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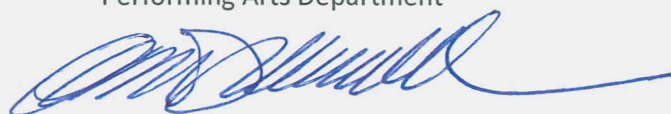
Corsets
The Foundation of Fashion

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, likely belonging to Anne Lommel, the Performing Arts Department representative. The signature is stylized and fluid, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Corsets: The Foundation of Fashion

In theatrical productions, accurately reproducing the clothing of a past era is commonplace. Costumers strive to recreate pieces that give the same silhouette and aura of the original period using modern techniques and technology. However, the problem in this is that the modern body does not usually work with period styles and new techniques in clothing construction do not always work in conjunction with period designs and patterns. Corsetry is one of the hardest garments to make and is normally reproduced poorly and does not fit properly. I have previously made corsets based on period patterns that did not use the proper materials, techniques and were ill-fitting. The importance of costumes that are faithful to the originals on which they are based is underestimated; costumes play an important role in making an audience completely engrossed in a play or movie. Creating more stylistically accurate corsets is important in creating a credible setting for a production.

When it comes time to make a corset, many costumers use a period pattern from a book and reproduce it exactly. The issue with this is that the body has changed in the past century. Women are not used to wearing corsets and cannot lace them as tight as they should be which prevents the garment from fitting properly and creating an accurate silhouette. Also, women in the nineteenth century began wearing corsets as a young woman, which changed the way her body developed and made it more suited to wearing a corset than the modern body.¹ Using research, pattern books and contemporary sources to help pattern a corset would result in a better garment. Using period methods of corset design and construction in conjunction with modern techniques of fit and patterning would make it possible to construct more accurate costumes.

¹ There are some modern day women who wear corsetry laced very tightly, known as “tight lacers”, but generally corsets are worn as part of fetish fashion, not every day wear. See Valerie Steel, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001) 110 and 168.

This project set out to create the most accurate reproductions of two different period style corsets possible. I chose two different periods with very different silhouettes to construct to gain a better understanding of the different techniques used to make corsetry. Through this project, one can examine different periods of fashion based on the corsets worn. Knowledge of clothing construction of the time and techniques used by professional costume technicians in costume shops was utilized to create the corsets. The goal for this project is to complete the garment as it would have been made in its historic period; however, the garment must also be made to withstand the rigors of a theatrical performance and be adapted to fit the modern body. This project is an opportunity to design within the framework of a period style, build construction skills and a portfolio of period costume pieces.

The Regency Period, early 19th century and the Victorian Period, late 19th century, which are stylistically contrasting, are explored in this project. The Regency corset reproduced is inspired by corsetry that dates from the 1820s (Figures 1-4). At this time a more natural figure was in vogue, which was called the Grecian figure.² The fashion of this time showed the contours of the body, so corsets were worn to help attain the ideal figure with a long slender body and a high bust.³ It has been suggested that at this time, wearing a corset was not necessarily in fashion, but was worn by some to obtain the ideal figure.⁴ Since the corset was worn as a corrective measure, its form varied greatly, from lightly quilted to having many whale bones to create the desired form.⁵ Unlike later periods, obtaining a tiny waist was not the goal of a Regency corset; this corset was to help create an ideal figure, good posture with the help of a thick whale bone in the front of the garment and serve as a smooth foundation for clothing.⁶ Since the sewing machine was not in use, corsets were hand sewn in this

² Norah Waugh, *Corsets and Crinolines* (New York: Routledge Theater Arts Books, 1994) 75.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Underthings," *Jessamyn's Regency Costume Companion*, ed. David Brown and Jessamyn Reeves-Brown, 1998, 28 Feb. 2007 <<http://www.songsmyth.com/underthings.html>>.

period and more expensive corsets were beautifully hand embroidered.⁷ These characteristics make the Regency corset create a silhouette that follows the form of a natural body.

The Victorian period corset created for this project is based on a corset from the late 1880s (Figures 5-8). This period corset is characterized by the hour-glass figure. A longer, less rounded body is created by the Victorian corset.⁸ Many whale bones and cording was used to give the corset its stiff structure and create the ideal figure.⁹ To construct the correct silhouette, some women used small pads in the hips and bust to accentuate a small waist, which was the model that all women tried to attain.¹⁰ In this period, all women wore corsets, regardless of size, age or social class.¹¹ The most expensive corsets were made of rich fabrics such as silk or satin and lower end ones of less expensive and less ornate fabrics.¹² During the Victorian period, the sewing machine began to be used in commercial situations; however, a majority of corsets, especially high end ones, were still handmade. The Regency and Victorian periods are ideal to explore through corsetry because they exemplify two stylistically different periods of corsetry.

