



# A WESTON AND WELLS REVERSIBLE PLATED BUSTLE

By Christine Gow  
MA Fashion Student

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**Much like the clothes that parade down the catwalks of the world's fashion capitals, the fashionable female body is also subject to the cyclical whims of taste.** When we manage to attain the unattainable—that year's bump, lump, or lack thereof du jour—we tire of it and move on. Take, for example, the statuesque supermodels of the late 80s, who gave way to heroin chic's Kate Moss in 1993; she, in turn, conceded the crown to a gravity-defying Gisele Bündchen at the end of that decade. While boy-slim silhouettes still dominate the pages of high fashion magazines in 2017, pop culture has permeated the arena of health and beauty and overinflated boobs and butts provide a shapely foil to the tiny waists of a million social media feeds.



Ryerson University  
Fashion Research Collection

Wire tennis bustle,  
ca. 1880s. Ryerson  
FRC2013.99.001. Tie.  
Photograph from Ryerson  
Fashion Research  
Collection, 2013.

It is with this in mind that I ask Ingrid Mida, curator of the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection and author of *The Dress Detective*, to show me the selection of bustles in her care. The idea of temporarily exaggerating one's shape with a strap-on 3D form appeals, having once had a costly brush with dermatological fillers (lips, \$1600, looked like a platypus for six months). **"Bustles," Ingrid replies, "are so fun. We have a whole variety of them—in different materials, shapes etc. I will bring out the whole box."** She is right—the collection hosts a plethora of styles from the bustle's hey day in the 1870s and 80s. Here, I must note, that bustles were conceived as a way to support the elaborate and heavy draping and embellishments of the dresses of the time, not as a way to give the impression of a larger-than-average bum. In *Victorian Fashions & Costumes from Harper's Bazar: 1867-1898*, Stella Blum explains that **"the knees had been freed by this time, and the trains for day disappeared for easier walking, but the weight of these costumes and the structures needed to support the huge rear extension added little to increase mobility. Many of the fabrics were upholstery like in quality, made heavier by the profuse use of beading, fringes, braids and furs"** (1974). When viewed from the side as was intended this rear profile looked like the backend of a horse.



Wire tennis bustle,  
ca. 1880s. Ryerson  
FRC2013.99.001. Label.  
Photograph from Ryerson  
Fashion Research  
Collection, 2013.

