

# ‘Sanitising the Female Body: Costume, Corsetry, and the Case for Corporeal Feminism in Social History Museums.’

## Abstract:

While social history museums are to be applauded for collecting and exhibiting nineteenth-century women's costume, exhibitions which use 'dress' are frequently responsible for perpetuating myths about Victorian women, myths which mistakenly assume that our female forebears were universally *tiny*, and that their clothing was always scrupulously *clean*. This paper argues that the incorporation of, and engagement with corporeal feminist theories, when researching women's dress, will harvest a much richer understanding of a specifically feminine 'past'.

# ‘Sanitising the Female Body: Costume, Corsetry, and the Case for Corporeal Feminism in Social History Museums.’

Author's biographical details.

Dr Leigh Summers completed her doctorate in history at the University of Melbourne. A previous degree in Museum Studies, undertaken at James Cook University in Townsville, was responsible for an ongoing interest in unpacking the ways in which material culture both inflects, and reflects the gender politics of almost any given, historical, moment. This paper is drawn from her research experiences in museums in both England and Australia. She is currently employed by the National Trust of South Australia as manager, curator, and historian at Ayers House Museum, an institution which holds an extraordinary collection of Victorian costume. This collection, comprised of a large number of ‘small and sanitised’ garments, has also led her to acknowledge the difficulties inherent in using costume in exhibitions, and to question the interpretation of displays which involve women’s history.

## ‘Sanitising the Female Body: Costume, Corsetry, and the Case for Corporeal Feminism in Social History Museums.’

In this article I argue that the incorporation of a corporeal feminist analysis is critical in the construction of meaningful museum exhibitions that feature women’s costume. A corporeal feminist analysis, as defined by Elizabeth Grosz, is an analysis or vision, an imagination if you will, that takes into serious account the biological specificities of womanhood, while also examining those other external elements which, in part, construct female identity. Grosz’ work, though at times difficult, spells out the necessity to recognise and honour female biological specificity. Grosz insists that female *biological* reality is, and should be, a worthy topic of analysis and discussion. Too long, she says, the female body has been an object of suspicion and of fear. (The appearance of blue liquid replacing menstrual blood in television commercials for sanitary products is of course, irrefutable evidence of one such fear and taboo.) Even feminist theorists, according to Grosz, to an extent, have been unable to discuss the corporeal female body, because to do so might leave them open to charges of biological essentialism. In other words, it has been thought that to discuss the sexually (ie biologically specific) female body might lead to accusations that 'femaleness' can be reduced to its biology.<sup>1</sup> Grosz and more recently Lynda Birke, point to the use of biology to justify socially approved and constructed feminine behaviour. An example of this is the scientific theory that purports to prove that women are better at ironing than men because of their genetic makeup.<sup>2</sup> Corporeal feminism offers another way of looking at the female body that does not essentialise it in such patriarchal and limiting ways.

Corporeal feminism, says Grosz, is broader than previously expounded essentialist

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1 Elizabeth Grosz, 'Corporeal Feminism' in *Australian Feminist Studies*, no.5, Summer, 1987, pp.1-17. See particularly pp.1-7. This is a realistic concern given that the female body has been, and is still, used to justify women's physical and social subordination.

<sup>2</sup> See Lynda Birke’s amusing refutation of this nonsense, in *Feminism and the Biological*

positioning, because it simultaneously allows individual women to be distinguished from each other, as well as being open to 'any culture's particular significations and requirements.' Most importantly for museum professionals, corporeal feminism takes into account both the biological or universal trans-historical elements of the female body. By this is meant the biological courses that characterise many, but not all women's lives (across time) being adolescence, menstruation, childbirth and menopause. However, while corporeal feminism focuses on issues of the body, it also takes into account the female body's capacity to be 'moulded, constructed, socially informed or culturally specified'. While Grosz's work focuses on the textual construction and analysis of the feminine, I would like to argue, as mentioned previously, that a similar repositioning and revisioning of women's bodies should be incorporated into social history museums which use costume when representing women. In practical rather than theoretical terms, this article is a call for arts administrators, museum curators and historians to confound modern sensibilities, to dash prevailing comfortable female stereotypes, and to actively transgress the taboos surrounding women's bodies when they research and exhibit the 'feminine'.

