



## The Corset: A Cultural History

By Valerie Steele

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### The Corset: A Cultural History By Valerie Steele

The corset is probably the most controversial garment in the history of fashion. Although regarded as an essential element of fashionable dress from the Renaissance into the twentieth century, the corset was also frequently condemned as an instrument of torture and the cause of ill health. Why did women continue to don steel and whalebone corsets for four hundred years? And why did they finally stop? This lavishly illustrated book offers fascinating and often surprising answers to these questions. Valerie Steele, one of the world's most respected fashion historians, explores the cultural history of the corset, demolishing myths about this notorious garment and revealing new information and perspectives on its changing significance over the centuries.

Whereas most historians have framed the history of the corset in terms of oppression vs. liberation and fashion vs. health and comfort, Steele contends that women's experiences of corsetry varied considerably and cannot be fully understood within these narrow frames. Drawing on extensive research in textual, visual, and materials sources, the author disproves the beliefs that the corset was dangerously unhealthy and was designed primarily for the oppression of women. Women persisted in wearing corsets—despite powerful male authorities trying to dissuade them—because corsetry had positive connotations of social status, self-discipline, youth, and beauty. In the twentieth century the garment itself fell out of fashion but, Steele points out, it has become internalized as women replace the boned corset with diet, exercise, and plastic surgery. The book concludes with insightful analyses of such recent developments as the reconception of the corset as a symbol of rebellion and female sexual empowerment, the revival of the corset in contemporary high fashion, and its transformation from an item of underwear to outerwear.

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## The Corset: A Cultural History By Valerie Steele Bibliography

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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

For 400 years, women wore corsets that controlled their shape and constricted, and sometimes crushed, their ribs and organs. In the 18th century, "tight-lacing" was a common phenomenon, but in the 19th century, technology allowed for more effective corsetry. Shortly after the turn of the 20th century, the corset became less popular and gradually faded almost completely from use, though recently, it's come back into fashion as sexy outerwear. In *The Corset: A Cultural History*, Valerie Steele, chief curator and acting director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology and editor of *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, takes on an item of clothing that has achieved notoriety among many historians. But Steele challenges the popular view that corset-wearing women were merely the victims of fashion, and delves into the "complex gender politics surrounding the corset controversies of the past." The hundreds of color and b&w photos and illustrations provide entertaining visual evidence for Steele's scholarship.

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From Library Journal

What is it about corsets that so fascinates costume historians and fetishists alike? For more than 500 years, women and occasionally men rigidly laced themselves up in whalebone or steel in order to be molded into some sort of physical ideal. Consider the work of contemporary designers such as Gaultier and Lacroix, and it becomes apparent that this strange obsession continues to this day. While there is no shortage of information on this fashion curiosity, Steele here emphasizes the aesthetic, social, and historical aspects. As chief curator of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York and the author of nearly 12 books on costume history, she is well qualified to tackle the subject and to attempt to answer "why." The text is scholarly, yet lively and readable, and the numerous images drawn from a variety of sources such as trade cards, paintings, advertisements, book illustrations, and contemporary photos help illustrate her point. This book would be a good purchase even for libraries that already have material on this subject. Margarete Gross, Chicago P.L.

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Review

"This is cultural scholarship and social history at its absolute best."

"The Corset is at once couture eye candy and intellectually enlightening."

"Obligatory reading for fashion historians."

## **Users Review**

**From reader reviews:**

**Georgianna Menendez:**

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### **Steven Young:**

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