Iron-collared and corseted

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Denis Bruna, editor

FASHIONING THE BODY
An intimate history of the silhouette
272pp. Yale University Press. £35 (US $50).
978 0 300 20427 8

Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell

FASHION VICTIMS
Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette
352pp. Yale University Press. £35 (US $60).
978 0 300 15438 2

There's nothing natural about clothes. Some people like to think that what they wear is free from artifice. But it never is. Clothes shape, reshape, highlight, squeeze, falsify, constrain our bodies; they signal ideals of beauty, social etiquette or morality. Those shoulder pads, little plastic stiffeners in shirt collars, push-up bras and contouring underwear in our wardrobes today are the successors of starched neck ruffs, padded codpieces, hoop petticoats, girdles and stomach belts – structuring mechanisms, that work on our body's silhouette to bring it into line with what we think we ought to look like.

How and why fashionable, often irrational, concepts of what we should wear and what is and is not beautiful are questions that *Fashioning the Body*, a collection of essays published in conjunction with an exhibition in New York earlier this year, attempts to answer. Undergarments, or "scaffolds", and how they construct a body's silhouette, are the focus here. "When these articles are removed from the person wearing them, they look like carcasses, like bodies foreign to the body they dressed", Denis Bruna writes in his introduction. "Without a body, the garment has no reason to exist; it is merely a lifeless mass of fabric, a soulless hide." Several pages of abstract, close-up photographs of, for instance, beehive-shaped wire frames and rattan hoops suspended on white or black backgrounds prove Bruna's point: pictured in isolation these shapes have little meaning. "In short, fashion makes the body", he says: "there is no natural body, only a cultural body. The body is a reflection of the society that presided over its creation".

It is not uncommon to read that fashion was invented in the Middle Ages, Bruna writes, though he warns that this consensus may stem as much from the increase in written and pictorial evidence as from any genuine change. These materials suggest that from the fourteenth century a new awareness of clothing, as a way to sculpt the body, developed. Where both men and women, Bruna shows, had worn a voluminous garment like a monastic habit – the surcoat – women now dressed in a long robe (the bliaut) often with a low neckline (sometimes provocatively bare down to the nipples), fitted tightly at the waist with laces tied at the front or back to support, compress and lift the breasts and exaggerate the hips. Although the binding of breasts was nothing new (women in ancient Rome wore bands of fabric called *mamillare*), this impulse was noticeably documented in the medieval period. Men, meanwhile, wore doublets – so called because the garment was made from doubled-up material, between which cotton padding or silk cocoon scraps were stitched – at first as cushioning underneath armour, and then as a way of enhancing the chest and broadening the shoulders under everyday clothing, covering the whole torso to just below the waist, or not: one of Bruna's rich examples comes from the Parson in *The Canterbury Tales*, who denounces the shortness of men's doublets that "show the boss and the shape of the horrible swollen members that seem like to the malady of hernia . . . and eke the buttocks that fare as it were the hinder part of a she-ape in the full of the moon". An exquisite frontispiece from an illuminated Bible given to King Charles V of France by his adviser, Jean de Vaudetar, in 1372, is reproduced here, showing the King on the left sitting in an outdated surcoat and de Vaudetar kneeling on the right in a doublet that strikingly contorts his body: a swollen chest and tiny waist, like a greyhound. Still, these male and female silhouettes have both played a decisive role in Western fashion.

Shoulders were further broadened in the fifteenth century, as men added a cylindrical roll around the armholes to which ballooning fabric was attached. But by the sixteenth century, they were no longer the star attraction. The doublet was modified to become the peascod, or goose-bellied doublet, which was padded to a point at the waist like a breastplate, while more padding swelled with supports around the abdomen, sculpting a hanging paunch. This all centred on the codpiece, and Bruna dedicates an entire chapter to it. Besides being a functional opening at the crotch – indeed, earlier codpieces were a piece of cloth partly attached with buttons or eyelets at the groin – these pouches were stuffed or layered with stiff fabric to highlight and stimulate the penis. Puffed up, or trying to puff themselves up, with rank and virility, men of all social classes adopted this new-fangled appendage. Giovanni Battista Moroni's entertaining portrait of Antonio Navagero (1565), for example, depicts the Venetian bureaucrat with a bulging red-velvet codpiece protruding from his fur-lined robe, like his shiny, ruddy nose poking out from his beard above. As Philip Stubbes pointed out in his pamphlet *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), men were "so stuffed, wadded, and sewn that they can't even bend down to the ground".