Creating the Regency period corset in the proper style and using accurate techniques was the first challenge of this project. Since this style of corset is not too constricting, the original pattern was not adjusted much to fit the modern body; the majority of the changes made were to make it fit the model properly. Patterning the Victorian corset proved to be more of a challenge. For this corset, I had to adjust the waist, since many corsets used to be laced to around 19 inches during the 1880s.¹³ The waist needed to be adjusted to accommodate the size of a person today while still maintaining the proper seaming and shape of the corset. The intent in creating the corsets was to make them look as

⁷ "Underthings," *Jessamyn's Regency Costume Companion*, ed. David Brown and Jessamyn Reeves-Brown, 1998, 28 Feb. 2007 <<http://www.songsmyth.com/underthings.html>>.

⁸ Waugh 83.

⁹ Waugh 81.

¹⁰ Waugh 145.

¹¹ Waugh 83.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Waugh 145.

accurate as possible while using research of how corsets were made in their original periods. To create this appearance, the fabrics used are ones that would have been used in their respective periods. However, when making the reproductions, modern technology was utilized. First, whale bone is no longer available to stiffen the corsets, so steel coil boning was used instead which is the same size and mimics the structure that whale bones would give a corset. The principal difference is that sewing machines were used instead of hand sewing in creating this project. Sewing machines are much more technologically advance than they were in the past and are now adept to handle making corsetry. There is some hand embroidery to decorate the corsets, but to create the garments faster and make them stronger, sewing machines were used. Although some changes were made in design and construction, the corsets produced maintained the overall characteristics of the original corsets on which they were based.

The outcome of this project exceeded the goal in that more was learned about the state of literature on period corsetry. There are many books about corsetry, feminism and corsetry, the effects of corsetry and reproductions of period corset patterns; but there are few sources that detail their construction in light of the modern body and technology. The most useful sources for this project were websites created by corset and period clothing enthusiasts who make their own period reproductions and documented their trials and errors on fit and construction. Since these are not the most reliable and scholarly sources, there is a definite need in the literature on costume construction for a book on construction corsetry. The enormous amount of visual and textual research compiled for this project will possibly be a jumping off point for a future book on period corset construction using modern technology. Of the sources used in theatrical costume shops, there is a lack of literature that deals with the patterning and construction of corsets using the modern body as a model and using the tools available today.

This project started out as a way to explore different periods of costuming through the corsets worn at the time. Much research of contemporary accounts, images, patterns and construction books helped to formulate the approach taken when it came to tackling the actual construction of the garments. Although the silhouette and structural elements remained faithful to the original, the construction techniques and fit were altered to work with the modern body and utilize the available materials. Through this project, not only have I been able to learn techniques for working on a period garment and build my portfolio, but learned about the absence of works that detail corset construction using today's technology. Accurate period corset construction is essential to making period garments look and fit correctly and creates a more realistic world in a theatrical production.

Appendix

Regency Corset

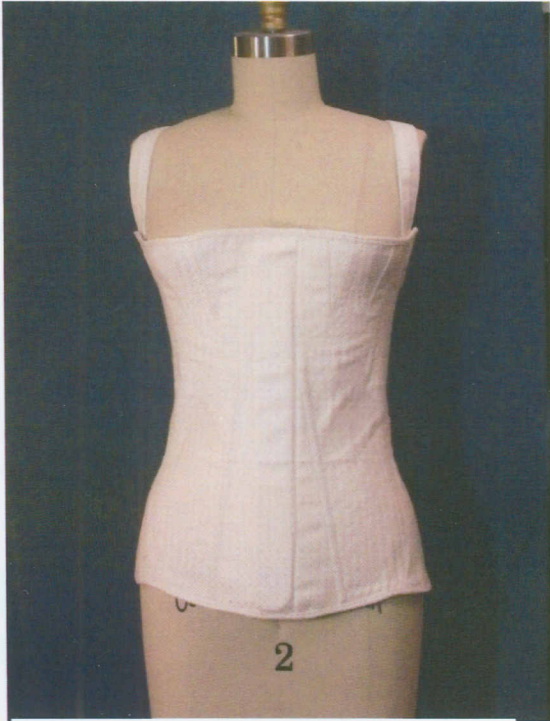


Figure 1

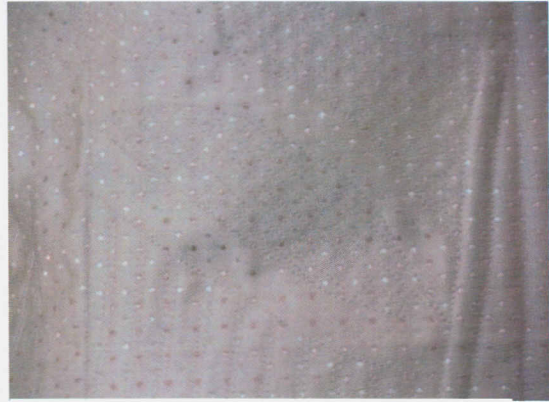


Figure 2

Detail of stitching



Figure 3



Figure 4

Victorian Corset



Figure 5



Figure 6

Detail of cording



Figure 7



Figure 8

Sources

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