

Portland State University

PDXScholar

Young Historians Conference

Young Historians Conference 2024

May 3rd, 9:20 AM - 10:30 AM

The Freedom and Danger of Crinoline

Kaiya Williams
St. Mary's Academy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/younghistorians>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Williams, Kaiya, "The Freedom and Danger of Crinoline" (2024). *Young Historians Conference*. 19.
<https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/younghistorians/2024/papers/19>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Young Historians Conference by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

The Freedom and Danger of Crinoline

Kai Williams

Mr. Vannelli

St. Mary's Academy

History of Modern Euro

15 December 2023

Abstract

“Hoop skirt” is a broad term encompassing many underskirt garments changing the shape of the skirt. Crinoline is often used interchangeably, but such use is incorrect. Crinoline is a specific design of hoop skirt. The developments of other forms of hoop skirts, such as farthingales and panniers led to the crinoline. The crinoline then led to more garments that fall under the term of “hoop skirt”, such as the crinolette and bustles. Just as women’s fashion today is debated as to the balance between the freedoms it offers and the “scandalous” nature of it, crinoline was debated when it was popular. The garment broke down class barriers and offered freedoms to women that were unavailable prior to its invention.

Essay

The typical impression of those without knowledge or research of hoop skirts is that they were restrictive and a form of modesty for women. They are typically believed to be forced upon women by standards created by a patriarchal society. This could not be further from the truth. The word hoop skirt is an overarching term used for a variety of garments with a variety of materials. It generally refers to a garment using some form of structural material to change the shape and flow of the dress worn on top of it. The exact materials and shapes are different based on the iteration being talked about. The commonly known hoop skirt, known as a cage crinoline, simply replaced the use of many petticoats. It was circular in shape, increasing in diameter closer to the ground. Crinoline created a break in the social class structure and a freedom for English women in the late 1800s while creating a danger for the very same reasons. This trend in fashion

social classes and freedom in women's clothing has continued today. The hoop skirt disrupted social norms as a form of modesty and an invitation, giving the population convoluted opinions on the garment. Hoop skirts as they are thought of today replaced petticoats, offering more movement to the one wearing the garment, while being much more cost-effective, requiring one garment rather than multiple. The hoop skirt has a history beginning in France, where it stayed for hundreds of years before the crinoline and other forms of hoop skirts were invented.

Crinoline was worn by most women defying social and economic barriers, differing based on size due to efficiency requirements of laborers rather than cost. It became popular quickly after its invention, spreading through England and the United States. Alongside the popularity, grew the size of the crinoline, spreading out to the point where the wearer would require assistance in moving from place to place, especially when it required moving up or down.

The word "hoop-skirt" is a term that generally encompasses any form of skirt that uses hoops to hold a certain shape. The shape differs based on which variation one is talking about and there are some things that do not quite fit that definition that are still considered to fall under that category, for example, bustles. Depending on the style of hoop skirt as well as the social class of the person wearing it, there are a variety of materials that could be used for the shape such as whalebone, metal, or horsehair.¹ This paper will focus on crinoline, specifically it will focus mainly on cage crinoline but will reference other forms. The cage crinoline was first created and patented in France by R.C. Milliet in 1856, but was soon after brought to England by their agent.² The original crinoline was made with horsehair to create a stiff fabric for

¹ Waugh, Norah, and Judith Dolan. 2018. *Corsets and Crinolines*. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, Ny: Routledge. 163-4.

² "Understanding Underwear: The Victorian Crinoline" 2020. European Fashion Heritage Association, last modified February 14, 2020. [https://fashionheritage.eu/understanding-underwear-the-crinoline/#:~:text=The %20steel% 2Dhooped%20cage%20crinolines](https://fashionheritage.eu/understanding-underwear-the-crinoline/#:~:text=The%20steel%2Dhooped%20cage%20crinolines).

