

Oglethorpe University

Victorians to Versace

Mainstreaming Fetish Fashion

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The historical foundations of fetish fashion reach back to the eighteenth century; however, it was in the latter half of the twentieth century that the aesthetics of fetish began to permeate through the mainstream fashion market. Now, in the 21st century, the influence of fetish on fashion is reaching unprecedented heights as the aesthetics of historically repressed subcultures are brought to the forefront of pop culture.

Historical Foundations: Fetish Subculture and Clothing

Fetishism as it is thought of today began in 18th century Europe and solidified in the latter half of the 19th century. The 18th century marked a transitional period when interest in eroticism increased with free thought; the spread of capitalism and urbanization in Europe created an environment that nurtured the spread of fetishism (Steele 22). French historian Alain Corbin argues that fetishes trickled down through the bourgeois and working-class society as a result of increased wealth in the middle-class, which gave the bourgeoisie space to indulge in the habits of the upper class (Steele 48). Evidence of the spread of fetishism can be observed in the services provided by prostitutes, who started specializing in more specific fantasies and acts that were previously considered too taboo (Steele 48).

Object-based fetishism typically centers on items of clothing like “aprons, boots, dresses, glasses, gloves, handkerchiefs, raincoats, shoes, stockings, underwear, and uniforms” (Steele 26). Generally, fetish clothing objects are either categorized as hard or soft. Hard fetish objects are typically smooth or shiny, dark in color, and often incredibly constricting; for example, leather and rubber are popular materials for hard fetish objects (Steele 26). Soft fetish objects are usually fluffy, frilly, or fuzzy, like lace lingerie or fur (Steele 26). The two most widely fetishized clothing items, corsets and shoes, are both hard fetish objects.

Gloves were a popular object for fetishization in the eighteenth century. Gloves are eroticized and act as a substitution for female genitalia in works such as William Hogarth's *A Harlot's Progress* (1732) (Hutchings-Goetz 318). Historian Kate Smith says women used gloves to hide their hands and present them in a different form, like silk; the popularity of plain gloves likely facilitated the eroticized conflation of gloves with women's hands and bodies (Hutchings-Goetz 324).

Gloves came to represent the female body, as evidenced by a mid-1750s felony rape case. Daniel Lackey was accused of rape and acquitted on the basis that he bought the victim a pair of gloves earlier in the evening, which was considered proof that she was a prostitute (Hutchings-Goetz 326). The purchase of gloves for a woman prefigures the purchase of her body; the gloves were bought with the intention of hiding her status as a prostitute, which paradoxically proved her status as a prostitute (Hutchings-Goetz 327). Whether the woman was truly a prostitute or not, the result of the case shows the undeniable connection between gloves and women's bodies in 18th century Europe.

Gloves appear in four of the six plates of Hogarth's series *A Harlot's Progress*. The first plate (Fig. 1) depicts Moll Hackabout, a pretty young woman, as she arrives into London; to her right is Mother Needham, the headmistress of a brothel that 18th-century viewers would have recognized (Hutchings-Goetz 327). Needham wears gloves which indicate she is disguising herself and her profession, ironically identifying her to the viewer (Hutchings-Goetz 328). Moll first wears gloves in the fourth plate (Fig. 2), where she is the best-dressed inmate in a Bridewell prison – her expensive gloves and gown indicate that she is a prostitute, making her an easy target in the prison (Hutchings-Goetz 328). This shows that people formed a connection between prostitutes and certain styles of dress.

Plate 6 (Fig. 3) depicts Moll Hackabout's funeral. In the plate, Hogarth and his harlots wear gloves, which titillate and distract the funeral-goers as well as the viewer (Hutchings-Goetz 329). Prostitutes in the right and left foreground are marked by their gloves, which serve to hide and distract from their misdeeds. On the left, a prostitute's glove is used to disguise her status, even as she masturbates a man sitting next to her. On the right, a prostitute drops her glove to distract an undertaker as she steals his handkerchief (Hutchings-Goetz 329). The gloves of bawds and prostitutes are both desirable and deceptive (Hutchings-Goetz 328). Hogarth's series shows that gloves became a symbol of eroticism and femininity through their connection to prostitutes. While this is not expressly fetishistic in nature, it indicates a trend towards the use of objects as substitutes for the body, which is a key element of fetish clothing.

