Crystal Llerena

[cllere88@gmail.com](mailto:cllere88@gmail.com)

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Museum Exhibition object analysis paper

The object I chose to analyze is a corset top by Jean Paul Gaultier from his fall 2010 collection. The corset is made of satin with intricate outline stitching on the top and bottom parts of the corset. Around the bust area a pattern of circles is done by lining it and the same pattern repeats at the bottom of the corset with straight lines around it. The waist of the corset seems to cinch in by boning in the undergarment that creates an hourglass silhouette. The rigid boning also helps frame the torso by accentuating it. The color of the corset is of a soft pink that gives a shiny appearance in the light from the satin fabric. Made by French designer Jean Paul Gauliter and considered to design one of the most recognizable garments: the corset. This was so by creating the famous “cone bra bustier” that was worn famously by Madonna during her Blond Ambition tour during the 1990’s.Gaultier created this corset specifically for her tour and it propelled him into a famous moment in pop culture history.

This particular corset in the exhibition was made for Gaultier’s 2010 fall collection and is considered to be a remake of the original corset from his creation for Madonna that caused a sensation. In the runway, the corset was presented in a more demure way by pairing it with a ripped up white t-shirt. The runway collection had an overall theme of underwear as outerwear and decided to revisit the famous “cone bra” corset. A New York Times reporter said of the runway show, “But to the initiated who've been following Gaultier since his Madonna days in the late eighties, it felt like territory he's explored many times before, and a heck of a lot more subtly (Saad, 2011, P. 3). His famous corset was thought to exude sexiness and powerfulness at the same time as does his own aesthetic. Jean Paul Gaultier was considered to be French fashions *enfant terrible* meaning the terrible child because of his unique and playful style his designs conjure up. He focused on the sexual freedom women wanted to express during the fame of the “cone-bra” corset and with that mindset he undoubtedly turned the corset from a symbol of the oppressed woman to that of the woman (or man) who is absolutely in control (Bowles, 2020).

The historical context of the corset is long and extensive, as well as with some controversy. The corset dates back as far as 1600 B.C, worn by women in the greek island of Crete as outerwear and certain tribes from countries such as Abkhazia would wear it to "beautify" women and also to ensure modesty (Riordan, 2007). However the corset classified as an undergarment was first mentioned, in Italy during the sixteenth century, by the Queen Consort of France, Catherine de’ Medici. This corset was elongated and tight at the bodice. They were often worn with a farthingale, a structure made for under Western women’s dresses or skirts to create a stiffened look. The corset worn under clothing turned the upper torso into a matching but inverted cone shape. These corsets had shoulder straps and ended in flaps at the waist.

Moving to the Elizabethan era, there was new material that formed the bodice to give a firm hold, a busk. A long, flat piece of whalebone or wood sewn into a casing on the corset in order to maintain its stiff shape (Fields, 1999). The corset would be worn for special occasions and events during these times. Further along in the Victorian era (1837-1901), the waistline got narrower by the corset due to more of a cinched waist that was popular in Victorian fashions. This fashion was to frame an hourglass silhouette, a popular style among western cultures, women would bulk up their sleeves and skirts therefore creating the illusion of a narrow waist.

Another memorable moment in corset history is in the Edwardian era. The corset was called the “s-bend” corset, its name is derived from the very rigid, straight busk inserted in the center front of the corset, and this corset forced the torso forward and made the hips jut out in back (Riordan, 2007). This garment personified what was the ideal beauty in a woman. And during this time the “Gibson Girl” fit this description, a feminine ideal of physical attractiveness as portrayed by the pen-and-ink illustrations of artist Charles Dana Gibson during a 20-year period that spanned the late 19th and early 20th century in the United States and Canada. Around this time when women would tightly lace their corsets to develop this “S-curve”, it inherently came with dangerous repercussions.

There was speculation by doctors that these corsets caused respiratory diseases, deformity to the ribs, damage to internal organs, birth defects and miscarriages, while others approved of “moderate” or “health” corsets that were less rigid and helped support the body (Fields, 1999). The structure of this corset caused injury in the back due to its unnatural posture the wearer had. This inspired illustrators in satirical newspapers to exaggerate this fashion trend by showcasing women struggling to tighten their laced corsets or depicting cartoons with distorted silhouettes.

Lastly in the twentieth century, corsets were out and girdles were in. As America was entering World War II, the U.S. The War Industries Board asked women to stop buying corsets to free up metal for war production. This was much needed metal to be used in building machinery for war. As this was a necessity the use of corsets were dwindling as well due to the famous proclamations of French fashion designer Coco Chanel, who said “...it was equally in the name of liberty that I proclaimed the fall of the corset and the adoption of the brasserie” (Poiret, 2019, p.39). However women still wanted the style of corset and opted for the girdle. With the introduction of elastic, in the 1920’s, women could still hold on to the shape of the corset but without confining the wearer. New garments started to emerge like girdles, compression underwear and brassieres. These garments were staples until the 1950's but it came to a halt in the late1960’s as women were in a second wave of femininity. A protest called the “Miss America Protest'', demonstrated protestors symbolically throwing a number of feminine products into a "Freedom Trash Can." These included girdles and corsets, which were among items the protestors called "instruments of female torture" and accouterments of what they argued were enforced femininity (Riordan, 2007).

Bringing it to the 1990’s corset had quite a history of positive and negative attributes however in the 90’s, corsets entered its way to a subculture of fetish fashion. To be extreme and provocative was the goal of the style and appearance of this type of dressing. Using undergarment as outer garments was Jean Paul Gaultier aesthetic and made the corset a symbol of female sexuality. The corset that Gaultier designed for his 2010 collection which was the likeness for his popular “cone-bra corset'', perfectly represented this sentiment.

The way this object was displayed in the exhibition was with a cluster of other objects that held a similar belief, this section was called “sheath in sex.” Raising the question, was what women wore made for the male gaze? Labeling objects as sexy can mean objectifying women however; feminists feel its polysomic, therefore taking control and power of wearing something so daring. I believe the exhibition was effective because the object aligned with what this section was about and with this particular object, designer Gaultier used a women imprisoning object and made it powerful. These classic elements like corsetry that could normally feel confined can be overturned into something sexy, and powerful. These Objects empowered women to take control; this is why it was featured in this exhibit it’s a mode of power by taking back objects like the corset and reinventing it to be appreciated as a strong statement.

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