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Rebirthing the Bustle: Examining the Haute Couture of 1887 London through Design and Dressmaking

The Late Bustle Period, 1883 to 1889, was a time where the fashion of England elite women was dominated by dramatic waistlines, intricate construction, and the iconic bustle. Wishing to understand how the relationship between people and their clothes have changed over time and how Haute Couture dresses of these period, dominated by the works of Charles Frederic Worth and his fashion house, were constructed to achieve this dramatic look, I placed myself as both client and dressmaker in this period to create an evening dress situated in the latest fashions of 1887 London.

For this project, I aimed to not only gain a deeper understanding of English haute couture in the 1880s but to push myself to put into practice much of the knowledge that I had gained through previous research. Through this dress construction, I found myself implementing knowledge I have gained through years of exposure to historical dress as well as the many practical skills I had learned through doing theater, design, and specifically, costume design. With the knowledge that I was working towards a completed dress, I found myself being pushed to dive into even the smallest minutiae of planning as every detail had a tangible impact on my project. Additionally, constructing and fitting this garment, which was initially conceived for a drastically different body type than my own and is decades past its peak of popularity, brought me to find many points of tension that I had to work through and revise.

I am delighted to say there are many parts of the project that truly surprised me. For example, whenever a piece of media is set in periods where corsets, stays, and other undergarments elaborate to our modern eyes were in vogue, there is always discourse on the internet as to how restrictive these garments were and wondering if women in these periods would be able to breathe, eat, etc. while wearing these garments. Although I've had experience with corsets in the past, the corset I own for personal use is of a drastically different shape than the corset that I had to procure for this project as they aim to shape the body in different ways. Subsequently, it was extremely informative to me to take time to merely walk around once I had procured the correct corset, bustle, petticoat, and shoes for the period. I instantly felt how these garments greatly pushed one to hold themselves in a measured manner; however, it was also clear to see how one still could do many of the aspects of everyday life, granted one was in a socioeconomic situation that doesn't require much physical labor. Of course, this is a given if one can afford the most cutting edge of haute couture fashion. Small details that I had initially conceived as merely aesthetic, such as the subtle ways fashionable corsets in the 1880s flared out a bit at the true waist, suddenly had a very tangible effect, i.e., that same flair at the waist made breathing much easier as the body mass redistributed from other areas had a place to rest.

This project would not be possible without the incredible knowledge and assistance of my faculty advisor, Ms. Lynn Holbrook as well as her willingness to allow me to use the many resources in the Film, Television, Theatre Costume Shop. As I was taking many of these steps for the first time, I constantly found myself checking in with her about everything from fabric choice to mockup construction. Her expertise was especially crucial as we reached the fitting stage of the construction of the bodice. This is where the customer wears the garment or mockup of the garment, often for the first time, and the tailor or dressmaker examines how the garment is

resting on the body and what needs to be changed in order for it to fit as it should. While I had, thanks to my previous knowledge, some idea of what needed to be addressed during each fitting, it was invaluable to not only talk through what was or wasn't working but to discuss how each issue could be best addressed. In addition to greatly expanding my knowledge of the late Victorian period, through her assistance, I have greatly grown as a designer through this project.

Looking back at this project, especially in the light of everything we've learned in *Strong Suits: The Art and Business of Thom Browne*, I would have to say this has been one of the best things I've done at my four years at Notre Dame. Beyond just getting the opportunity to spend hours in a windowless costume shop that I happen to really enjoy, thanks to an incredible grant from the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP) of the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts program of \$1350, I was able to turn a dream project into reality.

On the topic of turning thoughts into reality, I think it's very easy when thinking about fashion to live in the abstract and theoretical. Although I enjoy doing that to some extent, I think this project helped me ground my thinking by reminding me of just how tangible this stuff is. It seems silly but some of the most profound moments of this project were merely remembering “Oh, hemming a skirt takes a really long time” or “I see, these two pattern pieces were designed with this curve in order to nip the waist in while flaring out by the time you get to the hip”.

In a way related to Thom Browne's reimagining of gender norms in clothing pieces, the process of adapting these traditionally female garments to my not-female form brought up interesting challenges, especially in the process of fitting. While fitting, my advisor and I realized that we would have to widen the shoulders to account for the mass I hold in my upper back and reshape the front pieces to account for my flatness in the chest, among other changes.

It's safe to say that this project wasn't perfect. Thanks to a lot of information on the Internet and through my advisor, I received a great amount of help and could focus my learning on aspects I thought were more critical i.e., the construction of the gown itself by being able to purchase the appropriate bustle, petticoat, shoes, corset. Additionally, I looked to commercial reproductions of historical patterns that were close to my desired elements as a starting point for my construction. I don't know what the next project will be, but I can't wait to get started.