underskirts, designed to widen women's skirts.³ Crinoline came from a social expectation for women to have an hourglass figure, and a need for a more effective method of supporting the skirts than the original crinoline. Before the addition of steel rings to crinolines, the skirts fell short in many ways including being expensive and not able to be washed. The large skirts gave the illusion of a smaller waist creating a desired silhouette.⁴ Hoop skirts as a category were introduced in the US by David Hough Jr. in 1846.⁵ With an established connection between the fashion industries of the two countries, caged crinoline moved to the US quickly after its introduction in England. The cage crinoline allowed for increasing skirts to a common size of twelve to fifteen feet in circumference.⁶

The silhouette considered fashionable changed through the years. Though the design was still referred to as cage crinoline until 1868. Up until that point, the skirt had slowly been changing to support more at the back and less at the front. In 1868, the skirt had mostly flattened at the front with a lot of volume in the back. This resulted in a new design called the crinolette. The design was similar to the crinoline, but rather than a full circle, the skirt was made of half-hoops that supported volume in the back of the skirt. This progression of the silhouette

³ "Understanding Underwear: The Victorian Crinoline" 2020. European Fashion Heritage Association. [https://fashionheritage.eu/understanding-underwear-the-crinoline/#:~:text=The %20steel%2Dhooped%20cage%20crinolines](https://fashionheritage.eu/understanding-underwear-the-crinoline/#:~:text=The%20steel%2Dhooped%20cage%20crinolines).

⁴ H. Kristina Haugland, "Crinoline." In *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, edited by Valerie Steele, 317-318. Vol. 1. Detroit, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005. <https://link-gale-com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/apps/doc/CX3427500148/GVRL?u=s1185784&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=71f3b969>.

⁵ Institution, Smithsonian. "Hoop Skirt." Smithsonian Institution, 14 Feb. 2012, www.si.edu/newsdesk/snapshot/hoop-skirt.

⁶ Harper Franklin, "1860-1869." Fashion History Timeline. Fashion Institute of Technology, last modified December 27, 2019. <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1860-1869/>.

eventually led to the bustle, bunched fabric giving more shape to the back of the skirt while keeping the front flat.⁷

In the late fifteenth century, one form of hoop skirt was created in Spain. The skirt was the Spanish farthingale. A main difference between it and many other forms of hoop skirts, is the material of the hoops. Rather than being made of whalebone or steel, the hoops in the skirt were typically made of wood. After its invention there were multiple updates made to the design as time passed. Rather than the original wooden hoops, it changed to be stiffened with multiple materials. The skirts were stiffened with willow cuttings, rope and eventually whalebone after 1580, a long time after the original invention.⁸ However, the design was not solely popular in Spain.

Though the Spanish farthingale was created in Spain, it was common in Elizabethan and Jacobean England as well. There were also multiple other garments referred to as a farthingale despite not being a similar design. There were two French designs that were referred to as farthingales. One was the French farthingale role, which was popular in England at the start of the seventeenth century. The garment was made of large rolls that would sit on the waist to increase the curve of the waist. The other appeared in England in the 1590s, the French wheel farthingale. It was similar to the design of the Spanish farthingale with its hoops, but it increased in size quickly compared to the Spanish farthingale where the hoops increased slowly.⁹ The farthingales were almost solely worn by court women, and it eventually disappeared completely

⁷ Harper Franklin, "1860-1869." Fashion History Timeline. Fashion Institute of Technology, last modified August 18, 2020. <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1860-1869/>.

⁸ Jazmin Montalvo, "Spanish Farthingale." Fashion History Timeline. Fashion Institute of Technology, last modified 2018. <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/spanish-farthingale/>.

⁹ Sarah A. Bendall, "Take Measure of Your Wide and Flaunting Garments': The Farthingale, Gender and the Consumption of Space in Elizabethan and Jacobean England." *Renaissance Studies*, October 28, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rest.12537>.

from popular clothing as fashion standards turned to crinoline. The farthingales were not the only French skirt design.

The pannier was another piece of clothing, made by the French, predating “hoop skirts” made for the same purpose. It is referred to with multiple spellings, panier and pannier, but both labels refer to the same garment. The garment was made of two baskets, hence the name which is the name for baskets held by donkeys, one on each hip. It created a flat silhouette with wide hips.¹⁰ The original design used whalebone for the supports, but as the size of the pannier increased there was difficulty in getting through narrow doorways which created a need for an adjustment in design. That adjustment came in 1770 as a change in material and construction. The new design for the pannier was made of iron and had hinges, which allowed for the woman wearing it to lift the skirt to fit through the doorway. The pannier was quickly becoming a very inconvenient fashion piece which would lead to the downfall in its popularity. In 1780, panniers were replaced by the bustle as the crinoline later was.¹¹ The materials in the development of the panniers was similar to other hoop skirt designs as well.

