Jumping through Hoops: The Rise and Demise of the Hoop Petticoat in the Eighteenth Century

Charlotte Engel

College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Part of the European History Commons, Public History Commons, Social History Commons, and the Women's History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/1412

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
Jumping through Hoops: The Rise and Demise of the Hoop Petticoat in the Eighteenth Century

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from the College of William & Mary

by

Charlotte Engel

Accepted for $\text{High Honors}$

(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

Julie Richter, Director

Gérard Chouin

Patricia Wesp
# Table of Contents

Title Page .......................................................................................................................... 1
Table of Contents ................................................................................................................ 2
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................. 3
Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 4
Chapter I: Hoops as Material Objects: The Evolution of their Shape and Elements Used in their Construction .......................................................... 8
  Evolution of Shape ........................................................................................................... 8
  Beginning of the Eighteenth Century .............................................................................. 12
  Middle of the Eighteenth Century .................................................................................. 13
  End of the Eighteenth Century ...................................................................................... 15
  The Materials in Hoops: Looking at how the Shape was Achieved .............................. 18
Chapter II: Contemporary Social Mentality and Commentary on Hooped Petticoats .... 21
  The Morality of Hoops: Ideas of Sexuality and Eroticism .......................................... 22
  The Religious Response to Hooped Petticoats .............................................................. 27
  Social Commentary on Hoops: The Issue of Space ...................................................... 28
  Expressing Public Opinion through Satire ..................................................................... 31
Chapter III: Hoops and the Social Hierarchy ................................................................. 35
  Who Wore Hooped Petticoats? ..................................................................................... 36
  Hoops Worn Throughout Society ................................................................................. 40
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................ 43
Appendix A: The Skills of a Hoop Petticoat Maker: Reconstructing an 18th-Century Hoop ...... 46
Appendix B: List of Known Surviving 18th Century Hoops ........................................... 53
Appendix C: Glossary of Terms ......................................................................................... 55
Bibliography ....................................................................................................................... 57
Acknowledgements

An enormous thanks is owed to the many people who helped me through my thesis-writing process this year. First I want to thank my advisor, Dr. Julie Richter, who guided me through all of the procedures, revised countless hours of work, and answered my never ending questions up until the very last minute. Without her patience and encouragement this work would not have been made possible.

To the tailors in Colonial Williamsburg- Mark Hutter and his apprentices Michael McCarty and Tim Logue- who taught me everything I know about eighteenth-century tailoring and guided me through my hoop-making process. Thank you to Mark for editing my thesis in its final stages, Michael for helping me cut, bend, and boil the tricky bamboo, and to Tim for always making sure my stitches looked accurate. Most importantly, however, thank you for allowing me to explore new things while working in the shop and develop my passion and knowledge for historical fashion.

To my family, who pushed me to pursue writing a thesis even when I felt daunted by the task, who always expressed interest in hearing about my progress, and was always there to offer a new perspective when I needed it.

To Neal Hurst, Associate Curator of Costume and Textiles at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, for sparking my interest in eighteenth-century hoop petticoats, and allowing me to look at the hoops in Colonial Williamsburg’s collection.

And finally to John, for always believing in me and helping me follow my dreams, no matter how crazy they may seem.
Introduction

Over the course of centuries of fashion, women have both chosen to and have been subjected to a variety of different bodily modifications by way of clothing and undergarments. One of these most memorable garments was the hooped petticoat, which manifested itself distinctly across three separate time periods from the fifteenth century onwards, each with a different shape to serve a different purpose. The first was the farthingale, worn in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which took on a conical shape and was the first type of structure added to a petticoat or garment worn on the lower half of a woman’s body. The seventeenth century Spanish Garde-Infante anticipated eighteenth century oval hoops. The second, the hooped petticoats of the eighteenth century, were much more ostentatious and became a way to distinguish between social classes in the beginning of the century, providing contemporaries with an endless source of satirical commentary on the oblong shape of women’s garments. Finally, the third example of hooped petticoats came a century later in the form of crinolines, which expanded women’s skirts in a large circular shape iconic during the American Civil War and Queen Victoria’s reign in England.

