Coco Chanel’s Unraveling of the Corset

Melinda Rolls & Abbigail Cote
Despite the disputes over its controversial history, it is evident that the corset has served as an emblem of female oppression in the past. Women were not deemed respectable in their natural figures, and thus were required to alter their bodies for a cultural standard forced upon them. Fashion designer Coco Chanel’s free form and practical attire was instrumental in helping to break these barriers corsetry placed on women in the early 1900s. Nevertheless, her work was far from breaking the barrier of all the complex body expectations women continue to face.
Panel #1
Tight Laced Expectations

By early 20th century, corsets became an everyday necessity for all classes of women, as it was scandalous to be seen in public without them. Even children were expected to conform to these expectations.

"By the nineteenth century, many urban working-class women wore corsets, either on Sunday or every day. By 1824, apparently even the poorest street-walkers in London were enrobed." Valerie Smith, The Corset A Cultural History, 2001.

Backlash

Corsetry faced backlash for the daily struggles it caused women. Everything from medical records to personal memoirs suggested corsetry was a detriment to women's lifestyle, but the trend held steady.

"When worn for extended periods, they did weaken the back and abdominal muscles, resulting in muscle atrophy, lower back pain, and an increased reliance on the corset." Valerie Smith, The Corset A Cultural History, 2001.

"Compression could cause permanent alterations in the body contours of the ribs, especially if corsetry began at or before adolescence." Dr. Edith, The Corset A Cultural History, 2001.
"The thought of the discomfort, restraint and pain, which we had to endure from our clothes, makes me even angrier now than it did then; for in those days nearly everyone accepted their inconveniences as inevitable. Except for the most small-waisted, naturally dumb-bell-shaped females, the ladies never seemed at ease, or even quite as if they were wearing their own clothes." - Gwen Raverat, *A Cambridge Childhood*, 1957

"I had a bad figure, and to me they were real instruments of torture; they prevented me from breathing, and dug deep holes into my softer parts on every side." - Gwen Raverat, *A Cambridge Childhood*, 1957

"It has ceased to be a metaphor that women is "dressed to kill". We are of stronger stuff than our brothers or we should have sunk in our shackles long ago. Could your father or husband live in your clothes?... Could he conduct his business and support his family in your corsets?" - Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *What to Wear*, 1873

"So burn up the corsets! No, nor do you save the whale bones. You will never need whalebones again. Make a bonfire of all the cruel steel that has lorded it over the contents of the abdomen and thorax so many thoughtless years, and heave a sigh of relief; For your "emancipation," I assure you, has from this moment begun." - Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *What to Wear*, 1873

"I can't breathe," I said defiantly. "I can breathe," said grandmother, "Your mother can breathe, and your sisters can breathe – and you can breathe too. It is unflattering and disgraceful not to wear a corset... And where would you have the young man place his arm, if I may ask?" - Edith Rode's memoirs, 1879

Fortunately, change was coming. A new designer would take the fashion industry by storm, and before long corsets would be deemed a thing of the past.
Panel #2
The Rise of Chanel

Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel grew up poor in a French convent, raised by nuns, where she learned to sew and found the basis for her now iconic use of black and white. She would go on to open her first shop selling hats and other practical items, but before long her fame took off.

"Woe to anyone who dared make any smart remark [to Chanel] about nuns. She always retained immense gratitude towards them – thanks to them she learned to sew." - Edmond Charles-Roux, Chanel and her world, 1991

"The key to her peculiar genius and its sartorial consequences may lie in the fact that Chanel, most Parisian and expensive couturier of her epoch, was born poor and in the country." - Janet Flanner, "31, Rue Cambon, 1911"
Innovative Fashions

"In this example, Chanel used striped jersey to create a droopy and slouchy style of dress. She purposefully designed the garment so that it would sag at the hem or lower end, incorporating bias, angles, and intersections. The use of the jersey as the fabric is a great example of how she used modern fabrics that were popular in the 1920s. She was also one of the first major designers to make fashions that did not rely on or even encourage variety."

Chanel became famous for her masculine-inspired looks, as well as her simple shapes and simple jersey fabric. Most influential, she was one of the first major designers to make fashions that did not rely on or even encourage variety.

