Reform, Women, and Fashion: Changes in Women’s Daywear from 1840 to 1920

“...A number of events and cultural shifts aided the change in attitude about reform dress. Yet clearly women’s clothing reform came about through evolution rather than revolution.”

- Patricia A. Cunningham, Author of Reforming Women’s Fashion, 1850 – 1920: Politics, Health, and Art

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By the mid-nineteenth century, more middle-class women were attending colleges, working outside the home, and taking on more active public roles. At the same time women were expected to follow fashion to exemplify good taste and respectability, which meant wearing layers of restrictive clothing.

Dress reformers, who included both men and women within the fields of health, education, art, and politics viewed the restriction of women’s fashion as both damaging to women’s health and a means to secure women’s inferior political and social positions within society. The dress reform movement occurred alongside the health reform movement in which women’s health was a primary concern. The weight and cut of women’s clothing prevented women from getting adequate exercise needed to maintain health and beauty. Due to the restriction of their dress, women avoided climbing stairs and lifting heavy objects. In addition, their long, heavy skirts dragged the ground, collecting dirt and dust, which made them unsanitary. Dress reformers believed that change in women’s dress was necessary for women to be healthy in order to be more active within the public sphere.

Politics was another major concern among dress reformers—most of them believed in women’s rights and gender equality. They promoted “rational” dress, which included alternatives to fashionable dress such as trousers or “Aesthetic” gowns, defined in this exhibit as interior
gowns, or rational undergarments that were designed to be less confining and/or made out of lighter-weight materials. At the time of their introduction, it was not acceptable for women to wear trousers and interior gowns in public. In particular, wearing trousers in public subjected women to ridicule as trousers were quickly associated with the then controversial women’s rights political movement. As a result, most advocates of dress reform focused their efforts on reforming undergarments, which allowed them to invisibly alter their dress without subjecting them to ridicule.

This exhibit is a part of a collaborative project that celebrates the socio-political impact of the 19th Amendment that gave women the right to vote. Featured here are examples of fashionable women’s day dress, dress for participation in sports, and undergarments that point toward dress reform. The exhibit captures the evolution of women’s fashion that was influenced by the efforts of dress reformers, combined with other social and political factors.

**Women’s Day Dress 1850-1860**

Fashionable day dress of the 1850s and 1860s consisted of gowns that were constructed with a sloped shoulder line and closely-fitted waistline, combined with full skirts supported by a “cage crinoline,” an undergarment made of a series of metal graduated hoops, to achieve the fashionable hour-glass figure. Sleeves were cut low on the
armscye, which prevented women from fully lifting their arms and hindered their movement.

The small waistline was achieved by wearing a corset. Dress reformers believed that corsets not only restricted breathing, but caused disease by displacing and damaging internal organs. Others viewed the corset as a symbol of women’s oppression and inequality. However, women continued to wear corsets for the remainder of the nineteenth century due to their interests in fashion, and because the corset was a necessary part of proper and respectable dress.

**Women’s Undergarments 1850-1860**

Dress reformers believed that women wore too many undergarments that restricted their movement and mobility, placed an uneven distribution of weight across the body, and brought on sickness as women experienced fluctuations in temperature as a result of their undergarments. In the mid-nineteenth century, the typical set of undergarments included a pair of stockings held up by garters, a pair of drawers or pantalets, a chemise, a corset, a corset cover, and multiple layers of petticoats (under skirts). Because the number of petticoats needed to achieve the fashionable silhouette contributed to these issues, dress reformers designed solutions that would reduce the heavy layers of undergarments and evenly distribute the weight of clothing on the body. The “cage crinoline,” developed in 1856 resolved these issues as it reduced the number of garments suspended from the
waist, increased mobility by placing petticoats over the hoops, and eliminated excessive heat produced from wearing many layers of petticoats.

