

Body Arts Reshaping

Clothing and Body Shape

Throughout history clothes have been used to alter the shape of the human body. The corset was first introduced into Europe in the fifteenth century, but clothes designed to reduce the size of the waist date back thousands of years. Corsets constrict the waist and, according to fashion, either flatten or push out the breasts. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century corsets were so stiff and constricting they permanently changed the shape of the skeleton and the internal organs causing serious health problems.



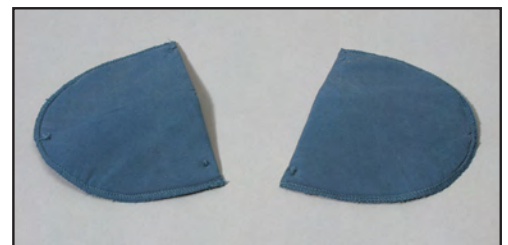
Nineteenth century corset, UK, 1930.84.2



2002.24.1 Bullet bra, USA

This 'bullet' or 'sweater' bra was designed to give women the torpedo-shaped, pointy breasts in vogue during the 1950s. Also pictured here is a pair of shoulder pads. During the 1980s shoulder pads were stitched to the inside of clothing, giving the wearer the

appearance of having naturally broad shoulders which were considered a sign of power and independence.



Shoulder Pads, England, 2002.28.1



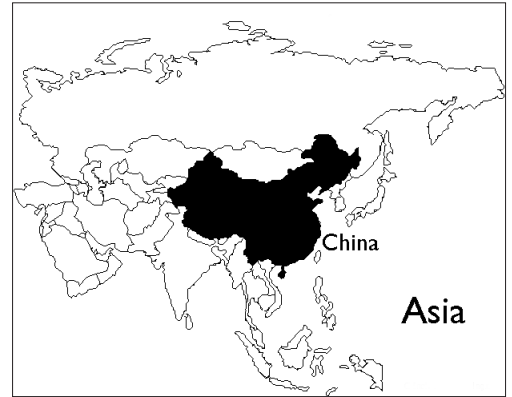
Bustle, Tuvalu, 1901.24.12



Another example of body reshaping is this bustle from Tuvalu, in Polynesia. It would be worn under the skirt to exaggerate the wearer's hips and posterior.

Footbinding

Until the early twentieth century young Han Chinese girls had their feet wrapped tightly in bandages to stop them growing. The bandages remained on throughout the girls' lives so that as adult women their feet were so tiny they could fit into shoes like these. To have bound feet was considered beautiful and virtuous.



Bound feet were painful and sometimes crippling, and their unpleasant smell, caused by the binding, had to be masked with perfume.



Shoe, China, 1941.8.045

The photographs here show shoes worn by adult women, who had had their feet bound from a very young age.

Although some girls had their feet bound in extreme and painful styles, others had their feet bound in much less contorted ways that limited the growth of the foot without breaking any bones. In extreme cases, however, the foot became so compressed that women hobbled about with difficulty, or had to lean on a wall or another person for support. This was especially severe among upper-class women, who became more or less confined to their boudoirs. It is said that a primary purpose of footbinding was to limit mobility, ensuring that women remained chaste.

Bound feet were considered a sign of discipline, civility, and a good upbringing. These qualities were sought for by prospective mothers-in-law when selecting wives for their sons. Therefore a girl with natural, unbound feet had little chance of marrying well.

Foot-binding was formally outlawed in 1911, but the practice continued into the twentieth century, until calls for reform and an anti-footbinding movement emerged. The abolition forced women to unbind their feet, an act almost as painful as the initial binding.



Shoes, China, 1944.9.63

Headbinding



In many parts of the world people have applied pressure to babies' skulls to permanently change their shape.

Headbinding was practised in New Britain, Papua New Guinea. A barkcloth bandage was wrapped around the infant's head, and a piece of vine used to tie the bandage.

Before the bandage was applied, the head was painted with a black mixture made from charred wood, said to help make the binding effective. Every time the bandage was replaced the child's head was painted.

The lengths of time children's heads were bandaged varied. Some bandages were removed before the child was able to walk whereas others remained on for a few years. This was either because the mother decided the head was elongated enough or because the child pulled the bandage off himself.

The shape of the child's head also varied. If the mother wished her child to have a very long head, she pulled the bandage very tight. Elongated heads were considered attractive to the opposite sex. The heads of girls were usually made longer than those of boys, and hairstyles would also accentuate the shape.



Male skull showing effects of headbinding, Papua New Guinea, 1938.36.1288

Further Reading

Further information can be found in the Body Arts Gallery and on our Body Arts website: <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/bodyarts>

Sources

KO, DOROTHY, 'The Shifting Meanings of Footbinding in Seventeenth-Century China', in Emily Honig (ed.), *Journal of Women's History*, Indiana: Indiana University Press, Volume 8, no 4 (1996).

Objects featured in this fact sheet can be found in the following cases:

First Floor (Lower Gallery) L38A for shoes

First Floor (Lower Gallery) L38B for skull

First Floor (Lower Gallery) L39B for corset

First Floor (Lower Gallery) L40A for bustle

First Floor (Lower Gallery) L40B for bullet bra and shoulder pads

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