The corset was one of the first clothing items to be fetishized in modern kink culture (Steele 58). The intense fetishism surrounding corsets is predominantly seen during the Victorian era. One of the greatest examples of Victorian-era corset fetishism comes from the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* which, from 1867 to 1874, published the incredibly risqué Corset Correspondence (Steele 59). These were anonymous letters sent in by readers, detailing sadomasochistic fantasies related to corsetry and tight lacing (Steele 59). The main priorities of the individuals sending in letters were body modification, sadomasochism, and cross-dressing (Steele 59). Though the EDM letters did not include the word sadomasochism, much of the language used indicates similar ideas; words like discipline, confinement, pain, torture, and submission were common (Steele 64). For the corset fetishists in the EDM letters, the aesthetic provided by corsets was secondary to the notion of restriction (Steele 64). This differs from mainstream Victorian society, where a naturally small waist was preferred to one achieved with the assistance of a corset (Steele 65).

Though a staple of Victorian fashion, the corset disappeared from fashion by 1907 as neoclassical style gowns reentered the mainstream through the work of Paul Poiret (Steele 76). Within the fetish realm, corsets maintained their importance; in fact, as fetishists looked back on the Victorian era with nostalgia, stories of tight lacing shrunk waist measurements down further and further until tales were told of 9-inch waists achieved through corsetry (Steele 77).

Tight lacing is not the only fetish with extreme numbers; shoe fetishism places similar emphasis on measurements. Chinese foot-binding is said to have begun in tenth-century imperial courts, inspired by a court dancer named Yao Niang who bound her feet into the shape of a new moon (Foreman). The most notable effect of the practice is the altered appearance of the foot, but foot-binding also forced a “particular sort of gait that relied on the thigh and buttock muscles for support” (Foreman). Over time, the practice was taken up by other ladies of the court with time and money to spend on such procedures, transforming bound feet into a symbol among the elite (Foreman). Small feet, much like small waists in Victorian England, symbolized the height of femininity and class; as such, tiny feet were prized as a means of raising a family’s status through marriage. The most desirable bride would have a three-inch foot, known as a “golden lotus”; four-inch feet – a silver lotus – were respectable, but feet that were five inches or longer were unattractive and dismissed as iron lotuses (Foreman). Daughters with smaller feet had better chances of marrying up, making foot-binding an enticing procedure for families looking to climb the social ladder.

The foot-binding procedure is long, incredibly painful, and requires multiple bones be broken. First, the feet are soaked in hot water and the toenails clipped; then, all the toes, excluding the big one, were broken and pressed flat against the sole, giving the foot a triangle shape (Foreman). Next, the arch of the foot was enhanced by pushing the front of the foot

towards the heel. The feet were bound in this shape with a ten-foot strip of silk. Over a two-year period, the wrappings were tightened until the heel and the sole were forced together, creating a deep cleft at the arch of the foot (Foreman). Visually, the procedure gave the foot the permanent appearance of a foot in a high-heeled shoe (Steele 94). Chinese erotic literature references bound feet in sexual contexts; the 3-inch “golden lotus” foot was considered the erotic ideal for women (Steele 92). Several texts describe ways in which bound feet were used in sexual acts (Steele 94). In China, small feet came to be associated with feminine beauty, and comparisons can be drawn between foot-binding and high heels as feminine and erotic modes of clothing the foot (Steele 91). Both are associated with grace and daintiness, and the ability to walk in such uncomfortable footwear is typically admired by nonfetishists and fetishists alike (Steele 99). The *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* also featured correspondence on high-heeled shoes; high shoes limit movement, a form of bondage that lends itself to fetishism in the same way corsetry does (Steele 98). A person wearing fetish shoes is not supposed to walk or operate normally, the idea is that the shoes limit movement, acting as a form of bondage (Steele 101). Many have compared heels to foot-binding.

Fetish Fashions in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

Similar to the correspondence published in the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, *London Life*, a fetish magazine, published correspondence on corsets and fetish heels, body piercing, cross-dressing, corporal punishment, and related topics between 1923 and 1940 (Steele 51). This publication, along with many others, was a source of inspiration for John Coutts, also known as John Willie, editor of *Bizarre* (Pine 1).

