

Fashioning the Body:
An Intimate History of the Silhouette

On View April 3–July 26, 2015



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The extraordinary ways in which women and men have shaped their bodies into distinctive silhouettes in the name of fashion will be examined in an exhibition opening next spring.

Having garnered high acclaim at the Musée des Arts décoratifs in Paris in 2013, the exhibition *Fashioning the Body: An Intimate History of the Silhouette* will be on display at the Bard Graduate Center from April 3 through July 26, 2015. The exhibition will present the many devices and materials that women and men have used to shape their silhouettes from the seventeenth century to today, including panniers, corsets, crinolines, bustles, stomach belts, girdles, and push-up brassieres. The exhibition will also look at how lacing, hinges, straps, springs, and stretch fabrics have been used to alter natural body forms.

Curated by Denis Bruna, curator of pre-19th-century fashion and textile collections at the Musée des Arts décoratifs and professor at the École du Louvre, the exhibition will explore the history of what has long been “behind the scenes” in clothing and fashion—far beyond the corset, the best-known device for shaping the figure. This show, which draws heavily on the Paris museum’s unrivaled costume collection, is the first of its kind, and the Bard Graduate Center will be its only venue in North America.

Although a broad array of silhouette-shaping garments has evolved over the course of fashion history, and techniques have been refined, the purpose of such garments has remained consistent: to flatten the stomach, compress the waist to the point of hollowing it out, support the bust, lift the breasts (and sometimes flatten them), and add curves to the hips. In short, comfort was superseded by appearance until about 1900, when couturiers such as Paul Poiret launched, however fleetingly, a vogue for “natural” lines.

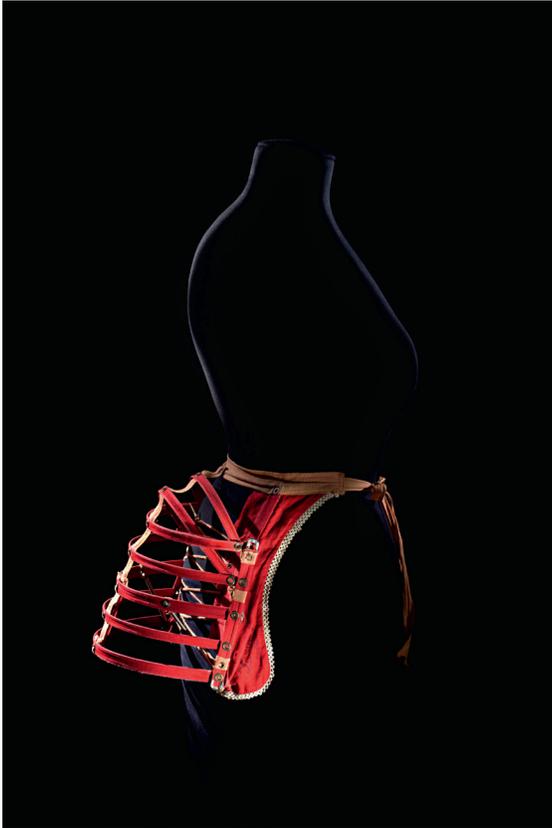
The tricks for fashioning women’s bodies have always confounded belief, from the earliest boned bodices through today’s push-ups. Spread across three floors of the Bard Graduate Center Gallery’s townhouse, *Fashioning the Body* opens with the seventeenth-century silhouette, exemplified by a rare women’s Spanish doublet, which was internally reinforced to be more rigid. Structured with armatures and other mechanisms, the



Bridal corset. United States, ca. 1860–70. Cotton interwoven with wood and whalebone stays, cotton thread embroidery, metal busks and eyelets. Collection of Melanie Talkington, Vancouver. Photographer: Patricia Canino.

garments of the eighteenth century enforced the erect posture prized first by the aristocracy and later by an influential bourgeoisie in order to convey a sense of superiority through the display of an idealized physical form. The epitome of the transformed female silhouette is the late eighteenth-century formal or court dress, examples of which will be on display alongside the undergarments that molded their distinctive silhouettes. In men’s fashion, the exhibition explores how padded jackets provoked arched torsos; how calf enhancers, stomach belts, and codpieces were worn; and how variations on these enhancements continued into the nineteenth century and beyond. The exhibition will also include garments for children, who wore corsets beginning in the seventeenth century.

Langtry, bustle "strapontin." France, 1887. Satin, braid, cotton lacing, crocheted lace, metal armature, fasteners, eyelets. Inscription: "Langtry. Patented [. . .]" Les Arts Décoratifs, collection Union française des arts du costume, UF 2013-010-1. Photographer: Patricia Canino.



