

Northwest University

Kirkland Washington

Modern Myths of Corsetry: Debunked.

An undergraduate thesis project submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for completing the Northwest University Honors Program

By

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A Brief Introduction

I have the honor to complete the first project-based Honors thesis at Northwest University. This project was born out of over a year of research into historical clothing, body image, fashion history, and research into corsetry specifically. This presentation is merely a shadow of the research completed that underlies this project. I chose to build a corset from 1890, as that is one of my favorite historical silhouettes for women's fashion. Special thanks to Dr. Wade and Dr. Thompson, for their patience with my thesis as it adapted and took its final form. Instead of being presented as a research paper, this is a recreation of Material Culture and a tangible representation of history. For a full bibliography or more information about this project you can reach me through my NU email address: anna.chase19@northwestu.edu

Presentation by

Anna Chase

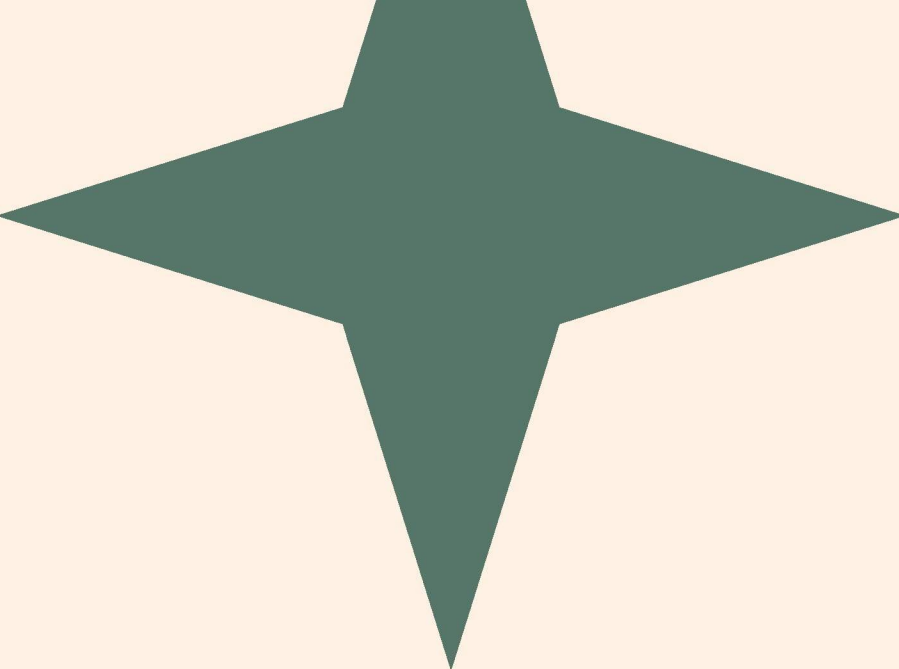
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Modern Myths of Corsetry: Debunked

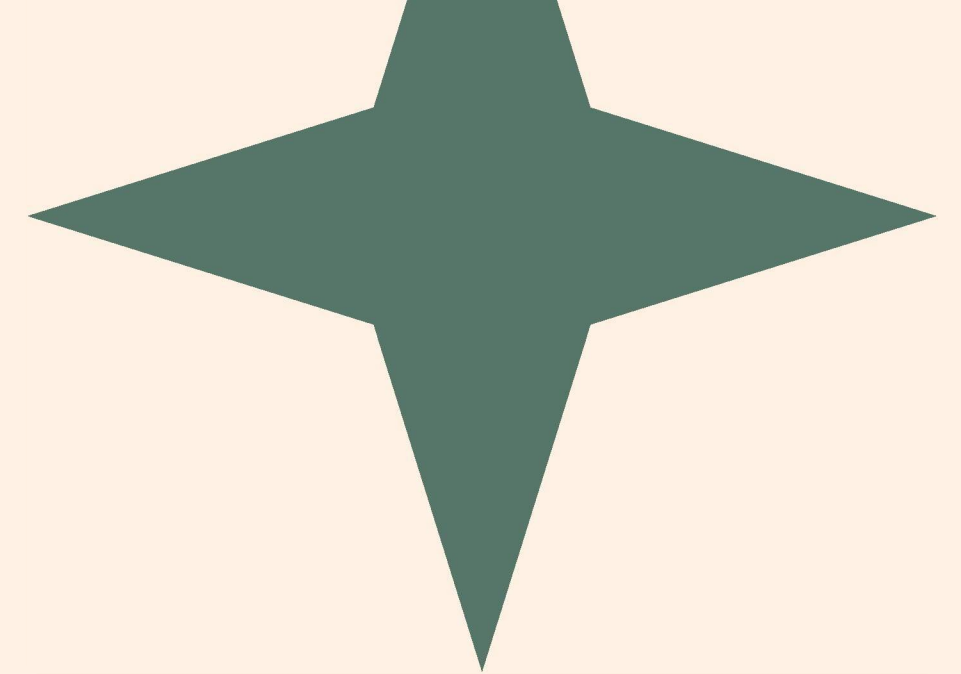
*A historical look at corsetry and how we
arrived at the narrative we have today*



