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This cage crinoline from 1871 has waves in the steel structure to allow overlying fabric to fall gracefully.

IMAGE Courtesy of V&A



OPINION

Undressed: A Brief History of Underwear

London
20 April 2016

Undergarments are the support beams of fashion. Architectural bustles, capacious skirts, conical breasts and the boosted bulge all owe their structural soundness to an array of undergarments that cinch, support and meld the body into desired silhouettes.

Hygiene, warmth, protection, adornment, eroticism, modesty and social status — undergarments serve many functions. They create the framework over which clothing is laid; they are the precursors to body modification, squat regimens and careful Photoshop alterations.

Undressed: A Brief History of Underwear, a new exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, is an expansive reveal of fashion behind the seams from the mid-18th century to present day. The exhibition features more than 250 articles of undergarments crafted for men and women and explores the relationship between underwear, fashion, and beauty standards over time.

The pieces included are on the one hand functional garments, on the other aesthetic additions to and alterations of the body. Although the name and content of the exhibition builds an expectation of sensuality, *Undressed* is at its most engaging in its emphasis of functionality and inventive design.

The sizeable exhibition, which spans two levels in the west wing of the V&A, starts predominantly with older pieces, including whalebone stays (stiff cone-shaped bodices) and steel-hooped cage crinolines alongside collapsible bustles. However, these objects of antiquity are often interspersed with their modern counterpoints, including waist trainers and butt lifters popularised by celebrities like Kim Kardashian.

The display is fascinating, visually arresting, and occasionally distressing. The exhibition highlights its darker side with a 1780s quote from the Duchess of Devonshire, displayed beside a red floral willowy-waisted tight-laced corset: “But it is the ‘ton’ [fashion] and pride feels no pain.” The variety of shapes and silhouettes exhibited expose standards that are rooted in adjustment, exaggeration and often discomfort – wide hips and “mono-bosom” bust extenders (“for the person who was too thin or scant in chest development”) that have almost nothing to do with the natural shape of the body.

Pieces like these demonstrate the sacrifices people, and predominantly women, made and continue to make in hopes of achieving the contemporaneous beauty ideal. The most waist cinching corset, at 45cm, is not, as one might expect, from the 19th century. Rather, it is a 2011 Swarovski crystal embellished corset designed for burlesque dancer Dita von Teese by couture corset maker Mr Pearl.

One case features an S-bend corset popularised in the 1900s during the Edwardian era, which were thought to be healthier for the wearer by placing less direct pressure on the front of the abdomen. The S-bend corset tilted the pelvis and pushed the bum back while thrusting the shoulders and bust forward, causing the wearer to swing her hips in a favourable manner while walking. However, this corset style was later found to exacerbate lumbar lordosis (swayback) and thought to be worse for the spine than the Victorian corset, which maintained a more neutral posture. Men, too, are not free from the tyranny of physical expectations. A pair of 2015 aussieBum groin-enhancing briefs exemplify the comparable, though significantly less confining, potential for men’s garments to accentuate and alter physical attributes.

Yet despite the perpetual influence of beauty standards, *Undressed* points to the resourcefulness of designers in increasing wearability and comfort. Warmth has always been a primary function of underwear and a key focus for designers. A pair of 1970s red string army underwear by Brynje of Norway were originally designed using fishing nets and warm the skin by trapping a thin layer of air in between mesh openings, but prevented the build-up of heat and sweat — imperative for the Norwegian army in bitter cold winter temperatures. A red paisley Booth & Fox petticoat from 1860 achieves volume and warmth with padded Arctic goose down. The petticoat is lined with plain red cotton and made up of five gored panels, each wadded with goose feathers in wide horizontal bands.

Other pieces cater expressly to health and reproductive preoccupations: nursing corsets with buttons down the centre of each breast to allow for ease of breastfeeding, and a mastectomy bra and prosthesis designed by underwear brand Nicola Jane for women recovering from breast surgery. A 1940s jock strap, used to protect male genitalia during physical activity, is a testament to underwear’s capacity to shield and provide comfort to its wearer.

