

the antecedent to the urban renewal projects of the 1960s. If the blighted areas adjacent to downtown could be improved, the reasoning went, the middle class would return, and downtown would thrive once more.

But by then it was too late. The chief reason that Americans stopped going downtown, according to Fogelson, is that they no longer needed to—or wanted to. “For the average person it might have been a thrill to go downtown in the late 19th and early 20th centuries,” he writes. “It might even have been a thrill in the 1920s, when the downtown hotels, department stores, office buildings, and movie theaters dazzled the senses—and, with their doormen, bellhops, elevator operators, shoeshine boys, sales-girls, floorwalkers, and ushers, offered a level of service that all but disappeared in the second half of the 20th century. But by mid 20th century the thrill was largely gone.”

Fogelson breaks off his account in 1950, so he doesn’t deal with the ballyhooed downtown revivals of the 1980s and 1990s. But his balanced, sobering history leaves little doubt that, whatever the future holds for downtown, its

glory days are past. It is now merely one of several metropolitan centers, and in many cities not even the most important one.

Downtown contains an evocative photograph of the Chicago Loop—the corner of State and Madison Streets—taken around 1910. The scene is enormously crowded. Lines of streetcars are backed up, and the street is flooded with people who have spilled over from the broad sidewalks. It’s a serious crowd, the men in suits and hats, the women in long, dark dresses. The atmosphere is one of busyness and purposeful activity. What a contrast to downtowns of today, which are almost never this crowded, and whose chief occupants are either the poor or idling tourists. The almighty downtown, which didn’t just dominate the metropolitan region but came to stand for the American city itself, is truly gone.

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Bound and Determined

THE CORSET: *A Cultural History.*

By Valerie Steele. Yale Univ. Press. 199 pp. \$39.95

UPLIFT: *The Bra in America.*

By Jane Farrell-Beck and Colleen Gau. Univ. of Pennsylvania Press. 243 pp. \$35

Reviewed by Eve Auchincloss

As Marie Antoinette rode in a cart to her execution, hair cropped and hands tied behind her back, the artist Jacques Louis David, who was in the crowd, did a quick, cruel sketch of her in profile, back arched, and bosom thrust forward but drooping as it would not have done had she been wearing a corset. In all of Vigée Marie Lebrun’s portraits of her, whether in shepherdess muslins or court finery, the breasts are pushed high and the back is proudly straight. Even in the

queen’s last moments, uncorseted, her body assumed the posture that tightly laced stays had exacted throughout her life.

Since the Renaissance, when clothes were first cut and tailored rather than simply draped, aristocratic women—later those of all classes, and men too—improved the body underneath with corsets that affirmed the wearer’s respectability and sex appeal. In a handsomely illustrated history of the corset, Valerie Steele, the author of *Fifty Years of Fashion*

(1997) and the editor of the journal *Fashion Theory*, demonstrates how various were the kinds of corsets, the ways they were worn, and the meanings they conveyed to their wearers. To some they were no doubt oppressive, although conferring gentility; to others, they rendered that matchless sense of being perfectly well dressed. Though tight lacing was probably never so bizarre as cartoons of the day suggest, then as now there was much talk of fashion victims. Montaigne compared women's courage in accepting the rigors of corsetry to that of gladiators and saints.

The sense of discipline, the approach to an ideal achieved by taking a few inches off the waist, lifting the breasts and thrusting them forward—such were the rewards of discomfort. When fashion called for décolletage, as it frequently did during the 400 years of the corset's life, the breasts swelled appetizingly above the close-fitting bodice. One writer observed, "As for her fair Breasts, they are half imprisoned, and half free; and do their utmost endeavor to procure their absolute liberty." One thinks of Samuel Johnson declining to visit David Garrick's green room, lest the "white bobbies" of the actresses overexcite him.

Although tightly laced bodices had been de rigueur since tailoring first began, the durable fashion seems to have been introduced by Catherine de Medici. The strict, boned corset was to be the norm until about World War I. In the beginning a blade of whalebone, called a *busk*, was set in a pocket running up the front. In time, more bones were added on the sides. One 18th-century corset that survives has 162 pieces of whalebone. Goya's paintings of the Maja stretched out on a couch, dressed and undressed, clearly illustrate how the natural form had come to be seen through an invisible corset. Her waist is pinched; her breasts are separate, high, and firm as marble.