*What do you
think when I
say "corset?"*

- 
- Oppression
 - Broken Ribs
 - Permanent deformity
 - Cause of organ failure
 - Women's Suffrage
-

*Who
perpetuates
this false
perception?*



- *Enola Holmes*
- *Bridgerton*
- *Pirates of the Caribbean*
- *Gone with the Wind*
- *Titanic*

Overview:

Answering Common Questions

01 **What are Corsets?**

02 **What are corsets
made of?**

03 **Debunking a Modern
Myth**



04 **My corsetmaking
experience**

05 **Why don't we wear
corsets anymore?**

What is a Corset?

Corsets are a structured undergarment primarily used by women to support the back and the bust. Many worldwide cultures had a structured garment that women wore to support their bodies. The earliest corset we see is from the 1300's.



Source unknown, *Stays*, 1795-1800.
The Victoria and Albert Museum.



Worcester Corset Company, *Corset*, 1880.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Worcester Corset Company, *Corset*, 1876.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

What were Corsets Made of?



Most of them were made using a thick linen or cotton fabric. If the wearer was wealthy, at certain times, the corset would have been decorated with silk and colorful embroidery.

The word "boning" most often refers to whale baleen that was inserted to provide better structure.

Some corsets and shorter stays did not have boning, but rather were reinforced with cotton twill.



Stays, 1795-1800.
The Victoria and Albert Museum.

These stays used cotton twill to reinforce the shape

This corset is decorated with lace, embroidery, and red silk. It was reinforced with baleen and has metal busks



Worcester Corset Company, *Corset*, 1876.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Debunking a Modern Myth: All Corsetry is tightlacing

"By patronizing women of the past as passive 'victims' of fashion, historians have ignored the reason why so many women were willing to wear corsets for so long."

~Valerie Steele, author of *The Corset: A Cultural History*

Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History*, (Yale University Press, 2003), 71.



World Of Fashion, 1850. TESSA.

Optical Illusion?



Woman Posing for a Studio Portrait, 1860-1870.
1860. State Library of Queensland

"All we see is the sloped shoulders..., the big skirts..., the densely pleated waist seam, and therefore the tiny waist and assume it was made for a tiny person."

~Bernadette Banner, *How the Victorians Faked Tiny Waists (without fainting!)*



World Of Fashion, 1850. TESSA.



Woman Posing for a Studio Portrait, 1860-1870.
1860. State Library of Queensland

Notice how many elements in the tailoring of this dress highlight her waistline.



This dress has a waist measurement of 37.5 inches and would have been worn with a corset underneath



Striped Silk Taffeta Day Dress. 1850. Augusta Auctions.

Phase 1

Measuring my body and creating a tailor's body block in order to draft my pattern.

Then I followed directions from Barrington's book on modern corsetmaking to draft my 1890's Wasp Waist corset.

Phase 2

Mock up phase and preparation phase! This is when I cut all my fabric panels and assembled the tools I would need.

Phase 3

Construction Phase! Finally getting to sew all my panels together and see if all my math worked in my favor.

