



# CORSET MAKER'S WORKSHOP

## Part 1

### What can we expect from corsets today?

LUCA COSTIGLIOLO, SCHOOL OF HISTORICAL DRESS



© 1872 evening gown by Luca and his students at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome

Luca discovered as a child that people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century really did look like the paintings of the time. Tailors and dressmakers transformed the body into the fashionable silhouette with corsetry and padding.



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Luca has always strived to look at the “real thing”, ie original antique garments, so that he can understand how the corset really worked. Each time he takes some technique from a real antique garment and uses it, he feels that the quality of his work improves. The historical technique always ends up being easier and more effective, because back in the day they found the best technique to get the result they wanted. Makers always had to find quick and easy ways that worked without any extra effort or struggle, because sewing has always been so underpaid.

Luca thinks it's crazy that some modern makers are snobbish about the relevance of historical corsets to modern corsets, because this was a moment in history when all the women of the Western world were wearing them, whatever age or status. The corset was the bra of the time – think of how sophisticated bra technology has become in the present day, due to sheer demand and competition between brands! Such high technology – and that's exactly as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with corsets. There was so much innovation throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century – patents show scores of continual improvements to every aspect of the corset because there was so much competition among makers, and such demand for improvement and innovation. It seems obvious that surely there is something to learn from a period when everyone was wearing them.

Some construction techniques were fairly universal, and others were personal - hundred and thousands of private makers all had their own methods and secrets and techniques, just as we modern makers do today – in fact, Luca is always on the lookout not just for machine made, mass produced corsets like the Symington collection, but original corsets made by bespoke makers.

We should all look more closely at historical corsets and learn from them, because most corsets today are obviously based on the late Victorian corset. Even the most unlikely fetish PVC corset clearly takes its ultimate inspiration from that part of history.



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## The “Modern Body”

The notion of the “modern body” as a different entity from the Victorian body shape is nonsense in Luca’s opinion, because in the 19<sup>th</sup> century corsets for all shapes and sizes were available – long waisted, short waisted, “stout” figures, petite figures, etc, etc. One pattern may not fit you, but another might, and this has been shown by makers in the Foundations Revealed community, who have made up original Symington company patterns (now available online) and sometimes found that they fit like a glove with minimal or no alteration. You just need to make similar adjustments that you’d make for any pattern to fit a particular body, just like adjusting a modern pattern if you are short waisted, say. It’s not like the human ribcage has changed. The way the joints of the body are arranged has been the same for over 2000 years; to look at an Ancient Greek or Roman statue is to see the shape of a modern athlete!



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© 1872 corset by Luca Costigliolo

## Luca's 1872 corset

This corset is three dimensional even when it sits on a table. It's like a sculpture, moulded on the body. The corset has to fit the body and be comfortable, but it has to be the right silhouette for the period if a historical silhouette is the aim.

Details of his corset that people don't usually do today:

- The diagonal bones at the centre back top are there so that the back of the corset does not sit away from the body when the wearer sits down.
- It is made of two surprisingly lightweight layers, no fusing, just cotton sateen and one layer of thick duchesse satin, and synthetic whalebone.



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- The curvy tummy is a feature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The curve is made by manually bending the busk into a curve. The fashionable tummy only becomes flat in 1899/1900 – which is considerably less comfortable to wear! But the Victorian curvy tummy shouldn't scare you – it's not built into the patterns, it's in how much you bend the busk into a curvy shape (do this AFTER you insert it into the corset!)
- Flossing has two practical functions – keeping the fabric taut from either end of the bones so that it doesn't wrinkle at the waist (the bone is pushed firmly into the channel and the flossing is tightly sewn to keep that tension on the bone). Flossing also protects the ends of the bones from poking through the fabric on a corset made of lighter fabrics.
- Most techniques being used and experimented with today have their origin in the 19<sup>th</sup> c – internal boning channels, external boning channels, it's all been done before!



© 1872 corset by Luca Costigliolo



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© 1862 evening gown by Luca and his students  
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## Luca's 1862 corset and gown

This outfit demonstrates that even a “modern body” can be turned into the fashionable shape of the time – the padding and corset work together to create the shape. As stated before, the body is transformed into the fashionable silhouette by the tailor or dressmaker.

This is a principle that has been forgotten in our era. Everyone can wear what they want now; the 1980s was the last time that there was an artificial fashionable shape, and the clothes turned you into that shape. Shoulder pads were everywhere, and high waisted trousers with deep pleats made even men's hips round. Jackets had big shoulders and short sleeves – but



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this doesn't mean that when our descendants look at the clothes in 100 years that they should assume that everyone in the 1980s had huge shoulders and short arms! The clothes were creating the shape, and it's the same with historical clothes from further back in the past. Victorian clothes were not for tiny people, as is often assumed – the clothes were much tighter fitting than ours, like a second skin. They just *look* small to us because almost nothing we wear today is so tight. Think of skinny jeans – they look so tiny off the body, but that doesn't mean they are for someone with stick thin legs!

The padding in this gown is at the top and side of the bust, quite thick, but there is none at the hips because the model is wearing a huge 1860s crinoline. The padding is there in 80% of extant 1860s bodices Luca has seen. He used padding the same as it was used in the 1860s and that's why the model gets the same result, looking like a fashion plate of the era!

Luca has made this skirt with pockets – all skirts had pockets – every dress he has seen from the past had them, contrary to popular belief!

The crinoline has a very thin cotton tape as a waistband because a small waist was so important to the Victorians. There must be no bulk there.



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© 1862 corset by Luca Costigliolo

## The 1862 corset

- The whole front panel of Luca's 1860s corset is cut on the bias, but the backing for the busk is cut on the straight.
- It's a one layer corset of coutil.
- The hip piece is also on the straight. It wrinkles a bit in this area, but that's because the bones stop at the waist. The crinoline goes over it, so this is not an issue.



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- The large front panel has slashes for large bust gussets that cup the breasts. A common mistake is to make the gussets too small (perhaps because everyone is looking at each other's work, not at the "real thing"?)
- A drawstring at the top edge pulls it in slightly so that it fits snugly.

## The myth of the strong corset

Yes, you can make a corset strong, but Luca wants to dispel the myth that a corset has got to be as strong as possible – that's absolutely not true.

It's got to be a nice shape, and stitched in a strong manner, but it doesn't have to be strong and hard and full of layers all the time; that's only one technique, whereas the range of corsets is so great. Lots of people are starting to work with bobbinet but they still get hung up on the idea that a corset has to be strong. There are no hard and fast rules - do what works for you - but if the pattern fits well, it doesn't have to be armour! It can still give support and a great shape, even if it's of a light construction.

## Modern corsets and historical corsets

There are many techniques in Victorian corsets that make sense to use now in modern corsets to make them work better and make them easier to make. Modern fashion designers look to the history of fashion as a sourcebook of technical ideas on cut and construction – why not us? Modern and historical are not two separate areas of corsetmaking; it's a continuum. One is an extension of the other.