A cursory stroll through almost any social history museum in Australia or Britain, whether it is part of a large and well funded city institution, or whether it is a smaller self-contained regional social history museum, quickly makes clear that at least ten years after feminist critiques of museum exhibitions have been (to a greater or lesser extent) accepted intellectually, the actual display of material culture which relates to women's history remains largely untouched by feminist practice. To put it bluntly, the representation of human kind in museums often remains gendered to the ground. Despite promises and claims of gender equality in official museum policies in England and Australia, it is often the case that social history museums remain dominated by androcentric depictions of Anzac heroes, empire builders, bushrangers, knights, colonial explorers, and the inevitable 'stories' of their conquering industries and assorted individual braveries. Indeed, the

shedding of masculine blood, masculine sweat and masculine tears, whether displayed in English or Australian institutions, is honoured and at times shamelessly valorised in collections which purport to represent the material culture and history of both men and women. Significantly, though this is rarely consciously acknowledged, those artefacts most prized in such exhibitions are those which retain traces of the valiant or sacrificial blood of battle, or those that show the sweat, grime and tears of 'honest masculine labour'. That is, the 'corporeal masculine' is recognised as valuable by both curators and the public, perceived as both evidence of the past and as contributing to the object's value.<sup>3</sup>

The situation is completely reversed when the material culture of women is collected and displayed. On both sides of the Atlantic, all traces of female effusions are banished from public display, and it is, I would argue, largely because of the invisibility of female corporeality (that is, female blood, sweat and tears) that exhibitions which use costume to exhibit women's history remain in most cases, predictably stereotypical. Despite this sweeping criticism of costume in exhibitions, I would also like to add that curators and historians of costume must be admired and thanked for their unflagging devotion to a topic which has until recently, been trivialised and relegated to the sensational in museums. Costume is at last, now gaining more credibility as a subject of academic research. Unfortunately the increased academic interest in costume is rarely reflected in social history exhibitions beyond a kind of 'quantifying' of frocks.

This is not to say that there is not a legitimate place for museums to use costume as a kind of historical, visual fashion barometer, from which changes in technology, fabric design and style can be observed. Major costume museums, such as the Gallery of English Costume in Manchester, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, demonstrate these 'technological' themes admirably, and do not pretend to do other than fulfil this role with costume. However, costume

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3 A noteworthy exception to this enduring trend has been the fascinating exhibition of menstrual cloths, found amidst the walls and foundations of the Sydney Barracks. That this well curated and researched exhibition is noteworthy upholds my thesis that very few representations of

collections in social history museums in Australia are rarely extensive enough to fulfil even this utilitarian, if unimaginative, basic function. The paucity of nineteenth-century garments in Australian museums (or the paucity of feminist research around them) usually means that female costume is used to demonstrate technological and stylistic progression. More often, women's dress is used as an attractive frou-frou to decorate particular historical moments, or worse still as a desultory and patronising concession towards women's history.

Given that costume is often the only way women appear as historical subjects within museums, and given that costume remains marginalised in the larger hegemonic masculine museum 'discourses', it is imperative that the exhibition of costume is reassessed and revisioned. For, when costume is intelligently researched and sympathetically exhibited, it can provide indications of female life-experience that we denizens of the late-twentieth century can identify with and share. More importantly, when costume is well displayed and interpreted, it can provide tantalising evocations, and even evidence, of a past that is not our own, and provide insights into experiences we will never endure. Costume, when it is authentically and sensitively used to represent women, has the ability to summon up in our imagination an embodiment, rather than an ethereal caricature, of our foremothers.

Currently many costume displays, even in the more progressive institutions, where one might reasonably expect a considered and holistic representation of women, fail to provide an illuminating optic on the lives, bodies or lived experience of our foremothers. Rather, our female forebears are frequently depicted as narcissistic sex objects, positioned in their underwear at mirrored dressing tables, as anonymous working-class domestics in the kitchen, or as crinolined, beribboned and mute middle-class bystanders in the parlour. The obvious questions here, then, are why has this happened, and, how can these static representations be overturned?

First the why. Official museum collection policies which have been traditionally based on an

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women grapple with immutable transhistorical issues of the body.

'object driven' approach, have to an extent, made this kind of representation inevitable. An object-driven approach is one that positions the object as valuable, or not, depending on its condition and whether the museum has, or does not have, that object in the collection. An object-driven approach means that the object is seen outside of its context. There have been significant efforts to overcome this method of acquisition, for obviously collections built on an object-driven approach make coherent contextualisation of artefacts difficult, if not impossible.<sup>4</sup>

The Victoria and Albert Museum has an object driven approach when it collects costume. However, it is an approach that works well for the V&A, because it is not a social history museum. Their acquisition policies adequately reflect the Museum's charter, which is not a social history charter. Costume curators at that institution acquire only those costumes that represent the middle and upper classes. Their acquisition policy also determines that the garments accepted for donation must be in mint condition and in a size that is easily displayed.<sup>5</sup> Few museums have such formalised and rigid collection policies as the V&A. Despite the absence of such restrictive, formal museum acquisition policies in Australian museums, constraints borne of ingrained gender assumptions, combined with preconceived ideas regarding visitor expectations, continues to influence curatorial and research staff in social history museums. These factors hinder the collection and /or exhibition of material that contravenes traditional stereotypes of Victorian women as small and clean.