It is perhaps the eighteenth-century hooped petticoat that is remembered most for its unnatural oblong shape. Hooped petticoats were an iconic fashionable undergarment that changed shape during the eighteenth century, initially providing the elite with a way to distinguish themselves sartorially from the lower classes until the shape-wear gained popularity throughout all levels of society. This shift and rapid rise in the popularity of hoops ultimately prompted a satirical backlash from contemporaries who viewed these accessories as impractical and ostentatious, until their demise as fashionable apparel in the last quarter of the century.
This thesis looks at hooped petticoats in three parts and focuses predominantly on white women in England and the American colonies as the demographic. The first part serves as a survey of how hoops changed over time and the materials with which they were made. By the early 1700s English women’s fashion had shifted from the bumroll, a crescent-shaped padded accessory worn around the hips, to small hooped petticoats made from lightweight but stiff structured materials to greater emphasize the hips and widen the figure.¹ In the beginning of the century hoops were only worn in formal settings by the upper classes, but by the mid 1700s almost all women wore hooped petticoats to some degree. Over the next few decades, the hooped petticoat would go through a variety of shapes and sizes before reaching its greatest width in the 1740s. These wide garments, ranging from six inches to two or more feet on either side of a woman, caused a stir when they became obstructive and cumbersome in public settings.²

The second part of this thesis examines the social commentary on hooped petticoats and how contemporaries viewed these undergarments, much of which was critical and satirical. Because hoops became so wide, they became the subject of ridicule and public commentary. Newspaper contributors and editors commented on instances of women being hindered by their hoops rather than being helped by them, causing disturbances when attempting to walk through doorways, attend the theater, or climb into a carriage. Thus, hoops were easy to lampoon due to both their impracticality and also the oblong unnatural shape they created on a woman’s body. Additionally, there were those whose grievances extended beyond the awkward visual scene that hoops provided. Certain individuals and religious groups deemed hoops immoral and sexually promiscuous due to their size and extravagance. Because of their lightweight nature, hoops were

reported to have blown about in extreme weather, causing some members of society to question whether or not hoops were too immodest for young ladies to wear.

The final part of this thesis examines how the purpose of hoops was to distinguish the elite from lower classes through fashionable and extravagant silhouettes. Hooped petticoats were not too expensive for lower classes, especially once they became widely popular as an everyday fashionable accessory. Rather it was the practicality of hoops that separated the lower classes from the elite due to the fact that hoops were not easily worn by working women for tasks that required manual labor. Hoops started out as a fashionable accessory for the upper classes worn at formal occasions but soon moved on to lower class women who sought to emulate those of higher social standing; hoops became viewed as a necessary part of any woman’s wardrobe. By the close of the eighteenth century, hooped petticoats declined as a foundation garment for everyday use, and the only people wearing them were those who were part of the Royal Court of England, affirming the fact that they were ultimately part of the most formal and elite type of wardrobes.

Hoops disappeared from the world of fashion momentarily at the end of the eighteenth century as the trend in styles for female silhouettes shifted to become more columnar. However, before long, the lower half of women’s silhouettes inflated once more to achieve the wide circular shape of the nineteenth-century crinolines that became popular during the Civil War in the United States. This cycle, in which female fashion keeps returning to an enlarged lower half of the body, raises questions as to why trends continue to follow this pattern. In exploring these themes and questions, this thesis will focus specifically on eighteenth-century hooped petticoats and society’s attitudes towards them in the hopes of learning more about what made these garments so popular.
Chapter I

Hoops as Material Objects: The Evolution of Their Shape and Materials Used in Their Construction

Evolution of Shape:

Hooped petticoats in the eighteenth century were first and foremost accessories to be worn as foundation garments to achieve the desired fashionable silhouette of the period. Because of the influence of fashion, the size and shape of hooped petticoats over the course of the century varied as style dictated. The width especially fluctuated the most over the course of the eighteenth century, prompting many comments from contemporaries as to the practicality of such garments. The female silhouette of this period was shaped almost entirely by the undergarments that women wore throughout the day, whether it was by their whalebone stays around their upper bodies or the hoops at their waists. The effect was to remove natural forms and anatomical curves, creating a structured and smooth torso and an expanded lower half of the body.