Bizarre was a fetishistic erotica magazine produced in Canada and the United States throughout the 1940s and 1950s (Pine 1). To avoid censorship authorities, Coutts marketed

Bizarre as a fanzine about “extreme fashions”, which he describes as a fashion fantasia (Pine 2). Coutts was born in a Victorian world in which women’s hair and clothing were rendered in art as emblematic of women’s body parts (Pine 18). This is reflected in Coutts’s use of sexual symbolism of clothing in *Bizarre* (Pine 19). This draws further connections between fetish and fashion. *Bizarre* can be seen as an attempt to normalize fetishism, providing fetish enthusiasts with a safe space to indulge in their interests (Pine 19). A good proportion of *Bizarre* was dedicated to normalizing male-to-female cross-dressing (Pine 22). American fetish art of the 1950s and 60s was largely an adaptation of the European style introduced by Coutts combined with pin-up and comic book style illustration (Pine 32). Many of the better-known artists of the genre were influenced by *Bizarre* and Coutts.

There exists a large collection of printed documents, like booklets and portfolios, that illustrate the growth of the fetish subculture; unfortunately, current scholarship has not documented this print record well (Pine 7). The print record, however, does show that small pockets of fetishists started to form in urban areas, and by the early twentieth century the fetish community spread internationally (Pine 7-8). There are many proposed explanations for the spread of fetish culture. Robert Bienvenu maps the roots of the European fetish subculture and the American fetish style, which he says began in the 1930s (Pine 6). Grady Turner, curator of the Museum of Sex in New York, says fetish was imported to the US via migrations of Europeans before and during World War II (Pine 7). Fetish erotica flourished in Weimar-Berlin; Mel Gordon, an erotica collector, writes that “between 1919 and 1933, German publishers churned out tens of thousands of books, pamphlets, newsletters and journals that appealed to the most lurid sexual tastes imaginable” (Pine 9). An often-cited source of fetish aesthetics in the United States is the post-World War II gay leather subculture. Since the mid-1950s, gay leather

organizations have cultivated a hypermasculine image and a strong connection to sadomasochistic practices through the use of leather garments (Hennen 135).

Gay leather culture first emerged in the United States in the years following World War II, and can be explained in part by an increased sense of community amongst gay men following the war (Hennen 136). The impact of World War II on the development of a distinct gay culture is attributed to a number of factors. Firstly, for young men in the military, the war provided a period of freedom from parental supervision and the restrictive social norms of their hometowns; this offered young gay men the chance to experiment with their homosexuality (Hennen 138). Secondly, the military's policy of discharging personnel suspected of being gay helped establish a feeling of belonging to a distinct minority, separate from the rest of the population (Hennen 138). Finally, the postwar effort of the American media to reconstruct the nuclear family ignored the experiences of gay men and further alienated them from the mainstream, while simultaneously strengthening the feeling of community between gay men who felt marginalized by mainstream society (Hennen 138). This sense of alienation ran much deeper for some gay men than it did for others; "[for] these men their combat experiences had so traumatized them... that they found it necessary to seek out the company of others like themselves, to organize a furtive "alternative" culture rather than return to the mainstream" (Hennen 138).

It was these men that nurtured the taste for leather and biker ensembles now synonymous with BDSM. The fetishization of the motorcycle is rooted in a desire to feel and appear masculine; many men returning from war felt their masculinity had been wounded by the traumas they endured, and motorcycles allowed them to "revive the powerful masculinist narratives of the untamed frontier and the lure of the open road" (Hennen 137). The connection to motorcycles made leather extremely attractive to gay men with a desire to project masculinity

and deny the stereotype of 'feminine gay man' (Hennen 137). A seminal influence on early gay leather culture was the 1954 Marlon Brando film *The Wild One*, in which Brando plays Johnny, the leader of the Black Rebels Motorcycle Club (Hennen 139). The biker aesthetic embodied by Brando's character gave gay men an "image with which they could refute the charge of homosexual effeminacy" (Hennen 139). Wearing leather gave gay men the opportunity to recognize themselves, and be recognized, as 'real men'; and though the aesthetic had an undeniable connection to BDSM, most gay men who adopted the look did not use it for fetishistic purposes (Hennen 141). This is an early example of taking fetish fashions out of the fetish context, a trend which continued to develop throughout the twentieth century.

If the Victorian Era was fetish fashion's Golden Age, then the 1950s was the Silver Age. The gay leather subculture introduced the aesthetic of bikers and leather to men's fashion. And in 1947, Christian Dior launched the New Look collection, which began a shift in women's fashion; Dior modified the corset to bring it back into the mainstream, along with stiletto heels, petticoats, and pointed brassieres (Steele 54). The neoclassical dress of Paul Poiret was replaced by the aesthetic that came to define women's fashion of the 1950s. Structural changes in the fashion system also allowed fashion to spread on a mass scale; and the Cold War-era nurtured a nostalgia for the past, including past gender roles which emphasized heightened masculinity and femininity (Steele 54). The fashion market responded to this change, and as a result, explicit fetish fashions entered the mainstream fashion industry.