As a consequence, costume collections that contain 'big frocks' or soiled frocks are rare. It is a general rule, that even when 'outsize' or soiled garments are held in collection storage rooms, they are rarely examined or researched, and even more infrequently displayed. Yet, it is these garments which potentially tell us a 'truth' about a specifically female past. It is these garments that potentially reveal aspects of what Grosz would identify as a 'transhistorical female corporeality', in a

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4 Julia Clark has discussed both the limitations of an object driven approach and the futility of exhibitions that are not underpinned by a theoretical imperative, in her succinct article 'Any Old Iron', *Museums Australia Journal*, Vols 2-3, 1991-2, pp.57-61.

5 Personal communication with senior curator of costume, Ms Susan North, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2 December, 1996.

way that tiny frocks do not. Costume displays that feature size 10 perfect gowns do more than eradicate a transhistorical biological common denominator. They actively reinforce misleading, stereotypical gender assumptions about women and, at the same time, shore-up mainstream myths about the past, myths that museums are supposed to dismantle. The myriad of tiny frocks, relentlessly exhibited by so many museums when representing the feminine, are lent an historical 'authority' by virtue of being displayed in the hallowed institution of the museum. Few visitors would question the authenticity of the exhibitions. Museum visitors believe, or want to believe, that curators accurately interpret and represent the past. While this might be true of scientific and natural history exhibitions, rigorous analytical research rarely underpins exhibitions of women's costume.

Gowns are generally chosen for display for purely aesthetic reasons, or, because they reflect the prevailing fashion style of the era being constructed in the exhibition. Most museums in Australia and England, to their credit, are scrupulous in avoiding anachronistic, sartorial blunders when choosing garments for exhibition. However, a choice of garments based on and informed by a corporeal feminist 'vision', as much as on historical accuracy, would see far different garments displayed, and completely different stories about the past revealed on museum labels. Rare are the displays that genuinely attempt to contextualise women's lives in relation to their clothing. More often, in their attempts to depict women's history, museums parade a pretty and predictable array of small, unsullied frocks.

The incorporation of a corporeal feminist analysis of both the bodies as well as the material culture of mid-to-late nineteenth-century middle-class women can disclose a completely different costume scenario. Even a perfunctory overview of nineteenth-century women's magazines reveals that many middle-class women endured a 'battle of the bulge', equal to, if not exceeding, the twentieth-century feminine combat and obsession with weight. The nineteenth-century middle-class diet was comprised of lashings of starch, mountains of stodge, and relays of deserts, with very little

emphasis on fruit and vegetables.<sup>6</sup> Vigorous exercise for most middle-class women was avoided as masculinising and, while the concept of dieting as a form of weight control existed in the nineteenth century, it lay more or less dormant until the turn of the century. Between 1830 and 1880, the fashionable ideal was to be tiny but unless hereditarily blessed by a small frame, most middle-class women must have, at some point in their lives, struggled to achieve this impossible goal. Women's magazines of the mid to late-nineteenth century, like those of today, were alternately peppered with advice on how to attain the perfect figure, and advice to heavier readers to 'be boldly fat' and to accept their unfashionable body shape with a 'laughing good grace.'<sup>7</sup> The incorporation of this kind of research, provided along with the display of tiny gowns inevitably challenges popular conceptions of Victorian women as universally dainty, lady like and without appetites.

The ubiquitous small-frock syndrome evidenced in many museum exhibitions is, therefore, inextricably implicated in the perpetuation of the prevailing fallacy that nineteenth-century women were uniformly minuscule and willowy. The small-frock syndrome evidenced by so many museums actively eradicating, or denying, a long female history of weight problems, of eating disorders, of obesity and even anorexia, all of which existed in the nineteenth century. Moreover, in routinely depicting nineteenth-century women as tiny, it can be very easily assumed by museum visitors that weight problems and eating disorders (along with the angst, shame, and despair that accompany these conditions) are feminine problems specific to the late twentieth-century. A kind of lying by omission is in operation in museum exhibitions which, for whatever reasons, continue to exhibit the tiny frock, either consciously or unconsciously, as emblematic of Victorian womanhood.<sup>8</sup>

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6 Dietary habits can be gleaned from nineteenth-century home making texts as well as beauty and health manuals, which often contained detailed menu plans for young middle-class matrons.