The fundamental purpose of hooped petticoats was to hold out the wearer’s outer petticoats, or top-most layer of skirts, for a fuller effect of the lower body. However, throughout the century, there was a clear pattern of hoops fluctuating in size, beginning small and round, growing wider and flattening front to back to an “immodest” size, and then gradually shrinking so that the effect was not so modest at the height of their fashionable appearances. Indeed, the

---

silhouette of the 1740s reached extraordinary widths and were more angular than hoops that appeared later. By the 1770s, however, the hooped petticoat’s popularity was on the decline as the silhouette for women’s garments was characterized by more natural lines before disappearing almost entirely by the 1780s. However in England hoops could still be found in Court dress until George IV came to the throne and banished them entirely in 1820.

Figure 1. Pedro Garcia de Benabarre, *Herod’s Banquet*, c. 1470, painting, 197.5 x 125.7 x 6.4 cm, Barcelona: Museum of Catalan Art, 064060-000. Muntadas Collection, 1956.

Holding out one’s petticoats with a structured undergarment was by no means an eighteenth-century invention; women had been using techniques to restrict and reshape their bodies to

---

9 Figure 1. A detailed 15th century painting depicting a biblical scene in which the head of John the Baptist is presented to Herod. The figures in the painting are depicted wearing clothes in the fashion of the period, including Salome and some ladies wearing early *verdugados* (farthingales) or hoop skirts. In this painting it is clear that the hoops encircle the women’s petticoats as part of the outer-layer of clothes, and create a very conical shape to the lower half of the silhouette.
achieve a “fashionable” form for centuries. Indeed, the predecessor to eighteenth-century hooped petticoats can be attributed to the sixteenth century “farthingale.” The garment then known as a “Spanish farthingale,” although its true origins are uncertain, was a cone-shaped petticoat whose structure was created by a series of concentric circular hoops increasing in diameter. These petticoats were introduced c. 1460 to hold the heavy and stiff materials of gowns away from women as they walked. Early depictions of these garments in 1470 (Fig. 1) show the structures on the outside of women’s skirts; however, by the end of the fifteenth century, the reeds, stiffened ropes, or whalebone used to achieve the desired conical shape were being inserted into the underskirt. Thus, the farthingale became an undergarment rather than the visible garment itself, and paved the way for the idea of hooped petticoats in the future. These conical garments are most popularly associated with the Tudor era (1485-1603) in England and can be seen as being worn by ladies in images from that time period.

Another type of farthingale known as the French farthingale, or the drum farthingale, widened at the hips in a flat disk-like shape and more closely resembles the wide eighteenth-century hoops introduced later. An example of the French farthingale can be seen in Queen Elizabeth’s portrait, known as “the Ditchley Portrait,” and clearly shows the wheel-shaped structure holding out her petticoats at the hips. By the mid-seventeenth century the farthingale fell out of use as the fashionable standard changed to include hip pads, known more commonly as “bumrolls.” These new crescent-shaped padded structures that sat on one’s hips underneath a woman’s petticoat and fastened with ties were then worn for the latter half of the century and

---

12 Ibid., 57.
varied in proportion and size, ultimately changing women’s silhouettes once more to accentuate the fashionably wide hips that led into the oval hooped petticoats of the eighteenth century.

Figure 2. Marcus the Younger (Flemish), *Queen Elizabeth I ('The Ditchley Portrait')*, c. 1592, oil on canvas, 241.3cm x 152.4cm, London: National Portrait Gallery, NPG 2561. Bequeathed by Harold Lee-Dillon, 1932.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{13}\) Figure 2. “The Ditchley Portrait” of Queen Elizabeth I depicts an example of the French farthingale, or wheel farthingale, worn in the sixteenth century worn by Queen Elizabeth and her contemporaries. This undergarment was characterized by the way it radiated out from the hips to create a wheel-like effect on which the woman’s petticoats rested. The rest of the material then draped down over the sides, creating a cylindrical shape to the lower half of a woman’s body.
Beginning of the Eighteenth Century