"Her clothes offered the perfect solution for women dressing for a new world." — Coco Chanel

"She has brought the essence of modern life to the clothes. She has put the shirt into the dress; without the shirt, the dress would have been made of the white collar and cuffs of the waistcoat, and just quilts into mechanics of contrast." — Gert van der Heide, 1930s

"Chanel's name is associated with this new, basic style that allowed women to dress and undress with ease." — Gert van der Heide, 1930s


Explosive Success

Chanel's career rapidly took off. From her perfumes to her little black dresses, everyone knew her name. The corset-free look gradually replaced the norm for women's fashion as her style spread, and women everywhere happily obliged, leaving fashion forever marked by Chanel. The easy transition to comfortable, practical, and stylish clothing was the result of the feminist movement that began to gain traction in society.

"From the impact of your personal relationships to your advocacy, influence, and eventually contribution to the modern musical style that emerged in the decade, you have been a force in defining the new sound I described as music on which one wallows." - José Clemente Orozco, Letter from José Clemente Orozco to Coco Chanel, 1933.


"To look at a Chanel jersey costume is to desire it at once." - Vogue (1928).

"Your work today inspired clothing evokes a sense of simplicity and body-conscious sensuality. The values of restraint and elegance are juxtaposed with aspects of freedom and fun. These are the values that true French culture ached for." - José Clemente Orozco, Letter from José Clemente Orozco to Coco Chanel, 1933.

"She turned a trick that even Marie Antoinette, dressed as a duchess, had not been able to, and if in doing it Chanel ruined the corset and corset-makers, at any rate mundane French women breathed freely and were at ease for the first time in French history." - Roger Fleming, Sainte-Geneviève, 1932.
Panel #3
Internalizing the Corset

While corsets were on the decline, its worst marketing efforts still attempted to be mirrored through other methods. In a way, the corset became "internalized" after the 1900s, as body shaping transitioned to more nutrition-based dieting and fitness trends.

"I've got nothing against knees if they're pretty. But if they're not pretty, if you stand rue Cambon all day long, you'll begglo to find people with good legs. We never thought they had such bad legs, knock-knees, too flat, purplish." Coco Chanel about her dislike of short dresses. Coco Chanel on fame, brouvers, creativy and the Moon, 2012

"Since Coco's slim, young body needed no corset, jersey suited her to perfection, but not all women could say the same. Chanel's clothes did not flatter all older women, or woman with Fuller figures, whose curves transformed into something more like hoops under corset shapely styles." - Edward C. Garen, Meditations on Coco Chanel and the Rule of Hierarchy, 2014

"I created a brand new silhouette, to conform to it, with the help of the war when food supplies dwindled, all my customers became slim, 'slim' like Coco... Women came to me to buy thinness.' Chez Coco, we look young, do what she's doing,' they told their seamstresses. Coco Chanel, no date given

keeping your weight down

"I created a brand new silhouette, to conform to it, with the help of the war when food supplies dwindled, all my customers became slim, 'slim' like Coco... Women came to me to buy thinness. 'Chez Coco, we look young, do what she's doing,' they told their seamstresses. Coco Chanel, no date given
"But why Welch's and not cheaper juices? Because, it is the Welch process that retains in the bottled juice the healthful properties of ripe Concord grapes so essential to the system." — Keeping Your Weight Under Control

**Keep Slim and Trim with Domino Sugar Menus**

**Modern Day**

"Practically no one need be overweight!" - Keep Slim and Trim 1954

RINE AND EGGS

<table>
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<th>Meal</th>
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| **Breakfast** | 1 egg, hard-boiled  
1 glass white wine (dry, preferably Chablis)  
black coffee |
| **Lunch**   | 2 eggs, hard-boiled but poached if necessary  
2 glasses white wine  
Black coffee |
| **Dinner**  | 6 oz. (150 g) steak, grilled with black pepper, lemon juice  
Remainder of white wine (one bottle allowed per day)  
Black coffee |

"SKIN is Kim's answer to shapewear that actually works. Designed to smooth, streamline, lift and tone - each piece has a solution for every body." - Kim-Kaboodle (shapewear brand online catalog, 2021, 44)

Although the battle of obesity rages on, it seems that the battle for beauty has not been forgotten. The pursuit of perfection has only intensified in recent years, and the quest for the ideal body continues to evolve.
Jersey Fabric

Corset Boning
Handmade Corset Model
The barriers of body standards imprisoning the minds of women can no longer stand.

