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On the Trail of a Nineteenth Century Corset

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Abstract

Through over four centuries women of Western world wore corsets to present their social status, sexuality and beauty. Furthermore, women wore different types of corsets, to mirror the mood of each era, from strict cone-shaped model that represented power and strenght, to the ''hourglass model'' were modesty, fragility and passivity represented the ideal female figure. Women nowadays continue wearing corsets. One model which is featured in the media is the hourglass corset shape that became the iconic corset shape. The present case study was designed to show corset making of a bespoke corset with the S shape chacarterised by a slim waist and broader bust, and hips. The basic block pattern was drafted on the German Muller pattern making system. Busk, spiral steel bones were used to shape the figure, and special attention was given to embellishment placed on the seams.

Keywords: Body measurements; Flat corset pattern; Muller & Sohn Systems; Bespoke corset making; Sewing

Introduction

From the late Renaissance into the twentieth century, women in the western society perceived the corset as an essential part of fashion, and so as a component of human culture. By wearing a corset women could express their social status, self-discipline, beaty, respectability and erotic allure. But still some women considered the corset as an assault on the body. Historians argue about the origin of the corset. Although the Greece and Minoan Crete were wearing tight bodices exposing their breasts, ancient fashion does not have significant cultural continuity to the European corset developed in Renaissance Spain and Italy. Modern fashion of the first half of the sixteenth century was characterized as tailored clothing, designed to shape the body accomplished throught the gradual development of seems, buttons, lacing and the use of rigid materials such as fishbone, whalebone, horn and buckram. An important component of the corset was the busk, a piece of wood or metal, placed in the middle of the breasts in order to keep the wearer straighter [1,2]. Since the Middle Ages, the production of stays (term introduced by the seventeenth century, garment to support the naturally weak female body) were dominated by men who were organized into guilds. Women were only empleyed as seamstresses, and could not be part of the guild. Corsets were hand-made till the nineteenth century. So, based on the complex making of stays, tailors had to develop considerable technical skills. Bespoke tailors who specialized in making stays were known as ''corsetieres''. Industrialization enabled many inventions such as metal eyelets, the first steel front busk fastening, and various types of lacing and unlacing. Corsets could be constructed differently, and a variety types appeared [3,4]. According to Erkal [5], corsetry is claimed as one of the popular garments of a social condition and the prevailing sign of a specific fashion". The present case study was designed to show corset making of a ''hourglass'' corsets fashionable in the Victorian era from drafting a flat corset pattern over sewing process to the final product using modern material.

Case Report

Pattern making

The german pattern making system M. Muller & Sohn was used to develop pattern for corset around the year 1880. Corset pattern was developed from basic dress block that did not include wearing ease, allowances for movement and comfort, because the garment should shape the body. The basic dress block was drafted using body mesurements of the end user, as well as calculated measurements. Body height was measured as the height from top of the head to the floor, bust measurement was measured as the circumference over the fullest part of the bust, waist measurement was measured as the circumference at the narrowest part of the waist, and hip measurements was measured as the circumference over the fullest part of the seat and the hip. Primary body measurements were used as foundation to calculate auxiliary measurements with the help of a measurement chart, such as: scye depth, back waist length, hip depth, finished length, neck width, bust length, front

waist length, back width, scye width and chest width. In order to determine precise body measurements, the person being mesured was dressed in underwear, so that the measuring tape lied flat around the body. Due to the close-fitting garment no ease was added to the calculated measurements. The basic dress block contained two waist darts at the front and two darts at the back pattern. According to the design of the desired corset shape the basic block had to be adapted first by moving the bust dart for 2cm to the right, followed by dart adaptations illustrated in Figure 1a and 1b. All measurements shown in Figure 1a, b are in centimetres [6 - 8].

Before cutting, seam allowances had been added to all pattern pieces in the desired width. The pattern also contained notches in the bust and waist line, and the grainline (Figure 1c).