Figure modification by way of structured garments shifted from the bum roll of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the hooped petticoat in the early eighteenth century. The hooped petticoat was introduced to both the English and Colonial American societies in the early 1700s, and although there are many debates among costume historians as to why these oddly-shaped structures came into fashion, it is evident that after they started gaining more popularity they were here to stay. At first, informal gowns were worn during the day without hoops, and hooped petticoats were reserved for more formal occasions. However, it was soon evident that hoops were developing into a part of everyday fashion when it became unacceptable to walk outside without wearing one. These earlier hooped petticoats took the form of a more rounded, bell-shaped profile, especially around the 1720s. However, by the mid 1730s, the dome of women’s skirts was replaced by a more flattened oval-shaped petticoat held out on the sides. This shift was prompted at the French Court by the rise in the fashionable “robe a la française,” a gown from which drapes of fabric hung elegantly down the back of the wearer, causing the need for a silhouette on which the back of the gown would lie flat. It was this shape that remained popular throughout the middle of the eighteenth century and reached impossible limits with its width in the 1740s, prompting many comments and arguments to appear in news sources and pamphlets later on regarding their practicality.

14 Ewing, Dress and Undress, pp. 41-3.
17 Staples, Clothing through American History, p. 259.
Middle of the Eighteenth Century

The point at which hooped petticoats reached their height in popularity is usually associated with the period when hoops reached their widest width in the middle of the eighteenth century. By the 1740s, almost the entirety of a woman’s ensemble was dominated by the supportive hoop beneath her gown. The effect was to widen the silhouette at the hips to an unnatural degree which, in contrast, minimized the waist. Indeed, throughout the 1740s and 50s, some accounts state that women’s petticoats became so wide that it was necessary for them to walk through doorways sideways, or else squeeze their hoops. These hoops became subjects of conversation and satire, with newspapers circulating pieces that ridiculed hooped petticoats.

---

19 Figure 3. This eighteenth-century gown located at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston provides a clear example of the drapes of fabric that hung down the back of the “Robe à la Française” which became so popular during this period, prompting the need for hoops to become flat on the front and back so that the pleats would lie properly against the back of the gown.
21 Ewing. Dress and Undress, p. 43.
22 Cunnington, The History of Underclothes, p. 90.
and their unnatural and often cumbersome size. Despite the public backlash, however, hoops continued to expand, creating problems of maneuverability for those who wore them. Thus, ways to make it easier to maneuver through public spaces with hoops developed, and a new hoop was invented with iron hinges at the waist that allowed for women to fold the sides of their petticoats. With this new “machine,” as some contemporaries referred to it, women were able to walk through doorways and sit in carriages with less of an issue.


As hoops such as these became wider, women often consulted newspapers and relied on accounts from correspondents in Europe to keep themselves updated on the latest fashionable standards. There are certainly many examples within contemporary newspapers and pamphlets that give insight as to how people kept up to date with constantly-changing trends from Europe. One individual wrote in a newspaper from 1736 specifically about hoops, stating that “… the hoops in general were not Rump’d, but French, quite flat before and behind, but high and wide

23 Ewing, Dress and Undress, p. 46.
24 Figure 4. This red pair of hoops located at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is an example of a pair of hinged hoops, which would have allowed the wearer to fold her hooped petticoat for easier maneuverability in public spaces.
on the sides: The Petticoats were not quite so short as last year, and a little fuller.”25 This source provides a perfect example of not only the description of the garment, but the knowledge that the trends had advanced and compared the contemporary hoops to what they had been before. A pamphlet was also published in 1745 titled “The Enormous Abomination of the Hoop Petticoat as the Fashion is Now” which touched on the idea that hoops were swelling in size and having a negative effect on public opinion of them, due to the amount of excess physical space women were now taking up in public settings.26