Artists and caricaturists had a field day with the corset. In many a boudoir scene, a woman in her stays converses easily with an unabashed gentleman caller who watches while the maid tightens the laces or helps her mistress wriggle into a gorgeous dress. Thomas Rowlandson's *A Little Tighter* shows a slender man desperately struggling to lace up the stays of a porcine female. In a Gavarni drawing, a man unlaces his wife, puzzled that the knot at the bottom is different from the one he tied that morning.

Women clung to their stays while philosophers and medical men, echoing Rousseau, inveighed against them. One French writer argued that they degraded the human race; an Englishman observed that the stay gave "a stiffness to the whole frame, which is . . . an enemy of beauty." Indeed, in the wake of the French Revolution, clothes grew looser and corsets less taut, often achieving their purpose without bones. The waist disappeared, and the bosom became the focus of attention. But by the 1820s the boned corset was back, more essential than ever, with its contradictory but irresistible message of straitlaced propriety and sexual allure. "Niggardly waists and niggardly brains go together," one famous reformer declared late in the 18th century, and produced a tortuous argument explaining why corseted women scream at the sight of a mouse.

Steele devotes many pages to the alleged medical consequences of corsetry. The list of possible troubles is fantastic, including apoplexy, hysteria, asthma, kidney disease, dropsy, epilepsy, hemorrhoids, hunchback, and on and on. Absurd, but in a few cases not wide of the mark. Breathing was indeed impaired, so that the corseted woman drew shallow breaths in the upper diaphragm (though one consequence of this was a pretty fluttering of the bosom). Breathlessness would be common, and fainting during vigorous exertion not uncommon. (When corsets became easier to lace and unlace, maids were no longer indispensable; in the event of "swooning, vapours, oppression, and spasms," a helpful bystander could quickly undo the knot.) Constipation was another plausible consequence, and corsets could possibly have contributed to miscarriages and prolapsed uteruses. But the incensed critics would have nothing less than that corsets "lay their victims in the grave . . . loaded with guilt."

At the outset of the 20th century a new corset claimed, without much foundation, to be more comfortable. It had a metal busk running down the front that made the wearer arch her back and thrust out her chest and rump, the now low-slung bosom assuming a pouter pigeon form. The result was a weird S-shape that threw the wearer off balance. Even so, this vogue lasted a good decade, until the liberating garments of Paul Poiret,

Madeleine Vionnet, Lucile (Lady Duff Gordon), and Coco Chanel rendered small waists and monobosoms obsolete.

And yet the issue of tight lacing was not quite dead. It returned with Christian Dior's New Look in 1947 and has been kept alive since by fetishists. One of these, whose corset-compressed ribs are illustrated in an x-ray, is also photographed in a dazzling costume worn over a grotesquely pinched waist not much bigger around than her upper arm. Her breasts are unalluringly squashed against her chest and her face registers what looks like acute distress. One can't turn the page fast enough.

Steele quotes from a wealth of letters written to magazines during the 19th century describing tight lacing in fetishistic language.

There is talk of discipline, compulsion, suffering, and submission, and descriptions of the sensations induced in the wearer as delicious, superb, and exciting. Some of the tales of boarding schools where the girl (or boy, for that matter) is tight laced until a 13-inch waist is achieved read like excerpts from pornographic novels.

A state of partial undress does carry a peculiar sexual charge. Édouard Manet painted the courtesan Nana in a blue satin corset and frilly petticoat, blue stockings, and high-heeled shoes. Only her face and arms are bare, yet the painting is certainly erotic. "The satin corset may be the nude of our era," said Manet. In 1878, a painting of a nude asleep on a bed while her lover watches caused a scandal owing to one seemingly innocent element: the pile of clothes on the floor in the foreground—starched petticoat and red corset—to which the fascinated eye is drawn. The discarded clothes were suggested to the painter by his brilliant friend Edgar Degas, who understood the subversive life of inanimate objects, "corsets, for instance, that have just been taken off and that seem to retain the shape of the body."