The material that was originally used in many hoop skirt designs was whalebone. Whalebone was not the bones of whales but baleen. It was visually similar to hair from one direction, but much thicker and ten to twelve inches wide at the base from the other view. It was a versatile material that could be split to quite thin strips without compromising the desired qualities of the material. It was a light and flexible material that could be bent into the shape needed for each skirt. To bend the whalebone, it would be heated and when it cooled it would retain the shape it was bent into when it cooled. It was also a material easily obtained, though

¹⁰ Black, J Anderson, and Madge Garland. *A History of Fashion*. London Orbis Publ, 1975.

¹¹ Black and Garland. *A History of Fashion*. 212-214.

expensive. The whaling industry had found an abundance in Greenland after another whale was hunted near to extinction, though when traded to England, the price was hiked up due to conflict over the control of the industry as the Dutch had control of the industry in Greenland at the time when crinoline was popular in England.¹² The typical whalebone would be about nine to thirteen feet in length.¹³

For many English women, the crinoline freed them from petticoats. With the fashion standards of the time, wearing petticoats required women to layer them. The petticoats were used as a sign of status. The bigger the skirt, the more petticoats, someone wore, the richer they were.¹⁴ The petticoats were heavy and hot, especially in summer. Crinoline was lightweight in comparison as well as cheaper and comfortable. Crinoline also gave space for movement underneath the skirt.¹⁵ The changes for women from petticoats to crinoline and later cage crinoline gave them a form of freedom they did not previously have. That freedom was not the full freedom to do whatever they might want to do, but a much smaller freedom. A freedom to wear clothing that was not detrimental to their ability to move or their health. It also gave women a small freedom from men's opinions controlling their clothing choices. This is an opinion expressed by Emily Faithfull.

Emily Faithfull's article in 1863 "Crinoline", provides an opinion differing from that of the typical societal opinion. She begins her article with a controversial statement, stating that "As a general rule, men have no right, either morally or aesthetically, to interfere with the manner in

¹² Kimberly Chrisman, "Unhoop the Fair Sex: The Campaign Against the Hoop Petticoat in Eighteenth-Century England." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30, no. 1 (1996): 9. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30053852>.

¹³ Waugh, Norah, and Judith Dolan. 2018. *Corsets and Crinolines*. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, Ny: Routledge. 167-169.

¹⁴ H. Kristina Haugland, "Skirt Supports." In *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, edited by Valarie Steele, 190–91. Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005.

¹⁵ H. Kristina Haugland, "Crinoline." *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, 317-318.

which women choose to dress,”¹⁶ This is quite different from social behavior at this time. At that time, it was commonplace for a man to comment on a woman’s clothing especially in terms of the modesty of her clothing. Similarly to the major argument against hoop skirts, she does mention that “scarcely a day passes without the papers recounting a fatal accident through crinoline.”¹⁷ Still she believes that “men have no right to object to their wearing—crinoline” referring to women in general.¹⁸ This idea was very contrary to societal norms of the time, but it was an opinion women were able to have.

Though many were happy with the invention of the crinoline, especially women, there were some people, mostly men, who did not see it so favorably. One such person was a man in England known as G. Vickers, who saw crinoline as dangerous. He opens his 1858 article “The Dangers of Crinoline, Steel Hoops, etc.” with the statement that “No one can deny that an evil of the greatest magnitude has for some time been making serious inroads into the health, morals, and happiness of this country, in the shape of an absurd and preposterous fashion, dignified with the incomprehensible designation of crinoline.”¹⁹ This was seemingly not true that no one could deny this as at the time crinoline was becoming increasingly popular. If crinoline were harming the morals and happiness of the English people, there likely would not have been such popularity throughout economic classes and social statuses. Though Vickers makes statements that may seem absurd, he also mentions a very real danger of crinoline. He tells a story of a lady unused to wearing crinoline who stood too close to the fireplace and almost died when her dress caught fire.²⁰ Though the exact story he tells may or may not be true, there are many examples of very

¹⁶ Faithfull, Emily. Crinoline. Reprinted from “The Illustrated News of the World.”. 1863.