My Creation Process

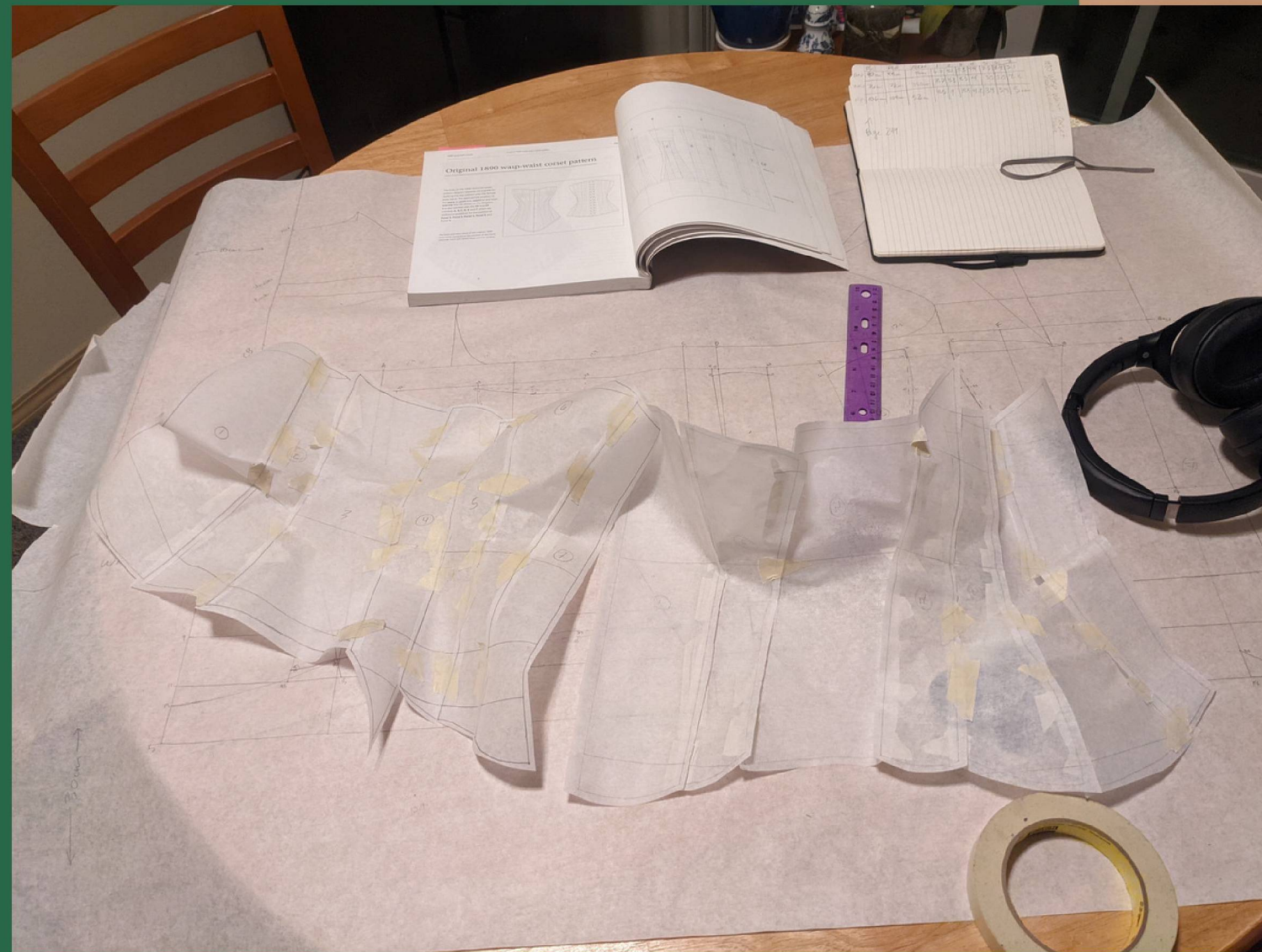


Phase 1: Patternmaking

I started by taking all my measurements and tracing them on a large sheet of paper, creating a basic tailor's body block. Then I transferred the entire body block to a sheet of parchment paper that would later become my pattern pieces.

