complicated as more materials are added in order to make them stronger, and more resilient and resistant to the daily wearing and less compromising to bodily demands (Vincent, 2009). Other additions included gussets for breasts and metal eyelets to make threading the corset easier. Corsets were often promoted during this time as giving women support by straightening her body and protecting her core (Vincent, 2009). It is interesting to note the differences between providing support for women during this time in comparison to providing for support and protection for women during the times of ancient Greece and Rome. While women were given “supporting” materials to be allowed to play in athletic events, women for the 18th century were provided with support to look fashionable and appealing to men (Cunningham, 2003). However, how far women would go in order to change themselves would be the concern of many.

Health Concerns

It was during the dress reform movement that several changes began to happen with women’s dress and status in society. Many doctors, like Dr. Andrea Combe, began issuing health concerns that the corset adversely affected internal organs (Ewing, 1978) and depleted women of their physical energies and deprived them of good health.

Promoters of the reform dress movement thought that women would only achieve equal standing if they return to their natural, healthy, and fit body.

Changes In The Corset

By the end of the 19th century changes with women's underwear and status in society began to show.

In 1863, Luman Chapman introduced his new breast supporter as seen in figure seven in appendix A. The new invention was designed to eliminate the friction on breasts that corsets often caused. However, no evidence suggests that Chapman ever mass produced his design. (Beck & Gau, 2002). It wasn't until 1876, when Olivia Flynt, a well-to-do Boston dress maker and dress reformer, introduced her patent for a "bust supporter...especially adapted to ladies having large busts" (Beck & Gau, 2002, pg. 4). Flynt's patent for her bust supporter can be seen in figure eight of appendix B. She sold her line of underwear from her Boston workshop and by 1881 was offering custom-fitted supporters by mail order (Beck and Gau, 2002).

Health Reform Movement

Changes in the corset were brought by the health reform movement of the 1800's. Physicians sought to improve women's health, by eliminating the corset, in order for women to take their "places in society—that is, in the public sphere" (Cunningham, 2003, pg. 25). The health reform movement was a very important time for women because reformers advocated for women's clothing that would offer them fashionable garments that could allow more movement for work and active sport, similar to the times of Ancient Greece (Cunningham, 2003).

The development of the brassiere “brought uplift in several facets of their lives” (Beck & Gau, 2002, pg. xi). It offered a more comfortable alternative to the constricting corset, as well as, increased the number of women attending college (Cunningham, 2003), and broadened women’s economic achievement (Beck & Gau, 2002). Women’s first-hand knowledge of bra wearing gave them the opportunity to be innovators in brassiere design. Women held almost half of the 1,230 U.S. patents for women’s breast supporters between 1863 and 1969, and they held other positions besides designers like “financial managers, promotional specialists, merchandising wizards, and production managers” (Beck & Gau, 2002, pg. xii). For the first time women were seen as equals among the work force, and were able to gain an advantage from their dual perspective of both designer and wearer.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

Shelving Stereotypes

It is important for the sake of women's status development to "shelve the stereotype of the brassiere as oppressive and to take a more balanced view of its development" (Beck & Gau, 2002, pg. xi). Many believe the brassiere to be a symbol of women's constriction and limited place in society; however it is quite the opposite.

The tight lacings and boned corset that predominated from the 14th to the 18th century was in fact a symbol of oppression for women. It not only restricted their bodies, it restricted them from their social standings within society. Limited to both political and economic freedom, the only way in which women gained social status was to maintain their appearance. Wearing of the corset denoted you were of "good health" and hygiene and were knowledgeable of the new fashions.

It wasn't until concerns for the ramifications of wearing the corset came into play during the health reform movement that women began seeing changes in their social standings. The development of the brassiere brought them "uplift," according to Beck and Gau (2002), "in several facets of their lives." Women began attending college more towards the middle of the 18th century and achieved greater economic standing through their brilliant innovations in brassiere makers as both designers and consumers, themselves.

As Cunningham (2003) points out, clothing is a reflection of the times in which it is worn, and the corset is no exception. The development of the corset through the times

from Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, Middle Ages, and through the Renaissance reflects women's limited roles within society. It wasn't until changes in the corset at the end of the 19th century that women finally began being noticed for the truly intelligent, and innovative women that they are.

