

March 31, 2022

Personal Project: Creating a Custom Corset

Section 1: Planning

Learning Goal

About 4 years ago, I started volunteering at a historical site in Colorado Springs called Rock Ledge Ranch. From there, I was introduced to the world of fashion history, and I found a particular fascination in one aspect: the history of corsetry.

I have been sewing from pretty early on in my life; I loved making clothes and accessories for my dolls as a little kid. It was a casual hobby, and I eventually fell out of the practice during middle school. Then, once historical fashion caught my interest, I wanted to start up again and improve my skills. In the past couple years, I've started making and mending my own clothes, and I've become quite a skilled seamstress for my age. However, despite all my projects, I had never made a structural garment, let alone a custom corset. As someone who struggles with self-motivation, I figured this project would be just the push I needed to take on a big project and actually complete it, so I set a challenging goal for myself. I wanted to learn how to apply my preexisting skills to making a structural garment, and I hoped to learn new techniques along the way.

Product Goal

The goal here was to create a functional garment—something I could actually wear—all while using historical sewing techniques. Before landing on this goal for my product, I had considered making a scale model of a Victorian corset, or just making a custom corset pattern for myself. However, I decided that I would actually end up using a functional, life-size corset, so the challenge would be worth it in the long run.

Product Success Criteria

Criteria

<u><i>Aesthetic</i></u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● It looks like a corset● No visible raw edges● Embroidered boning channels
<u><i>Function</i></u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Supports chest and back● Redistributes weight to hips
<u><i>Technique</i></u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Busk installed properly● Bones placed properly● Even stitches

Plan for Achieving Goal

At first, back in September, I hoped to have the physical product complete by January. As it turned out, I remained busy well into December, so I had to readjust my expectations. I came up with a rough estimate of the steps I needed to take and about how long I thought they should take, which is shown in the chart below.

<i>Step</i>	<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Time allotted</i>
<i>Step 1</i>	Research corsetry and custom pattern-making	About 1 week
<i>Step 2</i>	Draft and finalize the pattern	About 2 weeks
<i>Step 3</i>	1 st mockup: make and improve	About 1 month
<i>Step 4</i>	2 nd mockup: make and improve	About 2 weeks
<i>Step 5</i>	Sew final product	About 2 weeks

Section 2: Applying Skills

Learning Goal Approaches to Learning Skills

Research: While I technically had the sewing skills I needed to get this project done, it was really hard for me to understand how to achieve the structure I wanted. I figured my best bet was to see other people do it, so I watched a couple videos where I could see experts construct corsets. Then, I found a historical pattern from the 1890's that I liked, and decided I would be basing my own pattern on that one.

After getting a better idea of where I was headed, I looked into some more specific aspects of the project like whether bias tape was used for boning channels and what could be used for boning to replace baleen or steel. Even still, I couldn't picture the structure coming together, so I decided to dive into trial-and-error.

To put it bluntly, this first trial was a flop from the beginning. My plan was to create a scale model of the corset, but I quickly realized that this would take far more effort than was worth putting in. This trial also marked the first of many mistakes I would make in my choice of fabric.

I already knew that I wanted something with a tight weave and a bit of weight so the corset could support itself, but I didn't realize just how much even a little bit of stretch in the fabric would affect the whole garment.

For this reason, I decided to take an entirely different route. I would use a modern corset that I had already adjusted to my measurements as a guide to create a historically-based pattern that would still fit me.



From there, I started making mockups using different materials and cutting out the pattern pieces on different grains. I actually gained a lot more information from this than I thought I would, and the practice would make it a lot easier to get working on the final product.

Product Goal Approaches to Learning Skills

Self-Management: This is where I definitely bit off more than I could chew. My product success criteria were ultimately far too specific for my skill level and the time I had allotted myself. According to the research I had done, custom pattern-making was a very time-consuming, arduous process filled with constant revisions. However, I was able to make mine in only a few hours. Since I had so greatly overestimated the time I needed for pattern-drafting, I assumed that the same went for every other step.

I got a bit too relaxed after that step, thinking I should dedicate more time to mockups so as to better understand the basics of structured garments and how they would come together. While the time I spent on mockups was somewhat helpful, in the end, I just spent too much time on this step. By the time I was confident enough to commit to cutting out what would be the final corset, I didn't have enough time to make a corset that would meet many of my success criteria.



Section 3: Reflecting

Product

My final product ended up being the bare bones of a corset-to-be. The fabric pieces form the structure I wanted, which is quite supportive even without boning. Only one side of the corset contains boning channels and bones, while the other is held up just by the fabric itself. There is no busk or lacing, and I never finished it properly by adding bias tape along the edges and embroidering the boning channels. This garment is technically a corset at its most basic, and it does have a lot of potential, but it's not what I was planning to do for this project.



Product Success Criteria

Criteria

<p><u>Aesthetic</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It looks like a corset • No visible raw edges • Embroidered boning channels 	<p>The only thing this product really achieved in the Aesthetic category was to “look like a corset”.</p>
<p><u>Function</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports chest and back 	<p>While it’s not pretty, I can say that the structure of this garment is</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redistributes weight to hips 	<p>functional. It fit me really well, and even the side with no bones supported my back.</p>
<u>Technique</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Busk installed properly • Bones placed properly • Even stitches 	<p>There isn't a busk on this garment yet, but I did learn how to install one. I suppose I technically placed the bones properly, but only on one side. What I did fully achieve was neat, consistent stitching!</p>

Impact of Product

This project gave me an appreciation of how different structural garments are from the ones I normally sew—and for how much longer they take. Putting the garment together also gave me such a better understanding of how the structure comes together, something I couldn't really contextualize until I had done it with my own hands. Even though I didn't finish it, I learned a lot from this project, much more than I would have if I had chosen a smaller task like creating a scale model of a corset, or drafting the pattern of a corset. Most of all, it pushed me out of my comfort zone and allowed me to commit to something I had wanted to do for a long time.

Product Feedback

Despite all that I learned, I would have to say that my project was not successful. My goal was to reconstruct a Victorian corset using historical techniques, which I did to some extent, but it's not the finished corset that I specified in my success criteria.

That said, I did achieve my learning goal. Now I understand much better how to apply my skills in the context of structural garments, I learned new skills like hardware installation along the way, and I've even improved my preexisting skills.

Conclusion

Sadly, this project was not successful. However, that's not to say it will go to waste. I learned so much from this experience, and I plan to continue my project into the summer now that I know I have the skills to complete it. At Rock Ledge Ranch, those of us working as junior docents have to do a project each year that will help us in historical interpretation, and I'm making it my goal to have the corset finished by then so that I can educate others about the history of corsets and all that I learned here.