7 See for example the popular English middle-class women's magazine, *Bow Bells*, 12 April 1865, p.286.

8 Large frocks are displayed on rare occasions in museums. However, these garments generally have been worn by an important personage, hence their inclusion in the exhibition. The Museum of Costume in Bath is a good example of this kind of use of the 'big frock.' The museum, famed for its astonishing collection and professional curatorship, has only one large gown on display. This less than glamorous 'outsize' garment, was worn by the aged, portly, and

While 'average' and outsize frocks are rare in museum collections and displays, rarer still are those female garments that are soiled by sweat or blood. Yet women's bodies are, as Grosz points out, transhistorically and transculturally marked by their effusions. Consequently, from time-to-time so are the clothes of even the most fastidious women. Yet those very garments soiled by sweat, and bloodied by the transhistorical, biological events of menstruation and childbirth, along with the even less appealing bloodshed caused by sexual violence and physical assault, when they exist at all in collections, are as often withheld from view as the 'big frocks'. Yet it is these very garments, which, like 'big frocks', potentially speak an important 'truth' about female existence and corporeality. Put simply, soiled garments potentially deepen and enrich any understanding of a specifically 'female' past.

My own doctoral research into corsetry has drawn 'issues of blood' to my attention. Both primary and secondary sources indicated that corsets were uncomfortable, even dangerous, devices. They were generally worn much too small for the occupant, whose well-being was jeopardised, not only by the compression the garments on internal organs, but by the tendencies of the bones or steels within the corsets to snap, tear through the fabric and pierce the flesh. Not surprisingly, a close reading of nineteenth-century corset patents revealed two recurring themes regarding corsetry.<sup>9</sup> The first of these was an earnest desire on the part of corset manufacturers to 'improve', that is to strengthen, the metal of busks, steels and bones<sup>10</sup> in corsets, to prevent them from snapping and puncturing the occupant's body. (This occurrence was a frequent complaint in women's writings about the garment.) Various pockets and gadgets were invented to this end. The

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mourning Queen Victoria.

9 All corset patents, including amendments and abridgments registered at the London patent office between 1850 and 1900, were examined as part of this research.

10 The busk is the band of wood, bone or metal (usually steel) which ran from below the breasts to the bottom edge of the corset. The busk was generally between one and a half, to two and a half inches wide. Busks made even simple movements like bending forward, a task to be negotiated. The terms 'steels' or 'bones' refers to the narrower bands of metal, or bone, that ran diagonally down the corset. It was common for corsets to have up to thirty bones or strips of metal, underpinning the corset's deceptively dainty carapace.

second theme that ran through the patents was the quest to invent a corset that reduced the amount of sweating about the torso, that corsetry, in part, provoked. This was, to a small extent, reduced by the invention of 'aerated corsets' or 'ribbon corsets'. These appeared to be constructed wholly of mesh or ribbon, but they were, in fact, simply daintier metal cages for the flesh.

Once confident of the technological history of corsetry, I felt adequately armoured to examine the garments. This entailed viewing and handling hundreds of corsets in museums in metropolitan London and rural England. Almost every corset was in pristine condition. Eventually the subject of my doctoral research became alarmingly dull. It was not until the least attractive garments were mistakenly, and eventually grudgingly, brought from the collections room that the hours spent examining corset patents and reading other primary documents really made sense. Those few extant garments, bloodied by the tearing of skin, patched with strips of bed sheet, soiled by sweat, and wadded in those areas of greatest pressure, spoke in a way that the perfect garments did and could not.

These garments eroded if not upturned and dismantled any lingering stereotype in my head of the corseted woman as a powerful or a passive sexual vamp. (This position is currently championed by several widely read and oft published fashion historians notably David Kunzle, and more recently, Valerie Steele.)<sup>11</sup> Indeed, bloodied and sweat-stained corsets presented a visual language that was far richer in its evocation, than the limited conceptual messages transmitted by immaculate, perfect, 'sexy' garments. An examination of the less than 'sexy' stained garments quickly repositioned the nineteenth-century corseted female subjects of my research from static, historically sexualised objects, to trussed, but often resisting 'living' bodies. These garments brought

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11 Both David Kunzle, author of *Fashion and Fetishism: A Social History of Corsets, Tight Lacing and Other Forms of Body Sculpture in the West*, Rowman and Littlefield, New York, 1982, and Valerie Steele, author of *Fetishism, Fashion, Sexuality and Power*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, argue that the corset's value as an erotic device, outweighed its oppressive characteristics. These arguments have been countered in some measure in Helens Roberts' article 'The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman' in *Signs*, vol. 2 no. 3, Spring, 1977, pp.555-569.