The Fashion Market

Many fashion trends are influenced by streetwear, but the process of diffusing styles throughout the fashion market is far more complicated than that. "The process of fashion refers to the complex of influences, interactions, exchanges, adjustments, and accommodations among

persons, organizations, and institutions that animate the fashion cycle from its inception to its demise” (Atik and Firat 839). Experts in trend forecasting observe street styles around the world to determine what will become popular; for example, organizations like Moda-In in Milan and Premier Vision in Paris greatly influence trends through their forecasts (Atik and Firat 839). In 2004, Moda-In presented trend inspirations for Spring/Summer 2006, proposing three groups of colors and lifestyles, which served as a suggestion to fashion companies to develop designs in three directions (Atik and Firat 840).

Trend researchers observe artistic, social, cultural, and political waves; they look at clothes, but they also look at events and shifts in public consciousness (Atik and Firat 843). This is known as Trickle Up Diffusion: the youth or other subcultures inspire trend researchers and designers who tell fashion houses, journalists, and trade buyers what will be popular; they then diffuse trends to larger markets and consumer groups (Atik and Firat 844). When trend researchers observed punk teenagers wearing fetish gear, they told fashion houses to develop designs featuring leather and corsets.

Commercial Fetish Fashion: Counterculture to Modern Day

Sexual liberation of the 1960s and 1970s spurred a reassessment of sexual deviations, as a result, fetish inspired fashions became increasingly popular (Steele 33). The first fetish fashion item to get popular was the kinky boot; previously associated with prostitutes, kinky boots are knee- or thigh-high high-heeled boots, often buttoned or laced up (Steele 34). In the 1960s Yves Saint Laurent showed thigh-high crocodile boots and Mary Quant designed corset-laced boots (Steele 113). The skintight catsuit was popularized in the 1960s by Diana Rigg, who played Emma Peel on the television show *The Avengers*; the designs for her costume were directly inspired by the couture fetish costumes of John Sutcliffe of Atomage (Steele 34). And by 1971,

fetish inspired fashions were being sold at low-budget department stores like Montgomery Ward (Steele 34).

Punks were instrumental in bringing fetishism to fashion; they dressed in offensive objects, including fetish garments, that were designed specifically to horrify strangers (Steele 37). “In particular, the illicit iconography of sexual fetishism was... exhumed from the boudoir, closet, and the pornographic film and placed on the street” by punks looking to make the general public uncomfortable (Steele 37). One of the most influential people to come out of this era is Vivienne Westwood who, in 1974, turned her own store into SEX, a bondage and fetish store (Steele 37). The boutique sold rubberwear, bondage leather, and fetish shoes, and the store itself was covered in whips, chains, masks, and other fetish gear; half of the clientele was fetishists, while the other half were young people looking for taboo clothes (Steele 37). But it was her corsets that have been Westwood’s most significant contribution to the fashion industry (Steele 86). Westwood’s corsets were not highly structured; they were made of plastic and lightweight to appeal to the younger crowd that preferred comfort (Steele 86). This shows how fashion appropriated the aesthetic of fetish, but not the ideas of fetish; the appearance of a corset was mimicked without the discomfort and restriction sought by true fetishists.

Throughout the 1970s, the sexual revolution became a mass phenomenon, and weakened censorship policies accelerated the commodification of sex and fetishism (Steele 40). By the 1980s, fetish fashions were in magazines and boutique windows (Steele 42). Jean-Paul Gaultier, who is famous for creating Madonna’s pink satin corset and cone bra, used corsets, girdles, and brassieres in his 1987 spring collection (Steele 88). Thierry Mugler relied heavily on corsets to achieve his iconic femme fatale looks in the 1980s; he even went so far as to create corsets with spiked breasts and faux nipple piercings (Steele 88). For their December 1987 issue, British Elle

published a cover featuring clothes in PVC, Lycra, and rubber; in January 1988, Elle showed a black satin corset and leather micro skirt; one month later, the magazine featured an Ectomorph rubber jacket and corset bondage belt (Steele 42). They don't use words like fetish – that's too straight forward and taboo for mass marketing. They use other words, like 'body conscious', 'slick chic', or 'sexy'; even today, kinky fashions are described as sexy to make them more palatable (Steele 42).

