Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

LATE VICTORIAN/ EDWARDIAN CLOTHING H92/C

Clothing styles changed dramatically between 1850 and 1910.

In the 1850s women's skirts were very wide, being supported by crinolines - stiffened petticoats or rigid skirt-shaped structures of steel designed to maintain the dress in the required shape. Skirts were made even fuller by means of flounces usually in tiers of three, gathered tightly at the top and stiffened with horsehair braid at the bottom. Outdoors cape-like jackets were worn and deep bonnets with wide ribbon bows tied under the chin.

By 1910 dresses had a much narrower silhouette with a thicker waist, flatter bust, and narrower hips. By the end of the decade the most fashionable skirts cleared the floor and approached the ankle. The overall silhouette narrowed and straightened, beginning a trend that would continue into the years leading up to the First World War. Hats were broad.

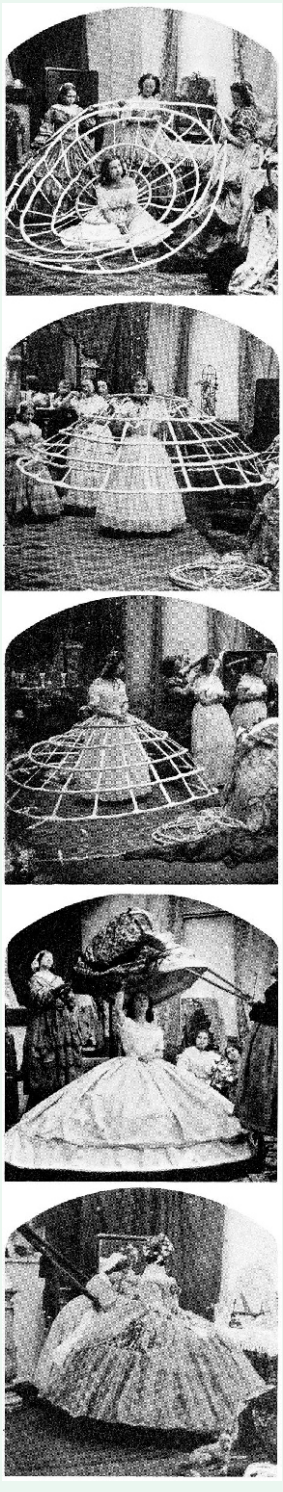
Since then styles have become progressively less layered and bulky - and more of the body is exposed to view.



Dresses in about 1850.



Dresses in about 1910.



Right: The fashion for large crinolines was often mocked. This sequence of photographs, taken about 1860, makes fun of the elaborate procedures necessary to put on such huge contraptions.

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Baby's Nightdress

Babies' dresses changed very little in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Typically they were long and decorated with frills and embroidery. This was probably a nightdress, although a baby might have worn a gown like this for their christening.







Two babies photographed in 1904.

Girl's Hooded Cape

This sturdy brown woollen cape would have kept the wearer warm and dry on a rainy day. It probably dates from the early years of the twentieth century. It is also probably handmade - the buttonholes are clearly finished-off with hand-stitching and it is unlined. It is possible that it is cut down from a cast-off adult garment.





Left: A fashionable girl's outdoor outfit in the 1890s. The leg o' mutton sleeves with narrow wrists were very fashionable at this date.



Girl's Combinations and Petticoat

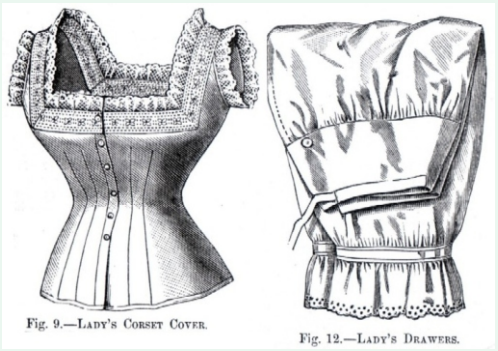
In the second half of the nineteenth century women generally wore several layers of underclothing. A thin shirt-like garment of cotton or muslin called a shift might be worn next to the skin. Over this, strapped around the middle of the body there would be the corset - the stiff, boned contraption which was used to mould the upper body into a desired shape. The picture below is a comic stereoscope of 1905 and shows a lady being fastened into her corset. The shift underneath absorbed perspiration and kept the corset clean.



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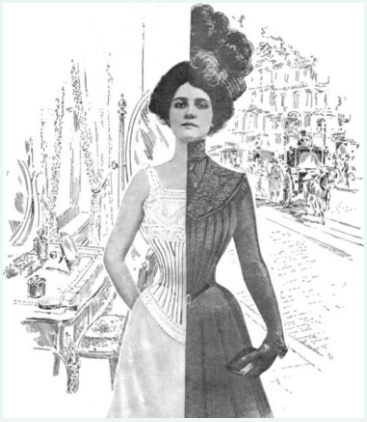
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On top of the corset there would be a corset cover - in effect, a sort of vest. It provided added modesty with gauzy summer and evening dress bodices, preventing the corset from showing at the neckline of the dress or through a sheer bodice fabric. Corset covers were often designed to match a petticoat on the lower half of the body and eventually began to be combined with the petticoat to form an all-in-one petticoat. Corset cover style garments are more usually referred to today as camisoles.

Beneath it all there would be a pair of drawers. Early Victorian drawers tended to come down well below the knee. Each leg was finished separately and joined together at the waistband only, leaving the crotch seam open. During the 1860s and 1870s drawers shortened to just below knee level. Throughout the period it was necessary to be able to open the drawers as they could not be easily pulled down to allow the wearer to use the toilet. Drawers were not always white - a fashion for drawers of scarlet flannel occurred around 1855-60.

The simple girl's petticoat in this box is machine made. At the beginning of the Victorian Era, all clothing was handmade and dresses were expensive. Only the wealthy could afford a large wardrobe. The less fortunate wore cast-offs, clothing from second-hand shops, or sewed their own. After the invention of the sewing machine in 1851, the industry began to change. Not only was clothing less expensive to produce, it was mass-produced, and by the end of the century, ready-made dresses were available to the general public at department stores.



The girl's combinations are fancier, with lots of lace panels and frills, although these too are machine made. Combinations - which combine a shift and drawers into a single garment - became popular in the 1870s when the fashionable silhouette was so tight that as much bulk as possible was eliminated. As with ordinary drawers, the crotch seams have been left open.

Left: An advert showing the corset and shift beneath the outer dress.

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Lady's Nightgown

Long nightgowns helped to keep you warm in the days before central heating and electric blankets - they were also modest!

This beautiful example is decorated with borders and panels of crochet-work. This decorative work is probably handmade and represents many hours of work.

In the nineteenth century crochet was used as a cheap substitute for lace which was very complicated to make, involving hundreds of carefully placed pins and very fine thread. Crochet work is produced using hooked needles and coarser thread. The finished product is less delicate, but similar in overall effect to lace.



Crochet rapidly grew in popularity in the course of the nineteenth century. Queen Victoria is said to have learned it. In the Edwardian Era, which is when this nightgown was probably made, crochet patterns became very elaborate in texture and complicated stitching.

After the First World War nightgowns started to become skimpier. The photograph on the right shows a crochet nightgown from the 1920s.