**End of the Eighteenth Century**

While there is no single date that is associated with the decline of hoops as fashionable accessories, hoops became smaller in size and width in the 1750s, and gradually decreased in popularity until after 1775, when they were considered no longer fashionable. Instead, the fullness of women’s gowns started moving to the back of the silhouette.27 Some costume scholars argue that the shape of the “robe à la française” with its ample folds down the back had made a pannier or hooped petticoat necessary for the material to drape elegantly. However, as hoops went out of fashion, women were faced with the issue of rearranging and supporting the material of their gowns.28 Thus, “false rumps” or “bums” began to gain popularity as women draped and gathered their gowns behind them to create folds and a new silhouette quite different from the previous one.29 As the “robe à la française” declined for fashionable daywear, ladies garments called for a smaller, more manageable foundation garment which caused a rise in

---

26 McClellan, p. 196.
29 Ewing, *Dress and Undress*, p. 46.
popularity of panniers and then “false rumps.” These “rumps” were slightly different from the sixteenth century “bumroll” because women were no longer used the same shaped padding around their hips to hold out their petticoats. “False rumps” were frequently buttock-shaped and emphasized the buttocks of a woman, allowing for extra material in women’s petticoats to be draped over them and acting as a predictor to the bustle in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Figure 5. Designer unknown, (Dutch). Woman’s Robe à la Française, c. 1740-60. Silk satin with silk and metallic-thread. Center back length 157.48 cm (62 in.). Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art. M.2007.211.928.30

However, hooped petticoats did not disappear completely until the early nineteenth century due to their appearance in court fashion up until the reign of George IV (1820-1830), when he recognized them as outdated and abolished them permanently c. 1820.31 Before this, scholars describe court dress as still being characterized by the large four-foot diameter hoops “quilted into the hem of the gown” which made for an “immense display of the lower person.”32

As the width of women’s lower bodies had diminished significantly in terms of fashion, the slim

30 Figure 5. Another beautiful example of a “Robe à la Française” in which the pleats drape elegantly down the back, facilitated by the hooped petticoat underneath the gown. The hoops are evident due to the way the gown’s hips are exaggerated, allowing for the sleeves to rest on the top of the petticoats.
31 Cunnington, The History of Underclothes, p. 108.
32 McClellan, Clothing through American History, p. 217.
neoclassical look closely associated with the nineteenth century became popular. This shows that the waist, though still there and placed significantly higher than before, was no longer emphasized in terms of a woman’s silhouette, and that sartorial trends had finally moved away from extreme width. This trend continued until the early-nineteenth century when crinolines made wide petticoats popular once more.  

Figure 6. S. W. Fores (British), *The Bum Shop*, 1785. Paper, hand colored etching. London, 33 cm x 45.8 cm (330mm x 458 mm). London: The British Museum, 1932,0226.12.

---

34 Figure 6. Printed in 1785, “The Bum Shop” provides a satirical example of the accessories that became popular after hoops moved out of fashion and the emphasis on the female silhouette moved to the buttocks rather than the hips. The satire in this image highlights the fact that even though fashion had moved away from hoops, the female body was still subject to ridicule as they struggled to maintain a new stylish silhouette.
The Materials in Hoops: Looking at how the Shape was Achieved


As hooped petticoats’ sizes and shapes changed throughout the eighteenth century, so did the materials from which tradesmen constructed them. Because the primary function of a hooped petticoat was to support the outer petticoats and create a fuller silhouette, hoops were made from a mix of materials, both solid and flexible, and all lightweight.36 These materials often included cane, wood, or baleen splints which were bent into shape by either soaking or heating the material, sometimes using both methods, to create the structural support of the garment. Baleen, the keratin substance from the roof of a whale’s mouth, was often used because of its lightweight flexibility, making it ideal for bending into the desired oblong-shape of a hooped petticoat. The

35 Figures 7 and 8. The front and back images provide an example of a rare original hooped petticoat from the eighteenth century. Three different levels of caning are visible on both the front and the back, providing the support needed to hold out the wearer’s outer-petticoats. They are encased in linen and sewn down on the flat sides of the hoops, allowing for the curved edges of the petticoat to drape freely on both ends for a smooth effect. The ties around the waste allow for adjustability when wearing the hoops. Although some hoops might have ended above or at the knees of the wearer to allow for more mobility of the legs, these hoops extend almost to the wearer’s ankles, suggesting that rather than a stiff final level of cane at the bottom, a much more flexible substance was included to add weight and maintain the shape of the hoops.

splints were then sewn directly into the fabric skirt or occasionally connected to the petticoat by cloth tapes to create the fashionable silhouette that provided the support for a woman’s outer petticoat.

