Fashion's Epic Proportions: A History of the Crinoline

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A variety of fashions have altered the human silhouette, but few styles have changed the body's horizontal proportions as drastically as the cage crinoline. Worn by women during the 1850s and 1860s, this garment consisted of a series of steel hoops, smaller at the waist and extending outward as they reached the hem, held together by fabric or tapes. The understructure thus caused women's skirts to project dramatically outward during the mid-nineteenth century. However, neither the cage crinoline itself nor opinions about it stayed static in its decade and a half of popularity. In fact, as the crinoline evolved over the 1850s and 1860s, a wide variety of women donned and commended the structural undergarment, despite the dangers it caused those who wore the trend.

Although its exact inventor is unknown, the crinoline originated in the 1850s to replace the excessive number of petticoats that held out women's skirts. Initially, though, the term crinoline had referred just to a woven textile made of a cotton or linen warp and a horsehair weft (Paz 178). By the 1830s, the name denoted petticoats made of this fabric, used to add volume to women's dresses (Paz 178). As skirts widened over the next twenty years, the number of underskirts women had to wear to achieve the desired silhouette became more and more extreme, up to twenty in some cases (Gamble 17). Burdened with the weight of all of this fabric, females sought other ways of keeping their skirts in the desired domed shape. They added braided bands of straw to the flounces, attached three or four rolls of horsehair to the hem, or affixed a whalebone hoop to the skirt lining (Gernsheim 43). By the mid 1850s, tire-like structures inflated with air known as "pneumatic tubes" became popular to project skirts outward (Gernsheim 43-44). Finally, in 1856, the steel-hooped cage crinoline appeared. Despite the agreement on this date, scholars debate the inventor of this garment. Lina María Paz credits Auguste Person (178). Alison Gernsheim cites R.C. Milliet, a French businessman whose agent, C. Amet, obtained a

British patent for the understructure in April 1856 (45). Phyllis G. Tortora and Keith Eubank acknowledge the anonymity of the crinoline's first creator but mention that Charles Worth popularized the fashion (354). And James G. Gamble and Cecile Clayton-Guthro describe how the French Empress Eugenie spread the style to England on a royal visit to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert (16; 64). Yet whoever conceptualized this wide-reaching trend, it soon became common among women, who wanted their skirts to stick out without layered petticoats' cumbersome weight.

For the fourteen years after its 1856 invention, the cage crinoline changed shape to reflect progressing fashion trends. In its first iterations, the crinoline extended outwards the same distance around, in a dome-like shape known as the "Pompadour style" (Paz 179). Skirt size did not differ between day and evening, so women could wear the same cage for both occasions (Paz 179). By the 1860s, though, the crinoline flattened in the front and elongated in the back, creating a more pyramidal shape (Tortora and Eubank 376). The skirt reached its most epic proportions in this decade. Some sources claim that cage crinolines had a circumference of up to ten meters (Paz 179). However, fashion plates and written accounts certainly exaggerated the scale of this garment, so photographs better demonstrate their real scale (Milbank 7). Based on photos and her own experimentation, Gernsheim hypothesizes that the widest skirts were actually five-and-a-half to six meters between 1859 and 1864 (47-48). By the end of the 1860s, day dresses narrowed and became more cone shaped (Gernsheim 52). Thus, in contrast to the previous decade, women had to wear a different crinoline during the day than for formal evening events (Gernsheim 52). As the focus shifted even more to the back of the figure and skirts became even smaller, females began to don a modified crinoline with a few half hoops at the top posterior and only two or three relatively small hoops at the hem (Paz 179). Fashion enthusiasts

named this garment the “crinolette,” and it paved the way for the bustle styles of the 1870s (58). While the materials of the basic steel hoop structure remained constant for the cage crinoline, the geometric shape it made hence changed over its decade-and-a-half sartorial reign.