**Trousers in Women’s Dress 1850-1920**

The first form of women’s trousers was worn with a matching dress with a shortened skirt. These were either cut straight or gathered in at the ankle, a style known as the Turkish trouser. Dress reformers promoted wearing trousers in public as an alternative to the fashionable skirts, which were not only cumbersome and unsanitary, but were dangerous as they easily caught fire. A group of American feminists and women’s rights activists, including Elizabeth Smith Miller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Amelia Bloomer adopted the costume with Turkish trousers, which became known as the Bloomer Costume after Bloomer had written about and promoted the costume in 1851. The costume was not widely adopted because it was associated with men’s garments, and those who wore it were ridiculed for not conforming to the standards for respectable women’s dress. Many women’s rights activists who wore the costume faced hostility and abandoned it by 1859, as it became a symbol of their oppression and impeded their advocacy for women’s rights.

While the push for women wearing trousers in place of skirts failed during this time, versions of the Bloomer costume were worn as uniforms or “gymnasium suits” for
college physical education classes, particularly calisthenics (gymnastics for women), as early as 1863. Versions of the costume also became acceptable for bathing (swimming), hiking, tennis, mountaineering, boating and other exercise and outdoor activities, and later bicycling, when it became popular during the 1890s.

**Women’s Day Dress and Undergarments 1870-1890**

Between 1870 and 1890, fashionable women’s day dress consisted of two-piece gowns that continued to achieve the hour-glass silhouette. Necklines were topped with high and close-fitting collars, and sleeves and skirts were long. The fullness of the skirt shifted to the back and was supported by a bustle pad or a series of hoops worn in the back of the skirt. The latter created a rigid, shelf-like appearance, fashionable toward the latter part of the period.

Dress reformers continued to seek solutions in undergarments by designing whole sets of “rational” underclothing. One such successful solution was the combination, which reduced the number of undergarments by combining the chemise and drawers into one garment. Combinations were also suspended from the shoulders, placing an even distribution of weight across the body. In addition, undergarments were produced in lighter weight materials such as light-weight silks, as opposed to heavy cottons.
Women viewed having a slim waist as a symbol of youth and beauty and were reluctant to stop wearing corsets. Due to several technological innovations including the use of metal eyelets and steam-molding in corset making, corsets were more closely-fitted to the body and allowed for tighter lacing. At the same time, women were desiring more comfortable corsets, which led corset-makers to introduce new models of corsets to meet this need.

1880s – 1890s Interior Gowns

Interior gowns were forms of day dress worn at home and included house gowns, wrappers, morning gowns, dressing gowns, and tea gowns. These were cut more simply and looser-fitting than daytime gowns worn in public. Their looser fit allowed women to loosen the laces of their corsets or wear fewer and/or looser undergarments beneath. Women may have worn an underbodice, a foundation garment similar to a corset, but not boned, with these kinds of gowns.

Interior gowns were often cut in the princess style introduced in the 1860s; one with no waist seam and constructed out of long panels sewn from shoulder to hem. The panels were curved to achieve a close fit at the waist and retain the fashionable hourglass silhouette. This type of construction allowed the garment to be suspended from the shoulders instead of the waist, a feature that appealed to dress reformers, as well as members of the aesthete movement, primarily artists, who also took an interest in dress reform. Tea gowns, in particular, became
an integral part of “Aesthetic dress,” as they were often made in the princess style and had loosely-fitted fronts. As members of the aesthetic movement adopted and promoted these gowns as alternatives to public forms of dress that could be worn without a corset, they were perceived as rational or reform garments.

**Women’s Day Dress 1890-1909**

Fashionable day dress of the 1890s retained an hour-glass silhouette achieved by a corseted waist, large sleeves, and bell-shaped skirts. Small bustle pads supported a small concentration of pleats or gathers in the back of the skirt. As more women began to participate in sports and enter the workforce, women needed more practical clothing. For such occasions, women wore skirts that rose 3 or 4 inches off the floor worn with separate shirtwaist (blouses) and/or tailor-mades, two-piece suits comprised of matching jackets and skirts, which were also worn with shirtwaists.