With the 20th century, the corset became a little problematic. Those of 1900 were mon-



Tight Lacing, or Fashion before Ease, by John Collet (1770–75)

strous, but since they gave the breasts no support, they did start women wearing proto-brassieres. The brassiere was to be the undergarment of the new century, though corsets had not really gone. They lingered on as the girdle well past midcentury, and have resurfaced in spasms ever since.

Uplift: *The Bra in America*, by Jane Farrell-Beck, a professor of textiles and clothing at Iowa State University, and Colleen Gau, a writer and businesswoman, takes up where the corset began to leave off—or be left off. As various light and loosely fitted fashions succeeded the pouchy monobosom of 1900, the desirability of a brassiere became apparent. Advertisers described going braless as “vulgar, unhygienic, and incorrect.”

Their products began to have more alluring names—“Blue Canoe,” “Bonzette,” “Fancee Free”—and innovations came thick and fast. Underwiring was devised as early as 1923; adjustable straps followed. The Great Depression hardly affected underwear sales, and bra makers went on from the gentle curves of the 1930s to a pointy “belle poitrine” exemplified by the Sweater Girl. *Brassiere*, originally a Norman word describing a boy's jacket, was supplanted by *bra*, just as pajamas

became pj's. Cups sized as A, B, C, and D came in during the late '30s. Young wearers had their own categories: *nubbins*, *bubbins*, *chubbins*, *droopers*, and *super-droopers*.

The war brought plenty of customers but not enough raw material. Shortages produced bras made of coarse, colorful Mexican cotton; the flat chested wore padding of milkweed fuzz. In the military atmosphere of the 1940s the torpedo bra silhouette was introduced, "which turned breasts into a pair of nose cones," as the authors put it. (It survived, unfortunately, into the 1960s.) Bombs may have been more important than bras, as one advertiser said to excuse late orders, but the Sweater Girl was an essential morale builder among the troops.

After the war, brassiere makers competed for attention with amusing, sometimes bizarre features. The "Mon-e-Bra" had a zippered compartment in which to stow cash; strapless bras abounded; there was a number featuring ocelot fur; "Très Secrète" was inflatable—you adjusted your size to suit the occasion. Advertising such as Maidenform's "I Dreamed" campaign, which variously depicted the supposed female fantasy of disporting in public while clad only in a bra from the waist up,

became as important as new designs. But there could be slips. "I Dreamed I Was a Matador" went over like a lead balloon in the Spanish-speaking world.

In the 1960s, the women's movement brought chaos and the threat of extinction. Bras were for burning, and girdles mercifully dropped out of sight with the appearance of pantyhose. By 1969, say the authors, legs were in and breasts were out. Twiggy, measuring 31–24–33, represented the new ideal.

The ideal didn't last long. Today, the profits in this business are considerable. In 1999 Victoria's Secret grossed \$2.1 billion, and it is not even one of the biggest makers. The irony is that because of costs—Warner's spent a million dollars to develop a stretch strap—almost all bras are now made abroad; simply sewing on a label justifies claiming them to be "Made in U.S.A."

The *Uplift* authors' survey among older women found that about half of their respondents don't like to wear bras, made in the U.S.A. or not, while many have given them up entirely and don't give a damn about fashion.

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Catching the Conspirators

LINCOLN'S ASSASSINS:
Their Trial and Execution.

By James L. Swanson and Daniel R. Weinberg. Arena Editions. 151 pp. \$45

Reviewed by Thomas Mallon

The literal theatricality of Abraham Lincoln's assassination, that audience participation event in which John Wilkes Booth broke the fourth wall, has blinded the average citizen's historical memory to much else that transpired in Washington on that night and over the following three months. Booth's supporting cast—the conspirators who plotted at Mrs. Surratt's boarding house (with or without her knowledge)—are more or less forgotten now, but in the spring and summer of '65, following

the death of the spectacle's murderous star, they served the country as emotional understudies. "Their names were on every citizen's tongue," write James Swanson and Daniel Weinberg in this weirdly handsome pictorial recreation of the conspirators' hooded imprisonment, military trial, and, for four of the eight, quick execution. "Newspapers in every city, town, and hamlet across the country wrote about them. People bought their photographs." The episode was, according to the authors, "a