As the size of crinoline skirts expanded, the style also disseminated over larger portions of society. Women wore cage crinolines on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond (Milbank 28). The garment’s fame spread as far as Madagascar, where Queen Rasoherina requested a crinoline from Empress Eugenie to celebrate her coronation in 1863 (Gernsheim 52). Given its association with French royalty, Paz portrays the crinoline as an elitist fashion (189). She argues that the garment symbolized a life of leisure, as the largest cage crinolines restricted women’s movement, needed the help of servants to put them on, and required large amounts of fabric for the skirt over the top (188). However, due to the industrial revolution’s fast-paced production levels, most other fashion historians agree that the crinoline actually became affordable to the masses (Tortora and Eubank 376). Factories could churn out the steel hoops relatively cheaply, and thanks to the invention of the sewing machine, the dresses worn over the crinoline became less expensive to make, as well (Stall-Meadows 50). At the height of its popularity, the London-based crinoline manufacturer Thompson assembled four thousand cages a day (Gernsheim 46). Gernsheim describes that everyone from royalty to servants, city-dwellers to country folk, and actresses to factory workers wore crinolines, for activities as diverse as mountain hikes and formal balls (54). In fact, a riot broke out in a South Dublin workhouse in 1860, partially because the poor women protested that their petticoats did not hold out their skirts in a sufficiently fashionable silhouette (Gamble 18). In her analysis of crinolines in socially critical cartoons, Cecile Clayton-Guthro reconciles Paz’s point on elitist conspicuous consumption with the understructure’s widespread use. Although the garment started as a fashion for wealthy women,

those lower in the social hierarchy began to mimic the trend, which caused status-based alarm in an era when the ascendence of the bourgeoisie made class lines less distinct (66-68). As the crinoline fell out of fashion, some upper-class women actually forced their servants to continue wearing the trend for longer (Gamble 20). Therefore, while the crinoline became a nearly universal style, it also illustrates class tensions in mid-nineteenth-century society.

Despite its widespread popularity in the 1850s and 1860s, the crinoline also posed a real danger to all kinds of women. Initially, females praised how the cage structure freed their legs from the weight of so many petticoats (Paz 178). Dress reformer Amelia Bloomer, who had caused a stir with her wide-legged women's pantaloons, even called the style a "comfortable and practical garment" (qtd. in Totora and Eubank 359). The crinoline acted as an extension of bodily self as well, helping women take up more space in a society that severely limited female autonomy (Stall-Meadows 50). However, the understructure's wide proportions also caused women numerous problems. They could not easily fit through doors or into carriages, and they often knocked over objects as they brushed by (Paz 188-189). In fact, in strong wind, crinoline-wearers could even tip over themselves and blow away (Gernsheim 47). Enormous skirts swept children off of sidewalks, and men broke their ankles when their feet caught in the steel cage structure (Gamble 19). Some technological adaptations aided women wearing crinolines, including kneeling pads in carriages, wider entrances, and decorative railings to prevent belongings from flying off of tables (Stall-Meadows 50). However, one of the most serious and unavoidable threats to crinoline-clad women was fire. Wide skirts could easily catch flame on cookfires, lamps, or stage lights, and the amount of free air under the steel cage provided sufficient fuel for the fire to grow (Gamble 19). Furthermore, the enormous proportions of the garment prevented bystanders from knocking a woman to the ground or wrapping her in a rug to

smother the flames (Gernsheim 47). As many as six women per month perished in 1862 in London due to crinoline-related accidents (Gamble 20). The next year, over two thousand women burned to death in a cathedral fire in Santiago, Chile, as their close-packed crinolines prevented an easy escape (Gernsheim 47). One 1863 British newspaper article even termed the style a "sentence of death" (qtd. in Gernsheim 47). Despite the benefits in comparison to copious layers of petticoats, crinolines hence caused serious suffering for women, who became victims of the fashion trend.

Therefore, the cage crinoline illustrates the extremes that fashion can take, in terms of safety as well as scale. The garment demonstrates the literal and figurative lengths to which people will go to pursue fashion, which suggests that dress is not just a frivolous fancy but instead derives from some deep human drive. Both offering freedom for the legs and forming a dangerous cage, the crinoline also shows the ambivalent effects that novel styles can have, as trends change and the human enthusiasm for fashion remains.

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