**Women’s Day Dress 1900-1909**

Fashionable day dress between 1900 and 1909 shifted away from the hour-glass to an s-shaped curve in which the bosom was thrust forward and the hips were thrust backward. Women’s day dress consisted of two-piece and one-piece dresses with high boned collars, pouched or “pouter-pigeon” bodices, and trumpet-shaped skirts that were flat in front and rounded in back.
The cotton or linen lingerie gown was a popular form of day dress. So named because it was decorated with the same bands of lace and embroidery, tucking, pleating, and lace insertions found on undergarments of the time.

**Women’s Undergarments 1890-1920**

From 1890-1900, women still wore several layers of underclothing, which consisted of a chemise and drawers or combination, corset or waist cincher, corset cover, camisole bustle pad, and petticoat.

Bust improvers, worn to fill out the bustline were introduced in the 1890s and used in the 1900s to facilitate the new s-curve silhouette.

The bust supporter introduced in the 1890s served as a forerunner to the brassiere, which first appeared in 1904. Bust supporters were promoted as healthy, comfortable alternatives to corsets as they supported, but did not confine the bust. These were worn with corsets that ended below the bust and cinched the waist. Brassieres were worn with corsets between 1900 and 1920.

Beginning in the 1910s, the number of undergarments women wore decreased, and corsets became lighter in weight and less restrictive. The practice of wearing corsets eventually disappeared as young women grew accustomed to wearing less restrictive undergarments produced in lighter-weight fabrics, and they were no longer required to wear corsets to appear respectably and appropriately dressed.
Women’s Day Dress 1909-1920

Throughout the 1910s, the silhouette of fashionable day dress grew narrower throughout the decade, reducing the number of undergarments and width of petticoats worn beneath. Beginning in 1909, the waistline moved upward to just above the natural waist. By 1918-19, waistline definition disappeared and dresses were loosely fitted through the waist, owing to fashion designer Jeanne Lanvin’s introduction of the straight, tubular chemise dress.

Dress reformers’ efforts had finally materialized in this new decade. These efforts, when combined with the influence of World War I and the changing roles of American women (facilitated by the passing of the 19th amendment that guaranteed women the right to vote), brought about simpler, more practical clothing for women. Increasing numbers of women entered the workforce and took on more stereotypically male jobs that were left vacant by soldiers fighting in World War I. By the end of the decade, skirts grew to be several inches above the ankles and were wider around the hem.

Women’s Day Dress 1920-1929

The straight, tubular chemise dress introduced in the previous decade was widely worn and gave way to a new silhouette evident in 1920s fashionable day dress. The ideal boyish figure was achieved by a flat bosom, narrow hips, and no waist indentation. One-piece dresses, as well as
separate blouses and skirts, and matching suits were worn. Chanel-style suits, which included a cardigan-style jacket were very popular.

The most significant characteristic of women’s dress of the period was that skirts revealed women’s legs for the first time in history. Skirts shortened to 18 inches from the ground by the end of the decade. The shorter skirts were influenced by a range of factors: (1) shorter skirts made it easier for women to drive cars; (2) shorter skirts were more practical for more and more women entering the workforce; and (3) the acceptance of shorter skirts reflected their new-found place in society after gaining the right to vote in 1920 through the ratification of the 19th Amendment.

Women’s Undergarments 1920-1929

By the 1920s, undergarments had dissolved into a few pieces and were made of lightweight silks. Only larger women wore corsets to achieve the fashionable silhouette. Panties replaced drawers and were worn with a brassiere designed to achieve the new fashionable tubular, boyish silhouette. The combination evolved into step-ins or teddies, which combined the camisole (formerly the corset cover) and panties into a single undergarment. The chemise or petticoat became the slip. Stockings, including those that were flesh-colored (held up by garters), were worn as the shorter skirt lengths revealed women’s legs.

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