

Hoop Dreams: The Cage Crinoline

by

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Women's fashion of the mid-nineteenth century can be characterized by the wearing of extremely full skirts.

The ideal silhouette of the late 1840s through the early 1860s consisted of a series of curves and domes. [Fig. 1] Rounded hairstyles and sloping shoulders were echoed in the shape of voluminous full skirts. [Fig. 2] These skirts were described as “swelling beyond measure all below the waist,” and gave the wearers “the majestic air of itinerant church-bells.”¹ Waist, hands and feet were to be small and dainty, and hair was smooth and shiny.

The proper underpinnings were essential in achieving the desired fashionable silhouette. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, a fashionably dressed woman would wear a cotton chemise, pantalettes, an hourglass-shaped corset,² and an average of four to six petticoats³ made of “starched and gummed” cotton⁴ in addition to a horsehair petticoat. These stiff, heavy, and scratchy horsehair petticoats were called “crinolines” from the French word for horsehair, *crin*.⁵ As even these stiffer petticoats still could not achieve the desired volume, additional fullness was achieved by embellishing skirts with multiple ruffles and flounces.

¹ Malakoff, “Paris Gossip” *New York Times*, October 17, 1856, 2.

² Eleri Lynn, *Underwear Fashion in Detail* (London : V & A Publishing, 2010), 86.

³ *Ibid*, 170.

⁴ Malakoff, “Paris Gossip” *New York Times*, October 17, 1856, 2.

⁵ Eleri Lynn, *Underwear Fashion in Detail* (London : V & A Publishing, 2010), 170.

⁴ Malakoff, “Paris Gossip” *New York Times*, October 17, 1856, 2.

⁵ Eleri Lynn, *Underwear Fashion in Detail* (London : V & A Publishing, 2010), 170.

As one can imagine, wearing a half-dozen petticoats under a flounced dress could be hot and cumbersome, to say the least. To create greater fullness without weight, petticoat manufacturers began experimenting with new designs. They introduced models made with hoops of baleen and cording.⁶

On June 16, 1846, an American named David Hough Jr. was granted a patent for a hoop skirt made with channels of “untwisted sisal” to “form a series of horizontal springs around a skirt while the skirt is left perfectly pliable in its length”.⁷

There was also experimentation with inflatable crinolines, which could be blown up by means of a tube. [Fig. 3] However, these pneumatic crinolines had been reported to deflate rather indelicately at inopportune moments.⁸ It seems none of these designs were be the winning solution.

In 1856, Empress Eugenie of France adopted a new style of steel crinoline, invented by R.C. Millet. This crinoline was described in its British patent as a “skeleton petticoat made of steel springs fastened to a tape”.⁹ [Fig. 4] News of this innovation spread quickly. In October of 1856, the new steel cage crinolines were praised by the *New York Times* as “healthy, and as a hygienic invention are worthy of all praise”. However, in December of the same year, the same columnist declared the cage crinoline trend as “generally believed” to be “short lived”.¹⁰

⁶ Eleri Lynn, *Underwear Fashion in Detail* (London : V & A Publishing, 2010), 170.

⁷ David Hough. 1846. Lady's Skirt. U.S. Patent 4584, filed June 8, 1846, and issued June 16, 1846.

⁸ Malakoff, “Paris Gossip” *New York Times*, October 17, 1856, 2.

⁹ Eleri Lynn, *Underwear Fashion in Detail* (London : V & A Publishing, 2010), 170.

¹⁰ Malakoff, “Paris Gossip” *New York Times*, December 26, 1856, 3.

The wearing of hooped understructures to support the fashionable shape of skirts was no way a new phenomenon in fashion.

Women in the sixteenth century wore hooped petticoats made of linen and wood called farthingales. There were two fashionable variations of the sixteenth century farthingale. The earlier, Spanish style, as seen in this 1545 portrait of Catherine Parr [Fig. 5], created a cone silhouette, which mirrored the conical shape of the corset of the time.¹¹ The later, French style, created a cylindrical, drum-like silhouette.¹²

Again in the eighteenth century, large skirts were supported by means of hooped linen and wood *panniers*, which widened the skirt, sometimes quite extravagantly.¹³ [Figure 6] It is no small coincidence that the champion of the cage crinoline, the Empress Eugenie, had a keen interest in the fashions of the eighteenth century, and a very specific interest in Marie Antoinette.¹⁴

However, the steel cage crinoline of the nineteenth century was unique in its ability to be a mass-produced fashion item and was adopted by a wide variety of women, including the women who manufactured it.¹⁵

By February of 1857, Douglas & Sherman's patent-pending "superior steel spring skirts" were advertised as the "best article of the kind ever produced" in the *New York Times*.¹⁶ Within the next few years, numerous patents were taken

¹¹ Francois Boucher, *20,000 Years of Fashion* (New York : Abrams, 1986), 227.