Fashioning the Body continues into the nineteenth century, in which the corset held tyrannical sway, embodying the voguish insistence on a "wasp waist," accentuated by the excessive ballooning of crinoline. After 1870 this kind of boned hoopskirt disappeared and was replaced by the bustle—also known as the *faux-cul* (fake buttocks), "shrimp tail," or *strapontin* (jump seat)—which gave women an odd and sinuous profile reminiscent of a goose. Undergarments were never as abundant or as concealed as they were in the nineteenth century. The exhibition will continue with the brassiere and girdle, including examples used by men, and eventually the bust-enhancing and push-up bras of today. These devices were designed to create a plunging look for even the slimmest figures, reflecting the dictates of the canons of beauty at a time when bodies are modeled more by diets, body building, and surgery than by clothing. In addition to complete outfits shaped by these hidden structural contraptions, the exhibition will also feature moving mannequins wearing mechanized reconstructions of panniers, crinolines, and bustles in order to show how the undergarments worked. The exhibition space will also include an area where visitors can try on specially made replicas of corsets, eighteenth-century panniers, and crinolines in order to understand the workings of these structures, which have played such an important role in the history of fashion.

Bra (and bustier). France, 1920–30. Cotton tulle, silk satin, elastic, lace. Les Arts Décoratifs, collection Mode et Textile, don Madame de la Marlière de la Sauverie 1994, 992-502. Photographer: Patricia Canino.



The Curator

Denis Bruna has a doctorate in history from the University of Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne. He joined Les Arts Décoratifs in 2011 as curator of textile and fashion collections before the nineteenth century. He is also a professor and director of research in the history of fashion, costume, and textiles at the École du Louvre. His research focuses on the history and iconography of the costume, dress, and customs of the body. He has published several books and was the curator of the 2012 exhibition *Fashioning Fashion: Two Centuries of European Fashion 1700–1915*.

The Bard Graduate Center, in collaboration with Yale University Press, will publish an English-language version of the book that accompanied the exhibition in Paris, which is now out of print. The book includes essays by leading European fashion historians and new photography by Patricia Canino. It is edited by Denis Bruna and looks at undergarments from the fourteenth century on.

Notes to Editors

In Paris, the 2013 exhibition was entitled *Les Mécaniques des dessous: Une histoire indiscrette de la silhouette*.

Gallery Programs

Lectures, gallery talks, and conversations are offered in conjunction with the exhibition. For more information, please call 212-501-3011 or e-mail programs@bgc.bard.edu.

Exhibition Tours

Group exhibition tours for adult and school groups are offered Tuesday through Friday between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. and Thursday until 7 p.m. Reservations are required for all groups. To schedule a tour, please call 212-501-3013 or e-mail tours@bgc.bard.edu.

The Bard Graduate Center Gallery is located in New York City at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Thursday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Suggested admission is \$7 general, \$5 seniors.

About the Bard Graduate Center

The Bard Graduate Center is a graduate research institute in New York City. Our Gallery exhibitions and publications, MA and PhD programs, and research initiatives explore new ways of thinking about decorative arts, design history, and material culture. Founded in 1993, the BGC is an academic unit of Bard College. *Fashioning the Body* is the third in a series of collaborations between the Musée des Arts décoratifs and the Bard Graduate Center, which included *Chinese Cloisonné* (2011) and *Discovering the Secrets of Soft-Paste Porcelain at the Saint-Cloud Manufactory, ca. 1690–1766* (1999).

About the Musée des Arts décoratifs

The Musée des Arts décoratifs, housed in the Louvre building, is a unique, private institution composed of a specialized library, teaching facilities, and an ensemble of prestigious museums, including the Musée Nissim de Camondo and the Musée des Arts décoratifs.

The Musée des Arts décoratifs fulfills a unique role in the French cultural landscape. Its six thousand objects on view in 10,000 square meters of exhibition space highlight the skills of craftsmen through the centuries, the evolution of styles, technological innovation, and the creativity of artists in enriching our day-to-day environment. It is the only museum able to pay tribute to all the great names that have forged the history of French taste, from Bouille, Sèvres, Aubusson, Christofle, Lalique, and Guimard to Mallet Stevens, Le Corbusier, Perriand, and Starck. The museum's chronological itinerary guides visitors through all the major styles and movements, from Gothic to Louis XVI, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, and modern design.

Les Arts Décoratifs also boasts exceptional fashion and textile collections, among the finest in the world, and a vast collection of advertising posters, films, and objects. The wealth of these collections enables Les Arts Décoratifs to run a program of ten to fifteen thematic and monographic exhibitions covering every historic and contemporary aspect of the decorative arts.

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Front page caption: Whalebone corset. France, ca. 1740–60. Silk satin damask, braided silk, linen bows covered in silk and decorated with metallic thread, whalebone, linen lining. Les Arts Décoratifs, collection Mode et Textile, PR 995.16.1. Articulated pannier. France, ca. 1770. Iron covered with leather, fabric tape. Les Arts Décoratifs, depot du musée national du Moyen Âge-Thermes et hotel de Cluny 2005, Cluny 7875. Photographer: Patricia Canino.