In 1992, *Vogue* noted that many of the world's most important fashion designers were inspired by fetish; "bondage, leather, rubber, 'second skins', long, tight skirts, split dresses, zipped bottines – everything from a fetishist's dream – is available directly from Alaia, Gaultier, Montana, Versace" (Steele 33). Their observations were accurate. In 1991, Azzedine Alaia showed leopard print corsets and stockings; and he showed leather corsets in red and dusty rose the following year (Steele 88). The British designer Helen Storey's 1991 collection used bondage clothing "to represent women's anger and to shift the discourse around bondage from restriction to liberation" (McLaws Helms). Gianni Versace's famous fall/winter 1992 collection, "Miss S&M," worked fetishistic elements into eveningwear (McLaws Helms). In 1992, Chanel produced cork-soled platform sandals with ankle straps, which seems innocent enough at first glance; but, as noted by fashion historian Anne Hollander, an ankle strap presents the foot "as a beautiful slave", the straps reminiscent of those used in BDSM (Steele 98). The period beginning in the late 1980s and continuing into the 1990s marked a small renaissance of fetish fashions, but the influence of fetish has not faded in the 21st century.

"From chokers and leather masks at Gucci to fetish-y waders and 'sex necklaces' at Y/Project, 2019's shows have so far been distinctly NSFW" (Hall). Fetish fashions have made themselves a staple on runways and red carpets in the contemporary world. In January 2019,

Givenchy incorporated latex garments by London-based brand Atsuko Kudo into its Haute Couture collection (Hall). Rachel Weisz wore a red latex gown from the same Givenchy collection to the Oscars (Hall). Gucci just recently showed leather twinsets and super-sharp spiked dog collars and masks in Milan (Hall). And Timothée Chalamet wore a harness that recalled some fetish gear to the Golden Globes (Hall). Clearly, fetish fashion is popular right now. But why? Many believe sexual deviancy flourishes because society has become increasingly sexually permissive (Steele 195). However, I suggest that increased visibility for the gay community, specifically the drag community, might be the cause of fetish's resurgence in the fashion market.

Drag in Fashion

In 2019, the Met Gala, hosted by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, chose to theme their event around the concept of camp, a concept that is closely linked to the LGBT community; following the event, *Vogue* writer Rachel Hahn spoke with prominent drag queen Violet Chachki, who was one of the first drag queens to attend the Met Gala, on the meaning of camp (Hahn, May 2019). Both the choice of theme for the Met Gala and the inclusion of a drag queen in the discussion on the event is evidence of a wider trend towards the inclusion of LGBT aesthetics and voices in the fashion industry. Violet Chachki is a perfect example of this. In 2019, *Vogue* published four articles on the drag queen. In one article, Pat McGrath, famed makeup artist, describes Chachki as "a fabulously disruptive style icon who's distorting the gender binary" (qtd. in Valenti). Another article detailing Chachki's looks from Paris Couture Week describes Chachki as "the queen of couture" (Hahn, July 2019).

As Chachki is most known for her fetish-inspired looks, her inclusion in high-fashion spaces indicates an increased influence of both the LGBT community and fetish aesthetics on the

fashion market, as Chachki is most widely known for her fetish-inspired looks (Hahn, October 2019). As figures like Violet Chachki are accepted into mainstream pop culture, their fashions are accepted with them. The fashion of drag has typically been characterized by hyper-femininity and masculinity, both characteristics which are also common to fetish fashions. And as drag is closely tied to the gay community and the club scene, it is also common for drag queens to utilize fetish garments and materials, such as corsets and latex. As drag enters mainstream culture, it brings with it the extreme aesthetics of fetish fashion.

The roots of contemporary fetish-inspired fashions come from a variety of sources – the gay leather culture of the 1950s, the punk scene of the 1970s, the modern drag community – all of which have a history of being rejected by mainstream society. The contemporary commercialization of fetish fashion indicates a wider trend toward increased acceptance of underground aesthetics and subcultures into the fashion market and mainstream culture.

Appendix



Fig. 1. William Hogarth, Plate 1 from *A Harlot's Progress*, 1732. Etching and engraving, 31.3 x 38.4 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. "A Harlot's Progress, Plate 1." Metmuseum.org, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 2. William Hogarth, Plate 4 from *A Harlot's Progress*, 1732. Etching and engraving, 31.3 x 38.4 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. "A Harlot's Progress, Plate 4." Metmuseum.org, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 3. William Hogarth, Plate 6 from *A Harlot's Progress*, 1732. Etching and engraving, 31 x 38.3 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. "A Harlot's Progress, Plate 6." *Metmuseum.org*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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