¹² Francois Boucher, *20,000 Years of Fashion* (New York : Abrams, 1986), 236.

¹³ Ibid, 296.

¹⁴ Therese Dolan, "The Empress's New Clothes: Fashion and Politics in Second Empire France," *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring-Summer 1994), p. 26.

¹⁵ "Employment of Women: Article IV" *Harper's Weekly*, February 19, 1859, 125.

¹⁶ Douglas & Sherwood, "Steel Spring Skirts," advertisement, *New York Times*, February 14, 1857, 5.

out on steel skirts of myriad designs, from mesh cages that resembled fishing nets¹⁷ to baskets¹⁸, and beyond.

Most of these unique designs were created using the same general principles as the original, however. Fabric-covered spring-steel hoops of gradually increasing circumference were suspended from a belt by cording or tapes, creating an open framework on top of which to wear a full skirt. [Fig. 7] Other variants looked more like a traditional cotton petticoats, and were made of cotton with the hoops inserted into channels.

The earliest cage crinoline designs gave the skirt a symmetrical dome-like silhouette. Improvements in design, such as the “waved jupon” allowed the outer layer of the skirt to fold into a somewhat less lampshade-esque and artificial shape.¹⁹ By the mid 1860s, the silhouette of the cage crinoline had evolved to an ellipse, with a flattened front and the majority of fullness at the rear of the skirt. The back fullness eventually evolved further into the bustle foundations of the 1870s.

Douglas & Sherwood’s patented²⁰ hoop skirts proved quite successful. According to an 1859 profile in *Harper’s Weekly*, they employed 800 women and turned out 3,000 skirts daily. In addition, “They consume a ton of steel per day; of other materials they use, monthly, 150,000 yards muslin, 100,000 feet whalebone, 24,000 spools of cotton, 2,800,000 eyelets, slides, hooks and eyes,

¹⁷ John Holmes. 1858. Lady’s Hooped Skirt. U.S. Patent 22,426, issued December 28, 1858.

¹⁸ E. G. Alwood 1859. Improvement in Skeleton Skirts. U.S. Patent 21,806 issued October 19, 1858, and reissued (number 784) July 26, 1859.

¹⁹ E. Philpott, “Sansflectum Crinolines,” advertisement, *Le Follet*, October 1863, 5.

²⁰ Samuel S. Sherwood. 1860. Skeleton Skirt. U.S. Patent 28,941, issued June 26, 1860.

etc., 500,000 yards of tape, 225,000 yards of jute cord, and 10,000 yards of haircloth.”²¹ [Fig. 8] A competitor, Thomson’s Skirt Factory employed 1,000 women and “provided an indispensable article of dress to three thousand to four thousand ladies daily.”²² And by no means were these two companies the only hoop skirt manufacturers in New York. Unlike the farthingale’s and panniers of previous centuries, the cage crinoline was an industrial, mass-produced, ready-to-wear garment.

However, the cage crinoline was not universally beloved. Satirical cartoons and editorials mocked the larger and larger skirts made possible by the springy hoops. Countless cartoons and editorials in *Punch* magazine lampooned the garment for not fitting through doorways²³ or in carriages,²⁴ concealing deformed feet and legs, and perhaps worst of all, keeping a lady’s male admirers at a distance.²⁵ [Fig. 9 and fig. 10] And in October 1856, a cartoon suggested the cage crinoline itself be used as a makeshift Christmas tree.²⁶ In 1858, a satirical report of the *Crinoline de Leviathan* asserted that there was a creation so large that it required the use of a crane to lower its wearer into and out of the “crinoline vessel.”²⁷

²¹ “Employment of Women: Article III” *Harper’s Weekly*, January 29, 1859, 68.