Women fared little better. In the sixteenth century, beauty among the elite was concentrated around the face. Women's figures were elongated, flared and padded at the hips with the help of farthingales (a series of connected hoops made from whalebone, rattan, reeds or cord under the skirt) to hide the "carnal" parts of the body, and the head, the "noble" part of the body, was emphasized at the top with a high, stand-up collar. Later, in the seventeenth century, the same effect was achieved with a stiff white linen ruff ("the platter upon which the head was served", Bruna tells us), also worn by men and children.

One of the most shocking items from this time, though, is the iron corset. A fascinating chapter by Bruna and Sophie Vesin focuses on the ten or so that survive in various museum collections: "more closely related to metalwork than textiles" and "at times compared to instruments of torture", they are the oldest versions of a corset, some of which have been dated to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; they open and close with hinges, and are pierced, not just for decoration but to reduce their weight (those still in existence each weigh between 800 grams and a kilo). Some of the sharp ridges still have traces of velvet edging. (Just imagine the pain when caught on skin!) No visual evidence survives of their being worn, but it seems likely that some were. What we do have are written records: Eleonora of Toledo ordered two from her family's armourer in 1549. The authors perhaps don't make it clear enough, however, that another of their examples, the "marquise-marquis de Banneville", is a fictional one, from the tale ascribed to the Abbé de Choisy (1695): a mother, fearing her son will be lost in battle, puts him in a metal corset to reshape his body, creating feminine hips and a bust.

The surgeon Ambroise Paré, in 1575, recommended iron corsets for "flaccid" girls who had hunchbacks. To Bruna and Vesin, fashion and orthopaedics are not always in opposition: "orthopedics, which are today exclusively a branch of medicine, were principally a social art in former times. Holding oneself erect, and staying that way, was a preoccupation of the upper classes, and iron corsets furthered this aim". The preoccupation persists over centuries. We repeatedly come across undergarments in this book that offer the body "support", help with "fat-busting", toning, moisturizing and so on. A French poster from the 1950s promotes stomach bands for toddlers for their "delicate frame", a custom that was standard between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries when girls and boys wore the same clothes as adults, including corsets and skirts. Only after the age of six did boys abandon severe body-binding undergarments to wear pants or breeches like men. Anti-obesity belts became a popular way for men in the 1900s to compress their flab – a symbol of softness and indulgence not admired as it was in the previous century. An advert from 1928 proclaims: "Obesity makes you ridiculous. Big-bellied men, give up the figure that makes you ugly and start wearing the Franck-Braun belt". The second half of the twentieth century gave us Issey Miyake's plastic-moulded bustiers, and plaster corsets by Alexander McQueen, as well as a skin-tight brown leather corset, with large diagonal stitches across the chest and abdomen as if closing up a wound.

Certainly, hindering the body's movement was deliberate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was a way of showing off one's wealth: the less you could do physically, the more servants you needed to do things for you. Petticoat breeches, laden with ribbons and lace, worn by men at the court of Louis XIV were described by Molière as "folly" in *L'École des maris*: "large rolls wherin the legs are put every morning, as it were into the stocks", making the wearer "straddle about with their legs as wide apart as if they were the beams of a mill". Added to this were silk stockings to slim the legs (calves were sometimes subtly padded with material to amplify lacking muscles) and precarious heels (also worn by women), often up to three or four inches high, altering one's gait.

A few decades on in Versailles, whalebone corsets, known as stays, unforgivingly squeezed women's shoulder blades together one on top of the other to such an extent that you could put two fingers into the hollow created down the spine. The farthingale had developed into ever-widening panniers that extended sideways from the hips. Walking with ease was a skill you had to learn. Before she was seven, the Comtesse de Genlis remembered: "I was quite surprised when I was told that I was to be given a master to teach me what I thought I knew perfectly well – how to walk . . . and to rid me of my provincial airs, I was given an iron collar". It was also fashionable to wear shoe buckles so enormous that they could deliver glancing blows to the opposite ankle as you walked. And, of course, to wear wigs: during the reign of Louis XVI – a significant moment in European fashion history, according to Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell's absorbing and well-illustrated survey, *Fashion Victims* – some men wore wigs fitted with metal, face-lifting armatures to stretch out wrinkles on the forehead, while women stiffened and enhanced the height of their own hair with pomade and false attachments. In a letter of March 5, 1775, Marie-Antoinette's mother chastised her daughter: "They say your hair is 36 inches high from the roots, and with so many feathers and ribbons that it rises even higher! . . . A pretty young queen, full of attractions, has no need of all these follies".

