

Bringing Back the Bustle

By Mary Carlson

All of you know the saying “What’s old is new again”. To prove the point, let’s take a brief look at the bustle as it appeared in the 1880’s, the Edwardian period, and the Model A era.

During the 1880’s, a bustle was a necessary item to create the fashionable silhouette. To attain the desired womanly figure, the bustle was worn to create the illusion of a small waist and ample hips. To achieve this look, a bustle extended at a right angle to the body. Some bustles were more extreme than others.



In the illustration to the left, they are making fun of the size of this rather large bustle.



The silhouette of the period [1887] looked like this. These decorative but restrictive fashions had their place in history; however it seems unlikely that the liberated women of the Model A era would have adopted garments such as these.

The bustle shown to the right is from about 1884. It would be used to create the look seen below.



As time went on the bustle faded away, to be replaced by a crinoline, and / or petticoats. In the Edwardian period, a revised version of the bustle, which could be made of wire, fabric or even horsehair appeared. The silhouette featured a gentle downward slope from the back of the

waist. Think of the very graceful and famous “S” curve that was prevalent in the early 1900’s.



A bustle pad such as the one to the right would be required to create the look shown here.



In addition to the bustle pad, a woman would have worn a shift, corset, bust improver, camisole, bloomers, a number of petticoats, and stockings with supporters.



Times changed again, and the dresses became much simpler, straighter and loose in style – think of the early 1920’s. Undergarments were less constrictive and fewer in number.

Along comes late 1931, and the bustle returns! However, this time, it is not an item worn under the garment but is part of the dress design, as demonstrated in the following patterns featured in the December 1931 issue of Delineator magazine.

Pattern # 4219 is described this way: “The Bustle Bow – This charming dull, dark blue lace frock turns its back to show a huge bow of wine-red taffeta – reminiscent of the bustle on grandmama’s ball gown.”



The next dress [below and to the left] is pattern # 4199 and is detailed as: “A New Twist – Ivory white and emerald green satin are twisted into shoulder straps and girdle for this evening gown. The back peplum is one of the things fashion is using to give the effect of a bustle to the newest evening gown. “



The third dress is pattern # 4204, described as: “Strap Back Décolletage. Much goes on behind the backs of new gowns. This one, simple and molded in front, has the strap décolletage that is so smart, and a chou at the waistline that shows the influence of the bustle. “ [It appears that the ‘chou’ is a rosette with ribbons]

These gowns are styled so that the special features are at the back of the dress and will be admired by everyone, especially when you are in the arms of your dance partner.

Always remember this – If your hips look bigger, then your waist will look smaller.



References:

V&A Gallery of Fashions Edited by Claire Wilcox and Jenny Lister
December 1931 Delineator
Photos from private collection of Mary Carlson
Images from the internet

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