²² “Employment of Women: Article IV” *Harper’s Weekly*, February 19, 1859, 125.

²³ “A Wholesome Conclusion,” cartoon, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, Volume 34, February 6, 1858, 54.

²⁴ “Cool Request,” cartoon, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, Volume 32, January 31, 1857, 50.

²⁵ “Under the Mistletoe,” cartoon, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, Volume 32, January 3, 1857, 10.

²⁶ “A Hint for Christmas Revellers,” *Punch, or the London Charivari*, Volume 30, October 18, 1856, 153.

²⁷ “The Newest Nouveauté de Paris,” *Punch, or the London Charivari*, Volume 34, February 6, 1858, 57.

Other, somewhat less fanciful criticisms were also levied at the cage crinoline.

In September of 1858, a church, the “Quarterly Conference of the Miami Annual Conference” resolved that, “the wearing of hoops by females is inconsistent with a truly Christian character...by some even considered indecent,” and forbade their members to wear them.²⁸ Other moralists supposed that the crinoline could conceal pregnancy, and therefore could abet infanticide.²⁹

The large, buoyant and springy nature of the cage crinoline’s construction made it susceptible to flipping up and exposing the wearer’s legs to her garters.³⁰ This unfortunate side effect (which was also much satirized in the press) made the “widespread adoption” of pantalettes a necessity.³¹

However, more was at stake than the wearer’s modesty. Because of the cage crinoline’s swingy and hollow construction, it was also relatively easy for a careless wearer to brush too close to a fireplace grate or other open flame and ignite her clothing. The structure of the crinoline also made it more difficult to smother the flames by wrapping the victim in a rug.

Reliable records as to how many flaming cage crinoline-related fatalities actually occurred are hard to come by. One source records nineteen deaths in England, during a six-week period in the winter of 1858, in addition to a case in Boston.³² It must have been a somewhat widespread phenomenon, as there was

²⁸ “Christianity and Crinoline,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1858.

²⁹ Therese Dolan, “The Empress’s New Clothes: Fashion and Politics in Second Empire France,” *Woman’s Art Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring-Summer 1994), p. 27.

³⁰ Malakoff, “Paris Gossip” *New York Times*, October 17, 1856, 2.

³¹ Eleri Lynn, *Underwear Fashion in Detail* (London : V & A Publishing, 2010), 170.

³² “The Perils of Crinoline,” *New York Times*, March 16, 1858.

at least one suggestion in the *Medical Times and Gazette* that the crinolines and ladies' dresses be made fire-retardant, as a precaution. They didn't dare attempt to compel women to abandon their hoops, as it was "quite impossible by any amount of reason or warning to produce any effect on fashion."³³

There were also cases of death by crinoline due to perils other than fire. In 1865, young woman in New Jersey was dragged for 2 miles when the horses of her carriage took fright and her crinoline became entangled on the carriage steps.³⁴

There was also a very real danger of the cage crinoline getting caught in industrial machinery. In 1864, a young woman's skirt brushed too close to a rotating shaft next to a dark stairwell at a lower Manhattan baking soda factory. As her clothing was swallowed up by the machinery, the steel hoops of her crinoline became wound "so tightly around her lower limbs that one of them was cut off and the other nearly so."³⁵

These criticisms and reports compel one to wonder why women continued to wear the cage crinoline. Surely looking fashionable was not worth the challenges of not fitting through doorways, flashing your underclothes, going up in flames, being dragged to death by horses, or being swallowed alive in a factory? Were women in the nineteenth century so oppressed and feeble-minded that they

³³ "Non-inflammable Clothing," *Medical Times and Gazette*, February 7, 1863, Volume I, 142.

³⁴ "New Jersey; A Young Lady Dragged Two Miles by Runaway Horses," *New York Times*, June 17, 1865.

³⁵ "Frightful Accident—A Woman Killed by Machinery," *New York Times*, July 9, 1864.

felt being fashionable was more important than their convenience and was even worth risking their bodily safety?

First of all, women liked how they looked in the cage crinolines. Arbiters of elegance wore them. They were incorporated into the designs of the great dressmakers of the day, most famously, the Paris couturier, Charles Frederick Worth. They provided the wearer with the fashionable silhouette.