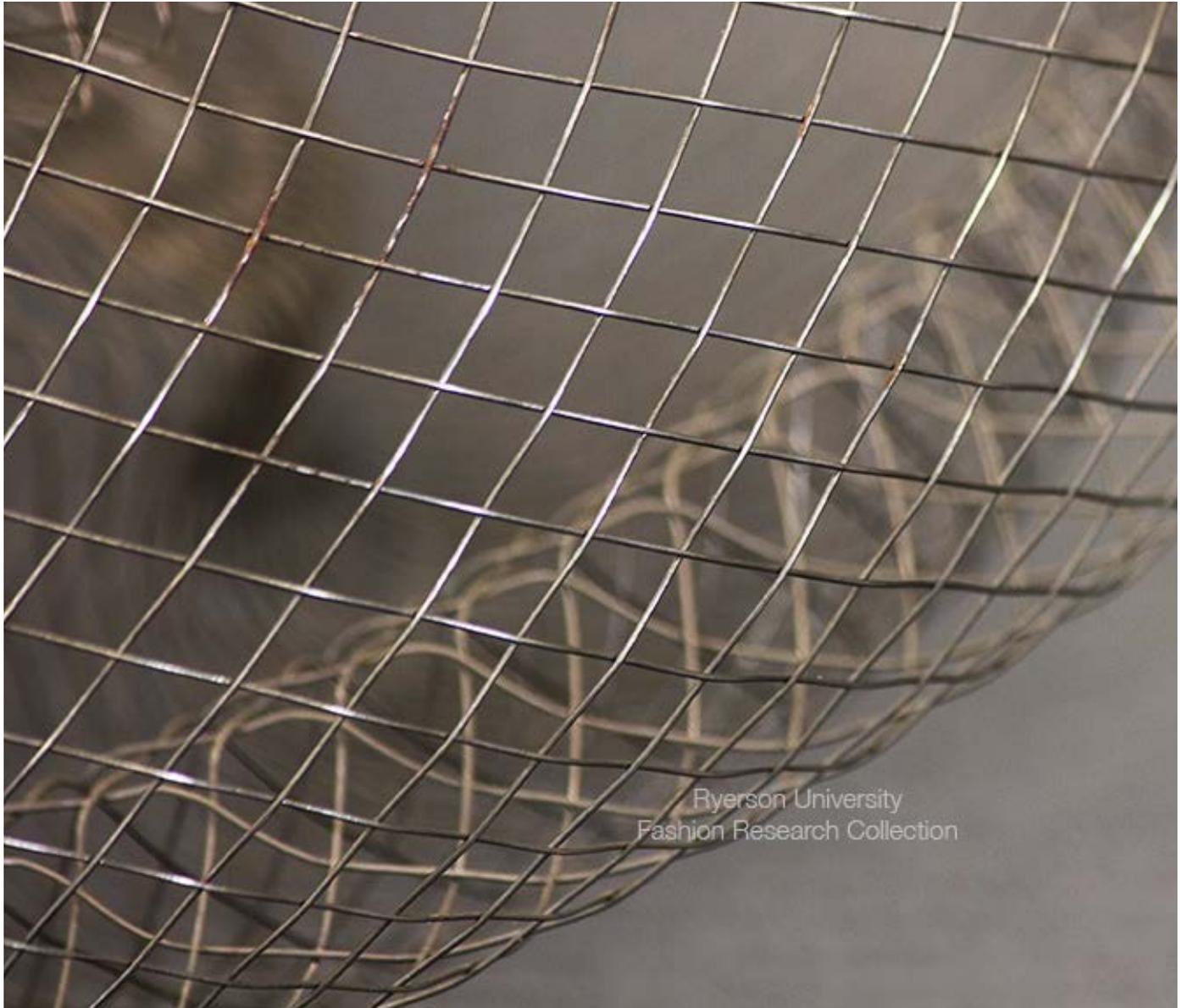
Blum also describes how our perpetual ennui is the primary catalyst of change in fashion, stating how “it often manifests itself as a dissatisfaction with the original shape of the body and seeks expression in a wide variety of anatomical constrictions and distensions.” From her vantage point in the 1970s, she felt that “of these deviations from the natural, none is so difficult for the modern eye to justify in terms of esthetics, comfort or practicality as the form considered fashionable in the mid-1880s.” Ms. Blum clearly did not anticipate the impact Kim Kardashian or Nicki Minaj would have on the desired female form in the new millennium at the time of her writing.

The mid-1880s is known as the high bustle period, as in the 1870s a much lower profile was in fashion (Peteu and Gray 2008). Harold Koda, curator of The Met’s Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed exhibition in 2001, explains how **“the silhouette of the 1880s was created with corsetry and “dress improvers” such as (the) wire-mesh bustle. Structured foundation garments exaggerated the sexually-dimorphic curves of the female body.”** What was then achieved with wire mesh is now the domain of gym squats and implants, but Koda points out that the shape women sought with the bustle was nothing new, even then: it was a “deliberate revival of the “bum rolls” and “half-farthinales” of the Baroque era. The height of this style peaked in 1887 and 1888 and “can be explained by the competition between Thomas P. Taylor and Henry O. Canfield (both of Bridgeport, Connecticut) to invent a viable folding bustle” (Peteu and Gray 2008).



Wire tennis bustle,  
ca. 1880s. Ryerson  
FRC2013.99.001. Back.  
Photograph from Ryerson  
Fashion Research  
Collection, 2013.

The bustle I find the most interesting within Ryerson's collection is precisely this type, though not because of the wire-mesh, double croissant-like shape, or intriguing combination of straps and laces. This one is the only one with any sort of maker's mark. "THE REVERSIBLE PLATED BUSTLE", proclaims the neat red print on the cotton twill tape used to secure the wire form to the wearer, the vestiges of a patent number barely visible in faded ink below. **"MADE ONLY BY THE WESTON & WELLS MANUFACTURING CO." in Philadelphia, P.A., by "AN AMERICAN BRAIDED WIRE CO.", this bustle speaks of American ingenuity in a newly industrial world, and thus, in a sense, of the American dream.** I love the perky sense of optimism this fashion invention projects. Dated to circa 1885, the bustle's original owner is unknown, having come to Ryerson through the vast Cleaver-Suddon donation, a collection of artifacts amassed by fine arts librarian Alan Suddon and acquired in 2001 by Professor Emeritus Katherine Cleaver on his passing.