¹⁷ Faithfull. Crinoline. 7.

¹⁸ Faithfull. Crinoline. 8.

¹⁹ Vickers, G. *The Dangers of Crinoline, Steel Hoops, Etc. [with Illustrations]*, 1858.

²⁰ Vickers. *The Dangers of Crinoline*. 13.

similar situations. Crinoline created a silhouette much larger than the woman wearing it, resulting in possible hazards if she is unused to paying proper attention to where the skirt ends. He also mentions a difficulty presented by wearing crinoline, that of balance. He mentions it in the context of watching women walk down the street saying “See how she rocks to and fro, like a vessel in a storm, keeping her perpendicular position with the greatest difficulty, and grasping hold of the railings as she passes along, to steady herself on her feet,”.²¹ Crinoline, especially those made with steel hoops, adds a lot of weight to a woman’s outfit. Unlike wearing petticoats, crinoline has nothing underneath it to stop it from swaying and keep the weight of it from shifting. This causes an easy loss of balance with strong wind or someone bumping into the skirt a little too hard. With the large diameter of the skirt, once tipped over it could be quite a struggle for one to get herself upright without assistance. It would also break multiple social modesty rules as, unlike with petticoats, there is no fabric to cover the woman’s undergarments.

When first introduced, crinoline was scandalous. Unlike petticoats and prior designs for hoop skirts, crinoline was lightweight. This allowed wind to move the skirt, making underclothes and bare skin visible to those around a woman. It was also easy for something to show when a lady would fall or even simply make any sudden movement.²² With previous standards of modesty not allowing women to show bare skin, even a woman’s ankles, the new reality of women’s clothing easily displaying such was scandalous. Though many stated the problems with crinoline in terms of modesty, crinoline was very popular. With the freedom of movement, the reduction in the weight of clothing and the severely reduced heat trapped by clothing, most women were happy with this new invention, ignoring the complaints of those concerned with

²¹ Vickers. *The Dangers of Crinoline*. 4.

²² Kimberly Chrisman, “Unhoop the Fair Sex.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30, no. 1 (1996): 10.

modesty as the benefits seemed to severely outweigh the small concession of modesty. Similarly, today many popular clothes are seen as scandalous and immodest, especially by older generations. Despite the scandalous nature of the “hoop skirt”, its popularity was widespread.

Though hoop skirts and crinoline originated in higher social classes, at the height of their popularity they were adopted by women of all social classes, including laborers. It was made with whalebone but soon replaced with cane, which was an easier material to work with and cheaper to use.²³ With the switch from petticoats to crinoline, it became much cheaper to increase the size of a woman’s skirt. This gave women of lower classes an opportunity to wear the same clothes as those of higher status. When women use the size of their skirt to show wealth, and the method of increasing that size becomes cheap enough for lower classes to do the same, the visual class barrier disappears. While cage crinoline was popular, the women of every class could be distinguished only by the quality of the clothing rather than the size due to all women wearing similar sized skirts. It is similar today, most people no matter their social class will wear similar clothes depending on the circumstance. This has resulted in visual differences being solely based on quality of clothing and brands seen on clothing rather than differences in the type of clothing. The visual effects on clothing are not the only effects on current society.

Hoop skirts are thought to have created behaviors that still exist today as polite. One is the behavior of holding the door for someone. Though the behavior existed prior to hoop skirts, with crinoline and other forms of hoop skirts, hoop skirts are likely to have spread the behavior from royalty and wealthy people to the rest of the population. The hoops created a large frame that did not allow women to reach door handles. As such, others nearby would be expected to

²³ Kimberley Chrisman, “Unhoop the Fair Sex.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30, no. 1 (1996): 8-9.

assist them. Even after hoop skirts disappeared from fashion, the behavior remained as a courtesy, rather than a necessity. The practices of assisting women on stairs as well as in and out of vehicles, may have had a similar origin as well.²⁴ These are all practices that, while they have become less frequent with a rise in the association by some between what was once considered common curtesy as contrary to feminism, they are still around today.