In addition, the elastic, springy nature of the steel hoops made the skirt capable of compressing and recovering relatively easily, so many of the criticisms about fitting through doorways and in carriages were exaggerations. A variant of cage crinoline called the “waved jupon” was extolled in its advertisements, which declared, “a lady may ascend a steep stair, lean against a table, throw herself into an arm-chair, pass to her stall at the opera, or occupy a fourth seat in a carriage, without inconvenience to herself or others.”³⁶ [Fig 11]

Also, extant examples of cage crinolines and contemporary photographs suggest that the average fashionable woman was not wearing the exaggeratedly enormous hoops depicted in satirical cartoons or fashion plates of the time. [Fig. 12] The largest fashionable crinolines were most likely only worn to extremely formal events such as balls or weddings.³⁷

Also, and quite importantly, women wore these crinolines because they were more comfortable than the alternative methods of obtaining the “correct” shape. The steel cages gave their clothes fullness without the inconvenience and

³⁶ E. Philpott, “Sansflectum Crinolines,” advertisement, *Le Follet*, October 1863, 5.

³⁷ Lucy Johnstone, “Corsets and Crinolines in Victorian Fashion,” <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/c/corsets-and-crinolines-in-victorian-fashion/>

discomfort of wearing a half-dozen cotton and horsehair petticoats. They were cooler in the summer, kept long skirts from dragging in the dirt, and could be “kept perfectly clean by simply using a wet sponge,”³⁸ thus saving the trouble and expense of laundering, pressing and starching multiple petticoats (a major boon for the classes of women without lady’s maids). The hollow, wide skirts also gave the wearer a great deal of freedom of movement, and were easier to walk in than multiple petticoats sticking to and getting twisted between the wearer’s legs.

Because the crinoline was so full, it made the wearer’s waist look tiny in comparison, so her corset did not need to be laced very tightly. The corsets of the late 1850s and early 1860s were relatively short in length and did not need to be heavily boned over the hips.

A case has also been made that *Punch*’s derision of the crinoline had much to do with the political climate between England and France, as the Empress Eugenie was so associated to the style. A cartoon mocking the crinoline could very easily be a thinly veiled attack on Eugenie’s political abilities.³⁹

Furthermore, while no doubt some widely publicized injuries did occur, the great majority of women appear to have worn their cage crinolines without incident. A British political and literary magazine, the *Anti-Teapot Review*, defended the crinoline’s reputation, writing, “we are certain more deaths have occurred, and more suffering has occasioned, from lack of crinoline than from any other ostensible cause,” and went on to suppose that the crinoline had saved

³⁸ E. Philpott, “Sansflectum Crinolines,” advertisement, *Le Follet*, October 1863, 5.

³⁹ Therese Dolan, “The Empress’s New Clothes: Fashion and Politics in Second Empire France,” *Woman’s Art Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring-Summer 1994), p. 22-28.

women from drowning, due to its light weight in comparison to layers of petticoats.⁴⁰

So while this fashion had its many detractors, it was worn by a wide variety of women for well over a decade. Clearly something in the style appealed to the wearers enough to ignore its inconveniences.

There is also a compelling case that while this fashion has been considered by some as a particularly oppressive style, women in the middle of the nineteenth century experienced more comfort and freedom of movement than they were to for the remainder of the nineteenth century. The tightly laced corsets and long straight skirts of the decades to come would arguably “cage” women more literally than the cage crinoline.

⁴⁰ “The Crinose Crisis,” *The Anti-Teapot Review: A Magazine of Politics, Literature and Art*, Vol. I, August 1864, 21.



Figure 1. Fashion Plate illustrating the fashionable sloping shoulders and dome-shaped skirts. Jules, David. *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* C. 1860



Figure 2. Miniature portrait showing a dome-shaped hairstyle. c. 1850
Victoria & Albert Museum no. M.12:1-3-1955



Emily. "Madame Bonton says 'the Circumference of the Crinoline should be Thirty-Six Feet!'"
 Caroline. "Dear me!—I'm only Thirty-Two—I must Inflate a little!"

Figure 3. Caricature of the inflatable crinoline. Cartoon, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, Volume 32, January 17, 1857, 30.