In the mid to late eighteenth century the silhouette achieved by a hooped petticoat was created by tying half oval basket-like structures to either side of the waist to widen the hips on either side and maintain the narrowness from back to front. This style was at times called “panniers,” the French term for “baskets.” Additionally, unlike their predecessor the Spanish farthingale in the sixteenth century or the crinolines in the nineteenth century, both of which had reached the floor, eighteenth-century hoops were often only hip or knee length. This was to allow for unrestricted movement of the legs within their oblong shape. Cane bent to achieve the flattened shape on the front and back could not extend below the knees or else women’s movement would be deliberately restricted when walking around in daily settings.

The “fan hoop,” a fashionable style of hooped petticoat throughout the middle of the eighteenth century when hoops were at their widest, was often made of cane or baleen and was pulled by internal tapes to create a fan-shaped silhouette at the hips. In its most extreme form, women often were obliged to walk sideways through doors to enter rooms, due to the gross width of their petticoats. In response to this inconvenience, hoops made of iron were invented with hinges to allow the wearer to fold up the sides of their petticoats. (Fig 4.) The idea was that in doing so, ladies might be able to maneuver their way more easily in public spaces, such as

---

37 Ewing, Dress and Undress, p. 41.
38 Staples, Clothing through American History, p. 263.
39 Ibid., 264.
40 Ewing, Dress and Undress, p. 46.
sitting in carriages. Thus in response to the changes in shape and size that hooped petticoats endured over time, there were always changes in how these garments were constructed.

Hooped petticoats underwent a series of changes in size, shape and material over the course of the eighteenth century. As hoops became wider, women had the challenge of moving around without causing disruption. Eventually some hoops were introduced with hinges to allow women to fold their hoops for better maneuverability; however, this did not stop some people, and men especially, from commenting on the ridiculousness of these garments. As hoops became wider, they faced public backlash from those who believed that these garments served no functional benefit to society, regardless of whether or not they were outfitted with hinges for convenience. Eventually hoops declined in popularity, but not before they had received a significant amount of attention within newspapers and pamphlets, documenting what their contemporaries truly thought of these ostentatious garments.

Chapter II

Contemporary Social Mentality and Commentary on Hooped Petticoats

Throughout the eighteenth century, hooped petticoats though popular and fashionable provided a constant source of entertainment for satirists, caricaturists, and the general public to provide their varying opinions on these outlandish garments. Attitudes were mixed as some people looked at hoops appreciatively for their sexual attraction and stimulation of erotic thoughts towards the female body, while others argued against this idea and instead focused on the disproportionate and comical shape that hoops provided. Indeed, there are historians today that take the opposite stance on hoops being used for sexual attraction, and instead state that hooped petticoats allowed for more freedom of mobility for women than ever before. Regardless of what people saw when they looked at hoops, the general consensus of the published contemporary commentary is one of bewilderment as they not only continued to gain popularity throughout the early and mid-eighteenth century, but width as well. When hoops started to become a problem in crowded public spaces, the eccentric shape of these garments also provided satirists with endless sources of mockery. By looking at eighteenth-century thoughts towards hoops, it is evident that contemporaries and men especially viewed these garments with disdain and ridicule due to the disproportioned silhouette they created on women and physical problems hoops established.