Once I made the first draft pattern on the parchment paper I traced iout my pattern pieces to make my first paper mock up.

Don't be decieved, this took HOURS, and the math involved in these angles and measurements was no joke.



Phase 2: Drafting

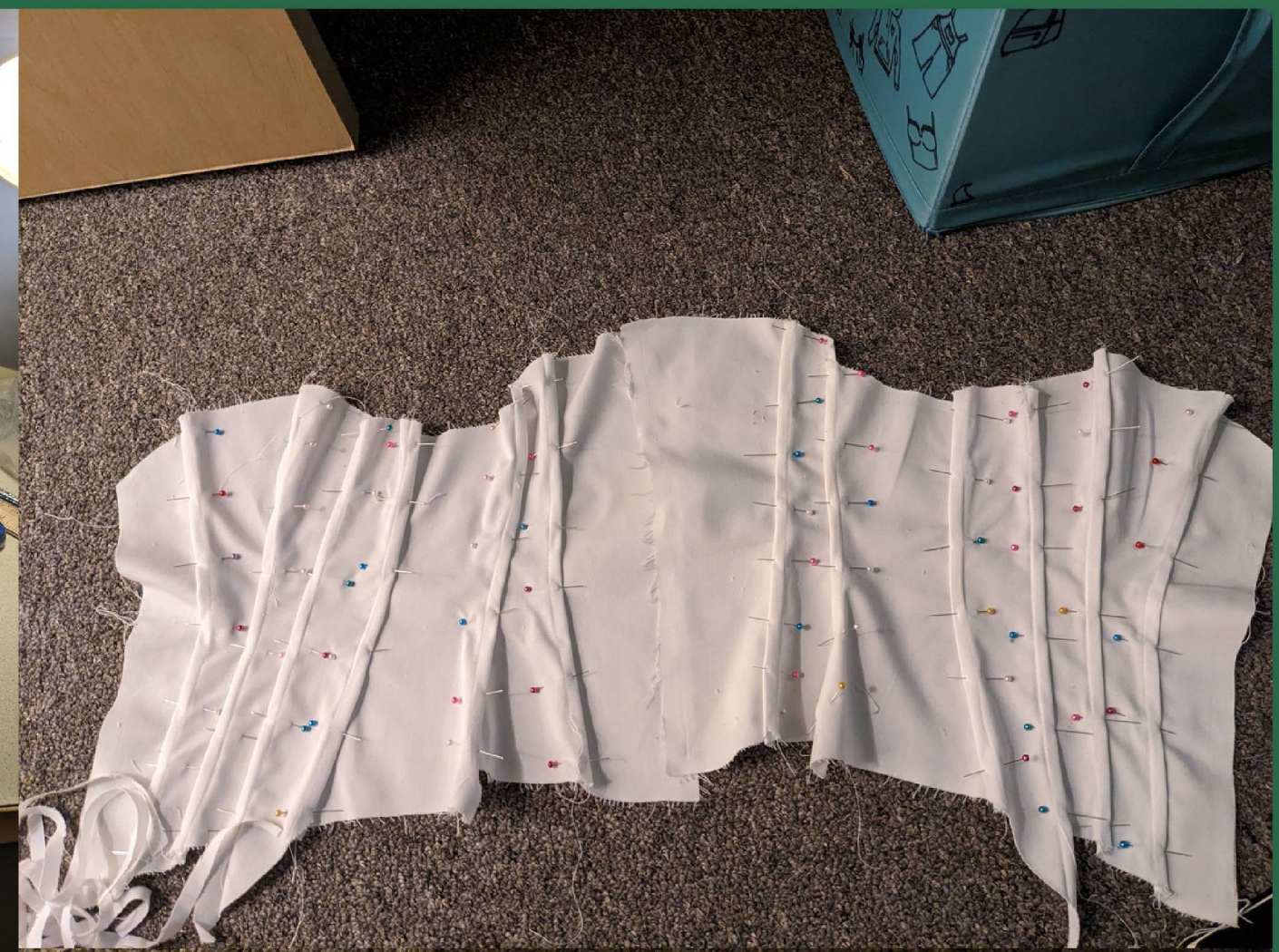
Now I had all my pattern pieces cut, so I first made a fabric mock up with an old sheet, just to double check that everything was correct. Once I was satisfied, I cut everything out in my real final fabric, a white cotton-linen blend.