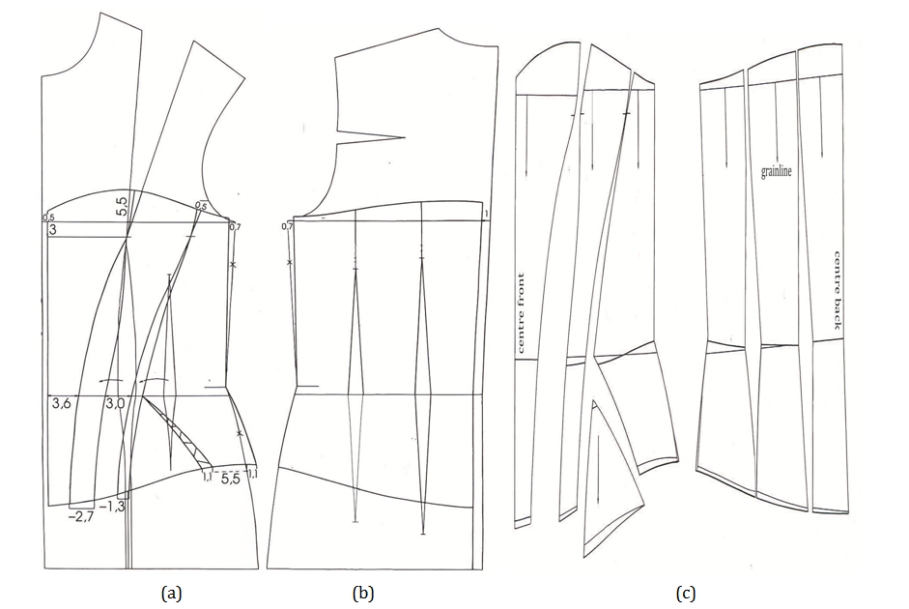

Figure 1: Pattern adaptations made on basic dress block (a) front pattern and (b) back pattern and (c) finished pattern pieces of the corset [7].

Material and tools for corset making

The corset was made of two layers with a interlining. The main fabric was silk and the lining was strong cotton material. After cutting main fabric, lining and interlining, the interlining material was bonded to the main fabric. Bias tape made from the same fabric as the lining were used as bone casing tape. Lace, and ribbon were used to decorate the bespoke corset. Scissors, thimble, hand-sewing needle, measuring tape, awl, hole punches, bolt cutters and needle nose pliers were tools needed in corset making.

Results & Discussion

A bespoke corset was produced based on personal body measurements. Functionality and fit of drafted and adjusted corset pattern was tested and evaluated by the end user and had a proper fit (Figure 2). Pattern pieces were joined using sewing machines. Stitch diagram, machine type, stitch type, thread and needle size are given in Table 1 and Figure 3. Special presser feet, edge guide for maintaining a fixed distance, and edge binding guide were used to obtain a regular seam line. After holles were drilled, attaching machine was used to press the two eyelet sections together through the material, spreading out the tubular section over the edge so that the end held fixed together.

Figure 2: Bespoke corset.

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Table 1: Used stitch type, needle thread and needle size [9- 11].

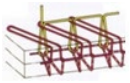
S.No.	Stitch Diagram	Machine Type	Stitch Type	Needle and Under Needle Thread Size/Tex	Needle Size/Nm
1		Lockstitch	301	40	90
2		Zig-zag cross stitch	304	40	90
3		Double chainstitch	401	40	90
4		Three thread overlock	504	40	90

Figure 3: Stitch types used for bespoke corset making [9].

The centre busk was placed in the middle of the breasts, and each seam was boned with 7mm spiral metal or plastic boning. Metal eyelets were placed at the centre back where the corset was laced with a lacing cord. Lace and ribbons are sewn over the seams on the front, side and back seams, as well as on the top and bottom edge of the corset. Centre front and centre back were the only straight lines on the corset pattern, all other seams were curves. Spiral metal and plastic boning were placed to the curved seems to shape the body. Bone casing has been sewn over the seam allowance to encase raw edges, holding the inserted bones. Special attention was given to decorative stitching and embellishment which was placed on the seams so they ephasize the form. Decorative stitching was also used to strength the seams [9-11].

Conclusion

Corset development requires considerable technical skills with a knowledge of anatomy that enables production of well-fitting corsets. The first corsets were made by men because of the complex and sophisticated production. Nowadays, corsets are made by men and women knows known by the French equivalent terms corsetier (male) and corsetière (female) [12]. Historical styles of corsets can be reproduced only by corsetmaker who are familiar with historical fashion over centuries of history. In order to develop a corset of proper fit the basic pattern should be drafted using personal body mesurements and adjusted to the body shape. Knowledge of anthropometry, material, fusing equipment and methods, sewing techniques, corset making tools, busk, plastic and metal boning and the various methods for the incorporation of the boning are essential in corset making.

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