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APPENDIX A



Figure 3



Figure 5

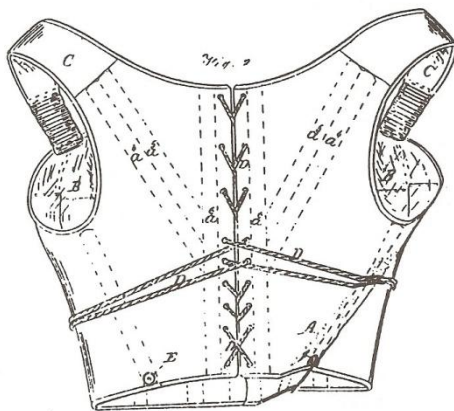
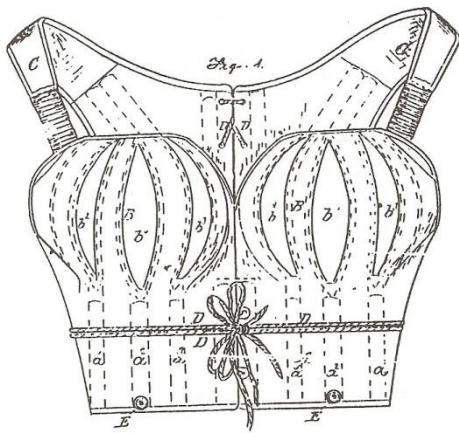


Figure 7

APPENDIX B

O. P. FLYNT.
BUST-SUPPORTER.

No. 173,611.

Patented Feb. 15, 1876.

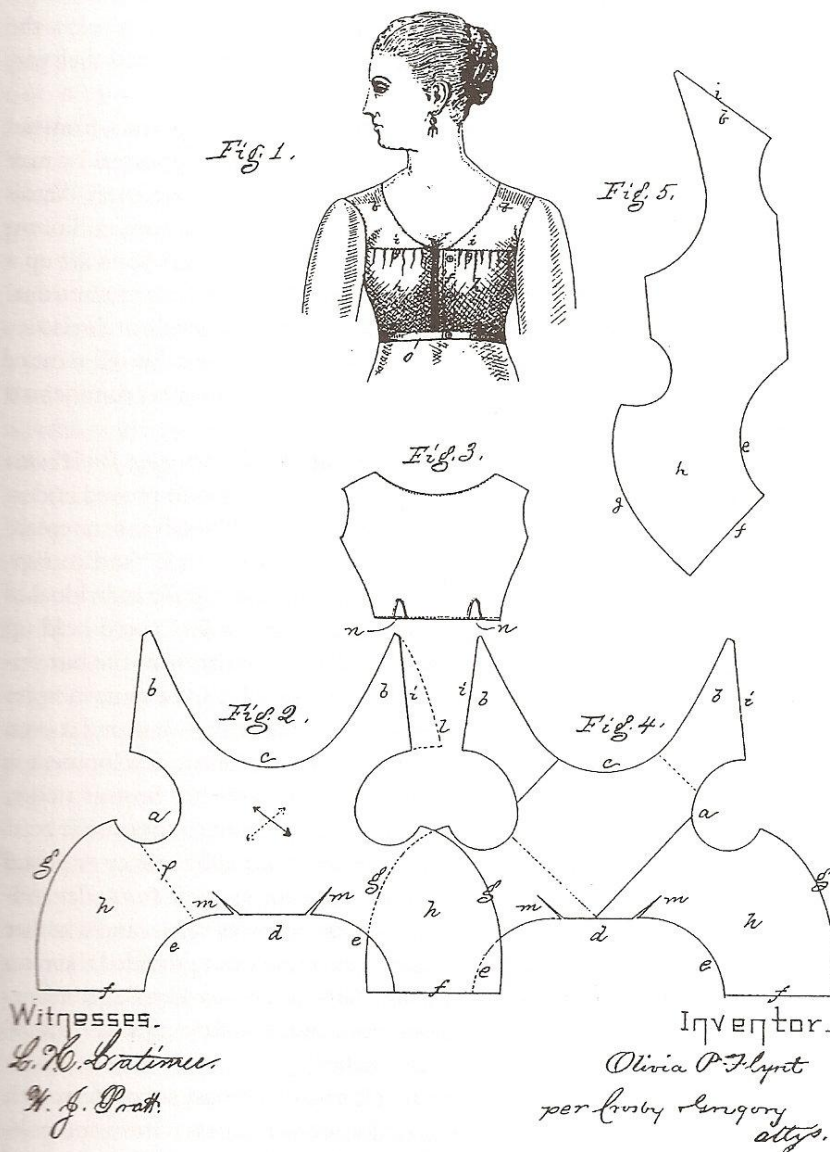


Figure 3. The first bust supporter known to be produced in the United States, patented by Olivia Flynt.

Figure 8