I cut every piece 4 times, since my final corset is 2 layers thick.



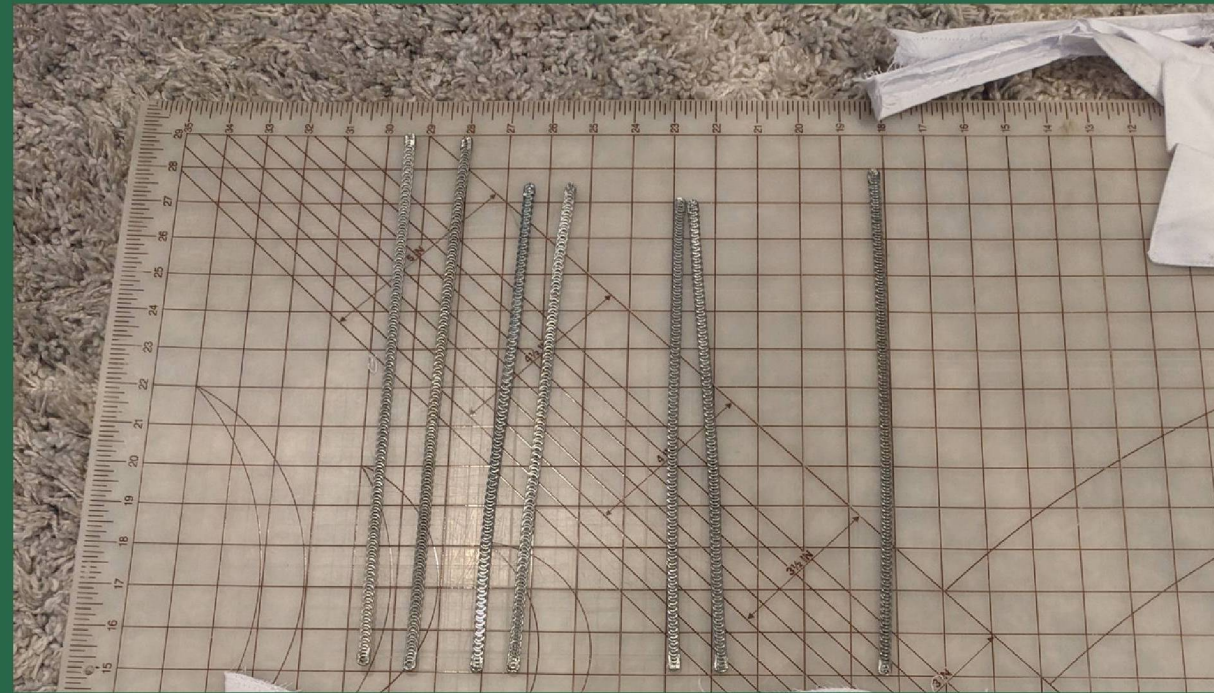
Phase 3: Construction

This was hard. Sewing such a technical garment is difficult, especially with my great grandmother's sewing machine.



Phase 3 (Continued)

It turns out that constructing a corset is a LOT of work. I am not a tailor. Making the boning chanel, poking holes for the grommets, measuring the seams, felling the seams, and measuring and cutting the bones took 20+ hours of work.



My Final Product

The 1890 Wasp

Waist Corset

I can understand why corsetry is misunderstood in modern media. It takes hours of hard work to create a tailored corset, and production studios don't usually have the time or budget to create a personal corset for each actress in the film.



Reasons why we stopped wearing corsets:

Elastic was invented.



References

Bernadette Banner, How the Victorians Faked Tiny Waists (Without Fainting), Youtube Video. April 22, 2023

Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History*, (Yale University Press 2003)
Stays, 1795-1800. The Victoria and Albert Museum.

Striped Silk Taffeta Day Dress. 1850. Augusta Auctions.

Woman Posing for a Studio Portrait, 1860-1870. 1860. State Library of Queensland

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