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Review of the Exhibition *Undressed: A Brief History of Underwear*

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In association with

Review of the Exhibition

Undressed: A Brief History of Underwear

Sabrina Roberta Villani

Undressed: A Brief History of Underwear, Fashion Temporary Exhibition Space, 12 April 2016 – 12 March 2017, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Stepping into the first room of the exhibition, one is immediately drawn to a cabinet displaying eighteenth-century hooped petticoats and red silk stays, the forerunners of corsets. The petticoats dominate the space with their volume, while the stays tightly subjugate the mannequins wearing them. This first display already encapsulates some of the wider issues the exhibition promises to address: the evolution of fashion, concerns with body shape, gender and morality, and also sets a chronological starting-point in the eighteenth century. While the array of exhibits is substantial and historically significant, it must be kept in mind that underwear is a difficult subject to explore. Due to its intimate nature, it is not often mentioned in documents, inevitably conditioning the scope of research.

The lighting and the enveloping feeling of the all-round cabinets on the ground floor make it easy to focus on the exhibition's narrative and on the individual objects. This floor is sectioned by themes: Fashion, Health and Hygiene, Volume, Performance Underwear, Support: Bras and Girdles. However, these themes and ideas regarding body shape, hygiene, fashion and materials interchange from cabinet to cabinet, giving flow to the display. There is an effective combination of garments and images, ranging from underwear catalogues, advertisements, original packaging and satirical prints by the nineteenth-century British caricaturist George Cruikshank. These are a valuable aid to understanding the wider cultural and historical context of underwear. *Undressed* presents a vast array of materials and

textures: whalebones inscribed with love messages, a video explaining the making of lace, and a latex corset by House of Harlot, to name just a few. The garments used to illustrate the employment of different materials range from “healthy” nineteenth-century sports corsets to a modern Marks & Spencer sports bra. Another aspect the exhibition dwells on successfully is the reconsideration of craftsmanship, especially the neglected history of women’s crafts. A noteworthy example is a stay found in an abandoned cottage in Whitby, handmade and altered by a working woman, probably a cockle collector. Paradoxically, while women were making and wearing this kind of garment, x-rays of a corseted woman with crushed ribs suggest that this largely society-imposed trend was harmful for women’s health.

The discarding of such oppressive wear coincided with the First World War, when working women could not wear impractical garments. However, another reason for this shift was the invention of elasticated underwear in the 1930s, such as the products produced by Charnaux. While the corset was worn by women to mould the torso and to support the breasts, men sometimes wore special belts to support the back and hold in the stomach while engaging in sports. The sports belt, together with aussieBum male boxers (that enhance the genitalia through discrete padding), are the only examples of male shaping tools. The exhibition seems to subtly suggest a heavier social pressure on women to conform to beauty standards compared to men. This appears to continue to date, as demonstrated by the inclusion of a contemporary waist trainer. A whole section is devoted to performance underwear, focusing on innovation, design and materials. This is the only section presenting an equal balance of male and female garments, as the other sections are principally dedicated to female underwear. The brief discussion of gender-neutral underwear is fruitful, even though it represented a minor trend. It starts with nineteenth-century embroidered stockings, which to date are still difficult to tell if for a male or female, and continues to the modern day with brands like Acne Studios and Calvin Klein.

The upper floor consists of a glamorous display of eye-catching pieces in cabinets, screens displaying fashion shows on rotation and a large projector screen showing interviews of creative directors of brands such as La Perla and Agent Provocateur. The themes explored in this section are: underwear as outerwear, with a specific focus on high fashion and celebrity culture, and the idea of erotic teasing through materials and designs. Although the upstairs section makes some good points on the evolution of fashion, it lacks the cultural depth of the ground floor. The most conspicuous omission is the complete absence of Victoria's Secret, which has undoubtedly revolutionised lingerie, fashion and beauty ideals. The exclusion of Victoria's Secret must have been because of Agent Provocateur's will to maintain a monopoly over the exhibition it sponsored. Another major exclusion was in the section regarding erotic tease, which included Dita Von Teese's corset, but did not give any historical background regarding burlesque and striptease.

The upstairs exhibition missed the chance to address some interesting cultural topics by surrendering to the superficiality of celebrity culture. Has underwear lost much of its shaping power because of fitness and plastic surgery? Has lingerie become a means to flaunt (especially on social media) the body one has worked hard for through diets and work-outs? To what extent do women feel empowered and to what extent are they objectified by lingerie? To what extent did (and still do) women use impractical and painful instruments to conform to a largely male-dominated society and to what extent did they do it for their own pleasure? By limiting the focus on high fashion in this display, there could have been an inclusion of examples from daily contemporary culture. This could have comprised images from social media where people display their body in underwear, paired with a discussion of body ideals and morality in the present. Another way to address these issues could have been through projecting interviews with a sample of people answering the above questions.

Through lace, latex and lycra, *Undressed* has recovered the, literally and metaphorically, hidden history of underwear. Although the exhibition proposes some innovative considerations on the functionality of underwear regarding the support, warmth and hygiene of the body, together with considerations on fashion, morality and gender within society, it could have given more importance to the cultural and social issues regarding underwear and the body in the present.