Undergarments, or garments that have been worn under the outer-most layer of clothing, throughout history have served a large variety of purposes including providing a barrier between the body and outerwear for hygienic purposes as well as their ever-changing fashionable role in shape-wear, molding the body to the contemporary idealistic human figure. However, a relatively new phenomenon between undergarments and their connection to erotic thought took
place, and although some historians might argue that this shift took place in the Victorian era (1837-1901), when the body was so concealed that any erotic attraction had to be placed on its coverings, evidence suggests that this shift occurred at least several centuries prior.\textsuperscript{42} Although the correlation between undergarments and eroticism is sometimes associated with the mid to late nineteenth century such as the Victorian era, ideas of underwear and sexuality were also part of social commentary in the eighteenth century, especially through shape-wear such as stays and hooped petticoats which exaggerated the curves of the female body.\textsuperscript{43} Despite their almost comical size and shape, hooped petticoats throughout the eighteenth century garnered a considerable amount of commentary in relation to sexuality and erotic thought that focused these thoughts on the lower-half of the female body.

\textbf{The Morality of Hoops: Ideas of Sexuality and Eroticism}

The societal perspective towards hoops in the eighteenth century is interesting because in addition to the widespread satirical commentary these outlandish garments attracted, hoops also provided people with a new area on the female body to turn their attention to: the legs. Hooped petticoats held the skirt of a woman’s gown away from her body, allowing for more freedom and ventilation beneath her attire than she had ever experienced before. While the shape of a pair of hoops did not direct viewers’ eyes directly towards the legs hidden beneath their wide frame, there are commentators that observed how hoops were occasionally prone to blow about in the wind due to their lightweight and billowing structure.\textsuperscript{44} Because “underdrawers” were not common until the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the only other underclothes an

\textsuperscript{42} Cunnington, \textit{The History of Underclothes}, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{43} Steele, \textit{The Corset}, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{44} Ewing, \textit{Dress and Undress}, p. 45.
eighteenth-century woman might have worn under her petticoats were a shift and stockings, leaving the legs prone to more exposure than what was deemed appropriate. Thus, the public mindset surrounding hoops in the eighteenth century saw them in a much more suggestive manner than had originally been intended for these garments since the original function of these garments was to simply hold one’s outer-petticoats away from the legs. Indeed, at the height of hoop popularity and width in the 1740s, one article found in the London Magazine in June, 1740 specifically touched upon the purpose hooped petticoats could have in the hastening of marriages between young people. Due to the unwarranted and sometimes accidental views of the feminine body these garments provided young men throughout England, the author clearly believed that young women could use hoops beneficially to attract male suitors. He stated:

An Instance herof I lately saw in St James’s Park, where two young Ladies walking together Arm in Arm in close Conversation, with their Hoops pressing hard on one Side against each other, the other Sides at the same Time flew up very high, to the great Information of the Spectators, while the poor young ladies, to be sure, knew nothing of the Matter.45

The same article had prefaced this anecdote with the idea that, because marriage seemed to be at an “all time low,” ladies should be encouraged to wear garments full of “slits and openings” in order to provide men with an adequate view of their feminine curves, in the hopes of procuring a marriage proposal. After marriage, however, women would be encouraged to

dress in the “utmost Decency and Gravity of garb.” Evidently, some contemporaries looked at hoops as objects of feminine sexuality by using fashionable shape-wear to enhance the feminine body in the eyes of the male gaze for the purpose of encouraging marital relations. While this may have been a satirical piece, the idea that one might use petticoats to capture the attention of men through the gross exaggeration of a feminine silhouette, or even the accidental glimpse of what is underneath, is still prevalent in its themes, and thus shows that it is part of contemporary thoughts towards hoops. Therefore, while women were wearing hoops as fashionable garments, the general public was appreciative of them in many more ways than just their impressive width, looking instead at the surreptitious views of the female body these structured petticoats provided them.

Despite these ideas that hooped petticoats throughout the eighteenth century were source of much sexual and erotic thought towards women, there are opposing arguments against these claims. Both some contemporary commentators and historians look instead at how hoops were, in fact, rather unattractive garments that dissuaded any amorous ideas towards women due to their comical shape and prevention of physical proximity to the wearer. Historian Erin Mackie supports this train of thought in her essay “Lady Credit and the Strange Case of the Hooped Petticoat” when she states that although fashion is often directed at the “grooming of women for their roles as objects of male desire” this was not the intent of hoops, and in fact the erotic desire was completely lacking in these oddly-shaped undergarments. