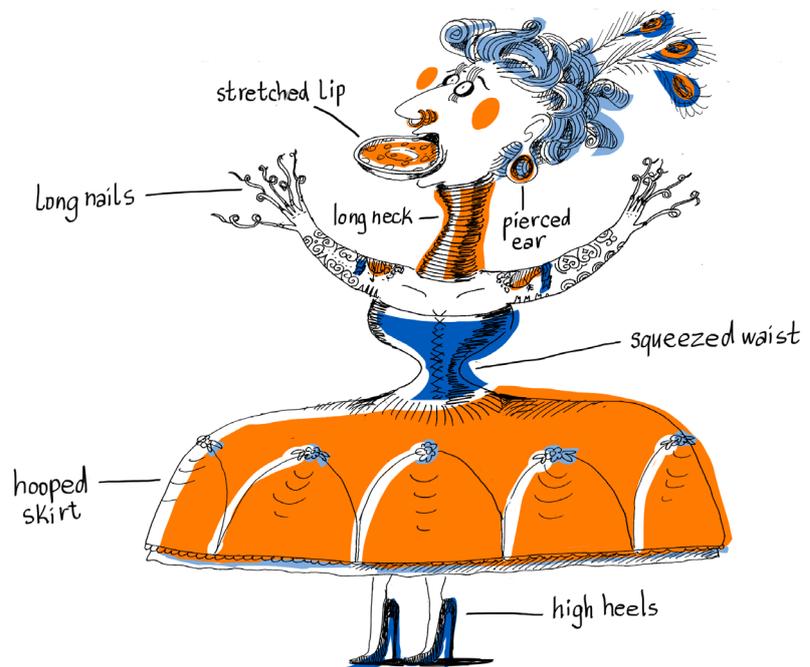


Women feel the squeeze as corsets make comeback

In the quest to achieve a 'Coke bottle' figure, more and more women are turning to corsets – which can damage bones and squeeze internal organs. Why is looking 'good' so often so painful?



ART & DESIGN
 HISTORY & POLITICS

For the upper-class ladies of the 19th Century, getting dressed was hard work. Every day, a woman would squeeze herself into a stiff whalebone corset. Pulled tight, the rigid frame would pull the lady inward – reducing her waist from a healthy 28 inches to a minuscule 18.

By the 1960s, women had been released from this underwear tyranny. But soon, girls may have to breathe in again. The corset is back. And this time, it is called a faja.

Originally designed as a bandage for liposuction patients, the faja took off in Latin America, and is now spreading to other countries, where women see it as a way to get a 'perfect' figure.

The quest for coke bottle curves, however, should be embarked on with caution. In Victorian times, corsets caused broken ribs, birth defects and spine deformities. Women would frequently swoon to the 'fainting room' as undergarments squeezed internal organs,

along with their waists.

As well as their corsets, Victorian women often wore great hooped skirts known as 'crinolines' – which were even more hazardous. Women who weren't careful could cause chaos as they moved around a room, upending anything from tea sets to small children. In high winds, the giant tents strapped around their waists could even cause respectable matrons to blow away altogether.

And lack of mobility could be fatal. When a Chilean church caught fire in 1863, crinoline-wearing churchgoers blocked doorways and tripped their fleeing friends. Nearly 3,000 people died.

At around the same time, on the other side of the world, women were suffering for a very different ideal of beauty. In childhood, Chinese girls would have their feet broken and then bound with bandages, which were wrapped tighter and tighter as they grew. The resulting, folded feet were frequently gangrenous,

desperately painful, and virtually impossible to walk on – but were considered dainty and refined.

These examples are a few among many. Elizabethan women made their skin paler with makeup made from lead – a poison that causes brain damage and death. Some women in Burma wear stacks of metal hoops as necklaces, pushing down the shoulders to give the illusion of a long neck. And today, as many as 20,000 women are hospitalised each year – by high heels.

PAIN IS BEAUTY?

What kind of society expects women to endure pain to look good? Only a society, many say, that places a woman's appearance before her health and happiness. It is time for girls to throw off their heels, and refuse to be tortured by the tyranny of beauty.

'But I love my heels', fashionistas cry. Looking good and experimenting with trends are some of life's joys. And like all luxuries, they are worth a few sacrifices.

Q & A

Q Corsets are unlikely to come back into fashion, surely?

A In the 1800s corsets were all the rage; in the 1920s, young women flattened their chests for the 'flapper' look. Many of today's models are much skinnier than in previous decades, which encourages some

young women to go on extreme diets. Fashion changes all the time, and often throws up unexpected trends.

Q But nothing today makes us suffer as much as corsets...

A Some would argue otherwise. Today, women spend a fortune on painfully waxing the hair from their bodies. Breast implants, botox and other forms of plastic surgery are serious invasive procedures. And where

ladies once used lead for a paler look, today's beauty buffs think nothing of using sunbeds to get a tan – exposing themselves to dangerous cancer-causing rays.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Looking good is more important than being comfortable.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► Women feel the squeeze as corsets make comeback

WORD WATCH

28 inches – In the 18th Century, waist sizes were much smaller – an average of less than 27 inches. Today, that has jumped up to 34 inches. Most corsets could narrow the waist by at least six inches, and some women would gradually tighten them, to make their waists even smaller.

Liposuction – Liposuction is a form of plastic surgery that removes fat from different areas of the body. To remove the fat, a surgeon inserts a tube into a slit made in the patient's skin, then pumps this backwards and forwards to break up the fat and remove it. Fat is often removed from the hips, arms, thighs or bum.

Coke-bottle curves – Coca Cola's glass bottle has been a design

classic since its creation in 1915. Its distinctive curved shape is based on a cocoa pod, but many have also drawn comparisons with a curvy female shape.

Crinolines – Although it originally meant a stiff fabric, made from horsehair, the word crinoline came to refer to a rigid petticoat, like a cage, that gave structure to a skirt. In the 1800s, crinolines could reach up to 180cm in length.

YOU DECIDE

1. Are you happy to suffer for fashion?
2. Why do you think women, rather than men, have been expected to follow painful dress codes throughout history?

ACTIVITIES

1. Design a poster encouraging women to abandon high heels.
2. Create a fashion design that completely disregards the importance of practicality and comfort.

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 **NOTES**