The exhibition is equal parts celebratory and critical, with x-rays emphasising the physical affects of tight-laced corsets as a foil to large displays showing sensual and celebrated contemporary designs inspired by undergarments: a sheer metallic dress designed by Liza Bruce and made famous by Kate Moss in 1993, a black Jean Paul Gaultiere corset designed with La Perla in 2010, and a silk and lace robe worn by Bérénice Marlohe in *Skyfall* in 2012. Overall, the exhibit indicates a reassuring trend towards functionality and ease of wear, without the sacrifice of luxury and often, titillation.

And a movement away from restricting understructures has perhaps been set in motion by the introduction of innovative fabrics that can maintain shape without support. While garments once restricted the human form, couturiers are using developments in material construction to free it. “Nowadays everything that used to be inside a dress doesn’t exist anymore – the corset, the hip pads – instead we can create a similar result with more developed materials,” said fashion designer Azzedine Alaïa in [a 2014 interview](#) with *Disegno*.

At its core, *Undressed* wrestles with the underlying conflict between eroticism and functionality, and the possible gratification that comes with their successful union. In a world that sexualises the nude body, undergarments continue to play upon the reveal — an exposed waistband, a glimpse of black lace, an accentuated curve. And while beauty may still often come at the sacrifice of comfort, modern-day consumers at least have the choice between corsets and unisex briefs, and will likely never have to navigate a crowd wearing a hindersome and highly flammable cage crinoline.

Words *Camilla Sterne*

Undressed is on display at London's V&A museum until 12 March, 2017

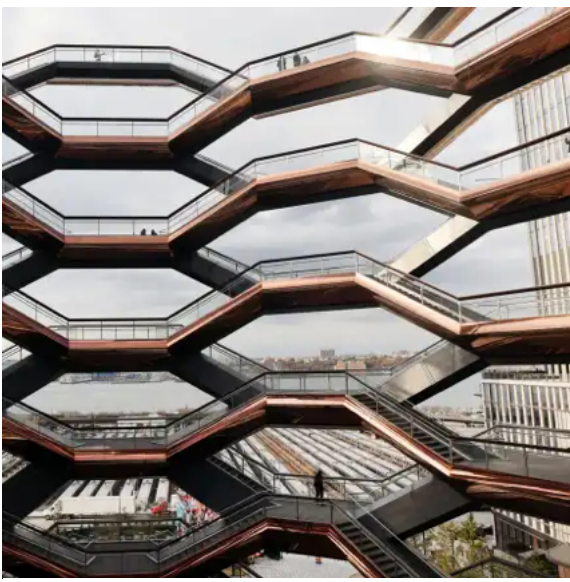
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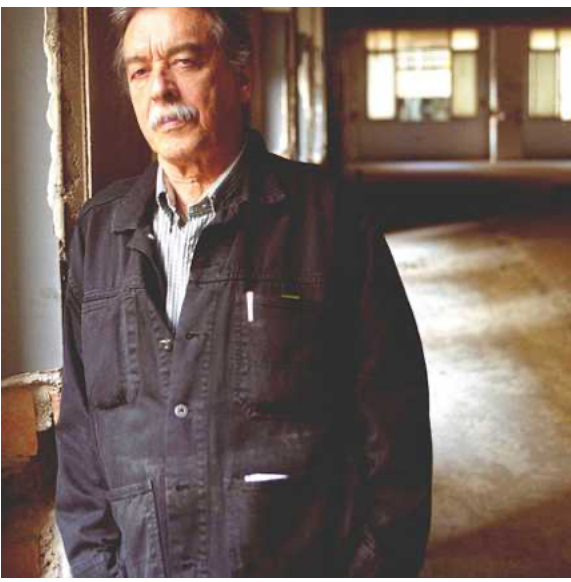
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