Wire tennis bustle,  
ca. 1880s. Ryerson  
FRC2013.99.001. Metal.  
Photograph from Ryerson  
Fashion Research  
Collection, 2013.

As you can well imagine, a rigid metal structure strapped to your behind would make sitting rather awkward, and innovations in bustle making stemmed from inventors looking to solve this problem. **Koda explains that these were normally “attached only by a waistband, so that they could shift or lift when the wearer sat. Frequently, they were collapsible, but even in those cases, a woman was required to shift her bustle to the side and perch on the edge of her seat”.** It seems ironic that at this time women began to actively participate in sports, even daring to try such masculine pursuits as yachting and fencing. It mattered little what a woman was doing; in order to remain fashionable she still had to wear a corset and bustle—even when running around a tennis court (Blum 1974). This sport, I posit, could well have been the purpose of my ‘reversible plated bustle’, though a little further research tells me that her manufacturer was a purveyor of “torsion braided wire springs for carriage cushions and backs” (Fitz-Gerald 1896).



Ryerson University  
Fashion Research Collection

Wire tennis bustle,  
ca. 1880s. Ryerson  
FRC2013.99.001. Band.  
Photograph from Ryerson  
Fashion Research  
Collection, 2013.

Perhaps Weston & Wells were only concerned with the comfort of a lady's backside while seated; of the bustles patented between 1887 and 1888, **"when the most extreme protruding bustles were in fashion, 44% were for folding bustles to aid in sitting."** Innovation in this area required engineering adeptness, as these contraptions needed to be robust enough to offer significant support, fold when the lady sat, and spring back into shape when she rose. In an 1888 bustle patent, inventor Alice White described the extreme "mortification of the wearer" should her bustle tangle and not regain its intended shape (Petru and Gray 2008). Though bustle patents outnumber those of other shaping garments (there were 261 between 1846 and 1920, versus 205 hoop patents in the same period), it is only after 1890 that patent records show a major turn in attention to skirts designed for sports and professional activities. **"Shaping devices followed the generally accepted timeline for fashionable silhouettes, indicating market demand as a patent incentive"** (Petru and Gray 2008).

Did the wearer of this bustle use it in her attempts to chase a ball around a clay court from the confines of a corset and gown? If she did, this lightweight add-on would have been the least of her worries. The light soiling on the straps suggests excessive perspiration did not manage to escape her corset and petticoat, which could mean the sport was played at a more leisurely pace, or that the corset had formidable powers of absorption (the torn loop where the bustle would attach to the corset and missing stainless cap at the end of one lace indicate that perhaps she did engage in athletic pursuits of some kind). **A certain level of plainness was mercifully acceptable in sporting ensembles at this time, but it could well have been that this lady's greatest concern was not how many points she could win but simply how best to sit.** Although extreme rear profiles were only favored for a short while within the two decades of the bustle's prime, the undergarment itself would remain fashionable in much subtler incarnations into the next century. Surprisingly, Peteu and Gray found that four patents were filed between 1921 and 2007, indicating there exists those who still champion its cause. In any case, it is either the masterful engineering or the short time this bustle was on trend that accounts for its relatively well-kept condition.

American anthropologist Igor Kopytoff writes: ***"commodities must be not only produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing. Out of the total range of things available in a society, only some of them are considered appropriate for marking as commodities. Moreover, the same thing may be treated as a commodity at one time and not at another. And finally, the same thing may, at the same time, be seen as a commodity by one person and something else by another."***

From valued undergarment to artifact—practically overnight, in the grand scheme of things—I am thankful that when millions of these bustles were relegated to the scrap heap in 1889 or 90, a lady somewhere tucked this particular one into the farthest reaches of her closet, perhaps hoping that it would one day again come back into fashion.

**Christine Gow is an MA Fashion candidate and communications professional, researching how the fashion industry could actively subvert dominant cultural narratives surrounding female consumers over the age of 40 and this market's digital engagement within omni-channel fashion retail.**

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