*Continue scrolling for process paper and bibliography.*
Coco Chanel’s
Unraveling of the Corset

Melinda Rolls & Abbigail Cote
Senior Division
Group Exhibit
Student-Composed Words: 498
Process Paper: 496
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


The “Wine and Eggs” diet introduced within the pages of a 1977 Vogue magazine shows the lengths women would go to match their figures to the ones covering the magazine itself.

Cocteau, Jean. Letter from Jean Cocteau to Coco Chanel. June 20, 1925.

This letter from one of Coco’s close friends shows not only her close relationships, but also her true originality. She is praised as revolutionary for her fashions no one has ever seen anything like; this demonstrates just how ground-breaking Chanel’s designs really were. A few quotes extracted from this letter were used in the exhibit.


The Compton’s Coraline Corset’s marketing towards mothers with young children showcases how the corset became such a cultural expectation that even children were expected to meet the standards given to them by society.


A portrait of a young Coco Chanel is clothed in the free-flowing and loose-fitting clothing shows the style of clothing she popularized in the 1920s.

A portrait of a young Coco Chanel shows another example of the free-flowing and loose-fitting clothing she popularized in the 1920s.


Chanel’s design for a costume in an Antigone’s play in 1922 consists of the draping of fabric over the model that cinched near the shoulders. The lack of structure to the design to contour the body displays is an effective example of Chanel’s design free-from design style.


Advertising margarine as something that will not lead to weight gain around the waist shows how even after the decline of corsetry, a certain ideal figure was still attempting to be achieved.


This article from Chanel’s time praising her fashions was very interesting to read, because it showed the true mindset change. The author condemns corsets as out of fashion and praises Chanel for being up to date and original, which shows her influence at the time, and as such some of these statements were used on the poster. Additionally, she goes on to talk of her childhood and the influence it had, which was hard to find information on.

This document shows record of a Chanel suit that Jackie Kennedy wore being donated to the National Archives. We used part of this document on our poster to signify how important this suit had become, and how part of Chanel’s brand was documented in one of the most secure places possible. This demonstrates how far her fame has spread.


Chanel’s green satin dress design draping loosely over the model displays an example of the free-flowing figure of Chanel’s work.

*Keep Slim and Trim with Domino Sugar Menus.* 1994. The American Sugar Refining Company, 

Domino’s dieting booklet used as a form of promotion for their product shows that diets were extremely sought-after and marketable due to their promise to give women the figure they desired. Through the booklet, the company is taking advantage of a women’s insecurities about her body that have stemmed from societal standards.

*Keeping Your Weight Down!* Welch Grape Juice Co.,

Welch’s diet booklet is yet another example of a company taking advantage of women’s body insecurities by promising them their ideal figure. This showed how body standards had not truly disappeared, and were still extremely prevalent.

A picture of Pat Odgen testing out the fitness fad of the 1940s, the “Slenderizing Salon”, taken by LIFE photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt. The machines were said to stimulate muscle contractions and in turn reduce fat. The invention of machines specifically targeted towards reducing fat for women showcases how slim body standards were attempted to be reached by women.


An example of a modern day “corset”, demonstrating that women are still attempting to live up to the body standards they believe they need to reach. This once again shows how the barrier has not been entirely broken as we might have originally thought.


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7mbRMPQ_E

This interview was used mainly for the quote relating to Chanel No 5. Chanel being Marilyn Monroe’s perfume of choice showed its far-reaching influence, and how important her designs were.


Dr. Ludovic’s x-ray work of a corset wearer displays the medical effects corsets can cause on the body, most noticeably the movement of the ribcage that can be detrimental to
organs. This demonstrates that corsets were definitively a detriment to women’s health when tight laced, and why Chanel and other women’s dismissal of them was justified.


Dr. Ludovic’s diagram of his x-ray maps out the movement of the ribcage that can occur from wearing a corset. We used this image to show how a corset can permanently alter the human body, which could lead to dangerous health consequences.


This book showed how deeply upset some women were by corsetry, and how deeply they felt oppressed by being forced to wear corsets. It served as a great source material for quotes.


This book also showed how hurt women were by corsetry in Raverat’s personal memoir, but also how engrained this was into society, such as how mothers and grandmothers enforced these beliefs. This was also used for quoting on the exhibit.


This ad shows a picture of a beautiful woman in a corset with the caption “women who were corsets are well dressed.” This showed the societal expectations at the time for women, and how deeply they were tied to corsets.
An advertisement by the corset company Ferris portrays a woman wearing a corset with an unreasonably small waist, causing women to compare themselves to this figure and develop an unhealthy view of their bodies.

An advertisement by the corset company Dr. Warner shows four corset drawings that gives a visual of what corsets looked like in 1886.

The extremely cinched in waist in the Thomson’s company corset advertisement in 1868 shows how minuscule women were striving to make their waists.
Showing an infant grow up wearing a corset into old age in 1914 shows how impactful the societal norm of corset-wearing was on every stage of a women’s life, and something she could never escape from.


Another machine Pat Odgen tested out as part of her work with LIFE photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt. This once again showed the extreme lengths that women were willing to go to for an ideal body shaping, echoing what the corset represented.

Secondary Sources


This article was mainly used for the pictures of Jackie Kennedy in her famous Chanel suit. This showed how widespread her fashions had become, as not only had her clothing spread to America, but an extremely important women: the first lady, was wearing it.


This book delves into the story of Coco Chanel, recounted her life and childhood with many details, explaining why she was so revolutionary, and how she came to be this way. Additionally, Garelick explores the nuance of her impact, and how Chanel did not completely break barriers of women’s oppression, which was an interesting addition.

This site contained numerous pictures of Chanel’s wardrobe that were used on the poster, as primary sources that displayed her sense of style. They showed her tendency towards masculine fashions and silhouettes, and were useful in demonstrating her influences.


This book was primarily used for research into Coco Chanel’s fashion choices. While this source was not directly used on the poster, it informed what elements to look for in her designs and chosen materials and was great for general information.


This article was used to find other sources, primarily relating to Coco and her close relationships. It attributed some of her success to these and provided ideas such as her costuming of *Antigone* and Jean Cocteau’s letter to her.


This book was an incredibly detailed account of corsetry and provided most of the research necessary for this portion of the project. Besides containing numerous important facts, it also cited many primary sources relating to corsetry that could be looked at. Through this several personal period accounts of the corset wearing process were found, which was vital in determining how engrained they were into society.
Process Paper

How we chose our topic:

From the beginning, both of us knew quickly that we wanted to do something in relation to fashion. From there we explored iconic designers, and of course stumbled across Chanel. After discovering the story of how she brought the corset out of style, we decided this could make an intriguing project. We also found it interesting that Chanel’s identity and story outside of her iconic perfume hasn’t been widely analyzed. Additionally, it very easily lent itself to the idea of “Breaking Barriers”, as the corset was such a staple of a woman’s wardrobe that was finally abandoned. After deciding to add commentary on how the world was left changed by Chanel’s designs, the general structure and topic of our poster was designed.

How we conducted our research:

First, we started by looking through books and websites, looking for secondary sources to guide our research. Beyond this initial research, most of our searching was spent looking for primary sources that could aid in telling our story. This involved combing archive sites and galleries, as well as looking through our secondary sources for references to primary ones we could find directly. The most useful source was certainly *The Corset: A Cultural History* by Valerie Steele, which gave an extensive history of corsetry, but most importantly gave reference to numerous personal memoirs and accounts of corset wearing that were crucial for our project.

How we picked our category and created our project:

The choice to make an exhibit was simple for one reason: Chanel’s importance was based on her clothing, along with how it looked and felt. We wanted to be able to show what the corset looked and felt like in comparison to her choice of jersey with our artifacts and show numerous pictures of advertisements and clothing design, both of which could only be done with an exhibit. An exhibit also allowed us to showcase a hand-crafted corset, which we managed to make through online tutorials. With hardly any experience in sewing, crafting a corset was a tricky, but with perseverance we figured it out!
For the actual poster itself, we incorporated Chanel’s iconic color palette of black, white, gold, and red. The three panels of the poster separated the sections of our project: the corset-based world before Chanel, how she changed it, and how the world looked afterwards.

**How our project relates to the NHD theme:**

For this project, the evident barrier being broken is corsetry in fashion. Women influenced by Chanel’s style were able to go without a corset and the burdens that came with it. She broke through that barrier by achieving massive success in her field, despite her poor upbringing. However, we wanted to emphasize that the oppression of women, the broader barrier, has not yet been broken. The stifling visual expectations for women have still been extremely prevalent over recent decades, a concept we distinctly addressed in hope to inspire more to act against it.