Figure 4. "A favorite of the empress," cage crinoline. 1860-1865. Victoria & Albert Museum no. T.150-1986



Figure 5. Portrait of Catherine Parr wearing a Spanish farthingale. Master John, c.1545



Figure 6. Panniers. Schabner, A. 1778. Victoria & Albert Museum no. T.120-1969



Figure 7. Chemise, pantalettes and corset with a cage crinoline. c. 1867. Victoria & Albert Museum no. CIRC.87-1951.



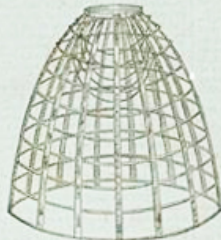
SKIRT SEWING MACHINE.



EYELETTING MACHINE.



A SKIRT IN PROCESS OF MANUFACTURE.



SKELTON SKIRT.



THE FINISHING ROOM.



QUEEN ANN SKIRT.

EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN. ARTICLE III.

DOUGLAS & SHERWOOD'S HOOP SKIRT FACTORY.

We illustrate herewith one of the largest manufacturing establishments of this city, Douglas & Sherwood's Hoop Skirt Factory; an establishment in which 600 women are employed, and 2000 hoop skirts turned out daily.

Five years ago Messrs. Douglas & Sherwood began the manufacture of skirts. At that time haircloth and other heavy materials were the substances most used in the manufacture, but the weight of several such skirts, and the heat generated bying together to finish, the situation of matters was directed toward the discovery of a substitute, and hoop skirts were invented. When hoops were first introduced, to turn out six skirts per day was considered a fair day's work; now the several factories engaged produce over 25,000. In 1853 Douglas & Sherwood removed to Broadway, and set up 200 sewing machines (Wheeler and Wilson's) in 1854 they found the premises too small, and kind there business in Wall Street, when they entered the manufacture. They consume a ton of steel per day; of other materials they use, monthly, 150,000 yards muslin, 100,000 feet washlines, 25,000 yards of cotton, 2,000,000 yards, shales, laces and eyes, etc., 200,000 yards of tape, 25,000 yards of fine cord, and 10,000 yards of haircloth.

We are happy to add that Messrs. Douglas & Sherwood have not been forgetful of the mental welfare of their employees. In a building on White Street, adjoining their factory, they have established a free library for the girls, containing 7000 volumes. This is a most good investment, and is an example well worthy of being followed.

THE KNIGHT'S LEAP AT ALTENAHL.

"So the baronet had bred the grey, son of mine,
And the water is open and done;
Then bring me a cup of the red Abo-wine;
I never shall drink but this one."
"And fetch me my harness, and saddle my horse,
And lead him one round to the door;
He must take such a leap tonight pasture
As horse never took before."
He harness'd himself by the clear moonshine,
And he saddled his horse at the door,
And he took such a pull at the red Abo-wine
As never man took before.
He spurred the old horse, and he led him tight,
And he leapt him out over the wall;
Out over the cliff, and into the night,
Three hundred feet of fall.
They found him next morning below in the glen,
And never a horse in him whole;
But Heaven, may you have more mercy than men
On such a bold squire's soul.



A WORK-ROOM IN DOUGLAS & SHERWOOD'S SKIRT MANUFACTORY.

Figure 8. Douglas & Sherwood's factory. "Employment of Women: Article III" Harper's Weekly, January 29, 1859, 68.



COOL REQUEST.

Lady Crinoline. "YOU WON'T MIND RIDING ON THE BOX, EDWARD DEAR, WILL YOU?—I'M AFRAID, IF WE BOTH GO INSIDE THE BROUGHAM, MY NEW DRESS WILL GET SO RUMPLED!"

Figure 9. A comically large crinoline. "Cool Request," cartoon, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, Volume 32, January 31, 1857, 50.



UNDER THE MISTLETOE.

AUGUSTUS THINKS CRINOLINE A DETESTABLE INVENTION.

Figure 10. "Under the Mistletoe," cartoon, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, Volume 32, January 3, 1857, 10.



Figure 11. "Waved Jupon" style of cage crinoline. c. 1868 Victoria & Albert Museum no. T.195-1984.



Figure 12. Fashionably dressed woman wearing a cage crinoline. c. 1864. Gernsheim, Alison. *Victorian and Edwardian Fashion: A Photographic Survey*. New York: Dover, 1982, 70.

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