What Chrisman-Campbell does so well in this book is to explain how a new global fashion system, established in France during the eighteenth century, became political. "The sartorial restlessness . . . was symptomatic of – and, ultimately, responsible for – the gradual, inexorable unraveling of France's social fabric that would culminate in revolution." Three archetypes provoked and personified the country's changes: the queen; the *petite-maîtresse*, a label given to urban women lower down the social scale, who were occupied in keeping up with the latest fads despite how unflattering, expensive or frivolous they were; and the *marchande de modes*, similar to what we would now call a designer, who perpetuated the fashion cycle by relentlessly introducing new garment constructions.

An influential individual could single-handedly garner support for current causes, and sustain or bankrupt whole branches of the country's commerce. When Louis XVI was inoculated from smallpox in 1774, the *marchandes de modes* commemorated the event with the *pouf à l'inoculation*, a headdress representing a rising sun and the serpent of Asclepius. Hats adorned with miniature ships celebrated French naval victories, as well as showcasing the wearer's patriotism and political engagement. Clothing was a way of telling others which plays, composers and ideas you liked. If it hadn't been for fashion, the Enlightenment might not have spread through Europe, Chrisman-Campbell suggests.

Marie-Antoinette, however, had an inappropriate interest in clothes. Her decision to use Paris's most fashionable *marchandes de modes* to dress her, rather than those officially appointed at Versailles, deviated from court protocol. She spent 258,002 livres on clothes and accessories in 1785 (more than twice her annual budget). A third of this went to her favourite *marchande*, Rose Bertin, whose career was made (and with time, destroyed) by the royal association: "wildly rich without being even remotely wellborn, Bertin was a walking threat to the entire social order". Anything Marie-Antoinette wore would quickly appear in fashion plates and magazines as "*à la reine*" and be copied by the public. Without sumptuary laws, luxury was suddenly within reach for anyone. In the 1780s, for example, the Queen's preference for imported muslins and gauzes over the silks produced in Lyon helped put France's textile industry out of business. This was part of her move towards a more natural aesthetic and to fend off critics of her extravagance, but the catastrophic economic impact of her *chemise à la reine* – a plain, white muslin gown with a gathered neckline and sleeves, a wide sash tied at the waist and no hoop under the skirt – meant that she was never more criticized for her wardrobe. With the throne's reputation at stake, Bertin and the Queen's portraitist, Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, were called on to perform "sartorial damage control". The result, a portrait, here given a full page, shows Marie-Antoinette posing in a suitably regal red velvet dress, trimmed with sable and Alençon lace (a pointed endorsement of the French lace industry), surrounded by her children. It was exhibited at the Salon in August 1787, and almost immediately withdrawn because of a public outcry. The empty frame remained on the wall of the Louvre with a note pinned to it reading, "Behold the Deficit!"

In some ways, France never escaped the potency of fashion. Looking beyond the sans-culottes, Chrisman-Campbell argues that the red, white and blue cockade became a symbol of enforced conformity to the principles of the French Revolution. By 1792, it was mandatory for both sexes, even foreign visitors to France, to wear it. "Absolute monarchy was replaced by an equally despotic form of mob rule." The Revolution had transformed "*la mode*" to "*le mode*", she says, acknowledging that fashions in dress were inseparable from fashions in ideas.

The history of the Revolution is dynamically told in *Fashion Victims*, and where Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell tries to gauge the cultural significance of clothes, art, personal memoirs and other assorted and well-chosen sources, she avoids jargon. The book is thoroughly researched (the translations from the French texts are her own) and inflected with energy. Marie-Antoinette is condemned, again; but we can see more clearly than ever why it happened.

An American corset, *c.*1865; from *Fashioning the Body*