with them a vivid picture of their occupants, of their corporeal, carnal experiences of discomfort, and of real pain. These garments brought with them, too, indications of a middle-class female mentality, a female psyche, that historians now recognise as remarkable for its long-suffering, its martyrdom and its patience.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, I would argue, that the corsets that were strategically patched, missing steels, soiled by sweat, and bespattered with blood should be acknowledged as texts, on which the female reality of corsetry was inscribed. In these soiled garments can be read stories of long hours of corseted discomfort or, worse still, memories of sharp tearing, or jabbing pain, possibly accompanied by tortured moments of public humiliation, as the wounded occupant worried that blood might seep through to her outer clothing.

In the patches and wadding of well worn corsets might also be read periods of quiet, possibly uncorseted moments, of careful consideration involving the patient application of fine needlework to make the garments more bearable. Possibly the most provocative reading of the bloodied corset is that which forces questions beyond the origins and tyranny of long-term discomfort and immediate pain. Those rare garments that were drenched in blood, and that are persistently overlooked in museum collections, foreground larger questions around nineteenth-century constructions of gender and sexuality, questions that turn on issues of Victorian masochism and misogyny. With holding garments like these from view, forecloses the possibility of creating a fuller understanding of the crucial and often cruel role of corsetry, in the construction of Victorian femininity.

Curators who brought these garments to my attention, mistakenly or unwillingly, were astonished by my enthusiasm. Several had not noticed that the garments were patched or stained.

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12 See for example, Martha Vicinus (ed.) *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1972.

Few recognised that soiled or 'damaged' garments were of any academic or curatorial value.<sup>13</sup> In all museums 'soiled' garments were systematically passed over in favour of the pretty, unblemished garment when it came to exhibition. This occurred because object condition reports variously termed the less than sterile corsets, as 'soiled', 'damaged', or in 'poor condition'. Thus, as a result of documentation procedures based on individual value judgements, which in turn were informed by prevailing female gender stereotypes, and ingrained taboos regarding the display of female blood, soiled or otherwise damaged corsets were relentlessly overlooked, or even discarded, as unworthy of collection and display.

Consequently, corsetry exhibitions, even in the 'best' museums, continue to sustain limited perceptions of the middle-class female body as a tiny, static, passively corseted object – an object which did not sweat, or bleed, or ache, or bulge, or labour in an unladylike fashion in its corseted state. Labels cement these misconceptions and stereotypes. A late Victorian corset, currently displayed on a body form at the Museum of Costume in Bath, reads: 'This corset measures 21 inches around the waist which debunks the idea that Victorian women's waists were 18 inches.' I would argue that labels like this, confirm rather than challenge mainstream beliefs that Victorian women were universally tiny, and that corsetry was 'sexy' rather than oppressive.

Despite the admirable groundwork of feminist historians and curators, women's history is still often overlooked in museums, or just as often, trivialised by the use of sartorial stereotypes in exhibitions that rely on the 'impact' of the dress or garment. Enlivening the representation of women is a constant challenge, particularly for curators faced with limited, 'pre-formed' collections. In most social history institutions little money is expended on the acquisition of costume. It has been suggested to the author that enlivening existing exhibitions of the 'feminine' lies in the incorporation of high technology. I disagree. Technology comes with its own problems,

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13 Sarah Levitt, costume historian and senior curator of the Gunnersbury Park House Museum, was an exception to this. While Ms Levitt prefers not to display the bloodied corsetry held at Gunnersbury Park, she recognised the value such garments have for research.

intrinsically related to its expense and its own obsolescence.<sup>14</sup> Rather, a more cost effective approach to enlivening representations of the feminine can be accomplished by a revisioning of basic research, and carrying that research beyond thematic contextualisation of artefacts, to establish instead, the sexually specific body, as much as the artefact, as the locus of interest. In other words, costume exhibitions whether of corsetry or of women's outer fashions, can be imbued with an extra and human dimension by the utilisation of theoretical explorations of the body, predicated by research methodologies informed by a feminist, corporeal, analytical framework. This kind of investment, which costs so little, promises to potentially invigorate and therefore contribute to, rather foreclose, twentieth-century perceptions and interpretations of nineteenth-century femininity.

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<sup>14</sup> Technology, of course, may amplify aspects of the body, but in doing so it reflects its own competence, and competes for attention with the garment, or the body, it purports to represent. Moreover, expensive technology is not available to social history museums, already struggling to cope with funding cuts and diminishing grant opportunities.

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