There were many things meant to change the way a woman's skirt fell referred to by the same name, most of which were at one point or another referred to as hoop skirts. From petticoats to farthingales to crinoline to bustles, changing the shape of a skirt to fit fashion standards. Hoop skirts and more specifically cage crinoline created a freedom for women. A freedom that gave way for many freedoms women now have. They offered freedom from petticoats and a small freedom from the influence of men's opinions. Cage crinoline was widely disliked by men, but nevertheless was extremely popular among English women. Currently, women have expanded upon those freedoms. They now have wide varieties of clothing available to them as well as the freedom to do and say as they like in spite of men's wishes. Similar to the choice of many English women to wear cage crinoline due to comfort and affordability, many women today choose clothing based on their comfort and cost. The creation and popularization of cage crinoline was just one step of many in women's freedom to get to where western society is today in women's rights.

²⁴ Felix M. Bathon, "A History of the Emergence of a Polite Behavior." *Social History—Historical Sociology*: 57.

Bibliography

- Bathon, Felix M. "A History of the Emergence of a Polite Behavior." *Social History—Historical Sociology*: 57, 2018.
- Black, J Anderson, and Madge Garland. *A History of Fashion*. J. Anderson Black; Madge Garland. London Orbis Publ, 1975.
- Blackburn, Julianna. "An Analysis of Middle-Class Women's Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Urban England." 2023.
- Blakemore, Erin. 2018. "Why Hoop Petticoats Were Scandalous." JSTOR Daily. January 28, 2018. [https://daily.jstor.org/why-hoop-petticoats-were-scandalous/#:~:text=Even %20though%20hoops%20were%20large](https://daily.jstor.org/why-hoop-petticoats-were-scandalous/#:~:text=Even%20though%20hoops%20were%20large).
- Bendall, Sarah A. "'Take Measure of Your Wide and Flaunting Garments': The Farthingale, Gender and the Consumption of Space in Elizabethan and Jacobean England." *Renaissance Studies*, October 28, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rest.12537>.
- Chrisman, Kimberly. "Unhoop the Fair Sex: The Campaign Against the Hoop Petticoat in Eighteenth-Century England." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30, no. 1 (1996): 5–23. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30053852>.
- Faithfull, Emily. *Crinoline. Reprinted from "The Illustrated News of the World."*. 1863.
- Franklin, Harper. "1860-1869." Fashion History Timeline. Fashion Institute of Technology, December 27, 2019. <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1860-1869/>.
- Haugland, H. Kristina. "Crinoline." In *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, edited by Valerie Steele, 317-318. Vol. 1. Detroit, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005. *Gale eBooks*(accessed November 18, 2023). <https://link-gale-com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/apps/doc/CX3427500148/GVRL?u=s1185784&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=71f3b969>.

Haugland, H. Kristina. "Skirt Supports." In *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, edited by Valarie Steele, 190–91. Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005.

Ingersoll, Helen. "The Sway of the Crinoline." *The Monthly Illustrator* 5, no. 17 (1895): 289–94.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/25582098>.

Montalvo, Jazmin. "Spanish Farthingale." Fashion History Timeline. Fashion Institute of Technology, 2018. <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/spanish-farthingale/>.

Sweeney, Megan. "Threads." In *Mendings*, 137–76. Duke University Press, 2023.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.2516317.8>.

"Understanding Underwear: The Victorian Crinoline" 2020. Fashionheritage.eu. European Fashion Heritage Association. February 14, 2020.

[https://fashionheritage.eu/understanding-underwear-the-crinoline/#:~:text=The %20steel%2Dhooped%20cage%20crinolines](https://fashionheritage.eu/understanding-underwear-the-crinoline/#:~:text=The%20steel%2Dhooped%20cage%20crinolines).

Vickers, G. *The Dangers of Crinoline, Steel Hoops, Etc. [with Illustrations]*, 1858.

Waugh, Norah, and Judith Dolan. 2018. *Corsets and Crinolines*. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, Ny: Routledge.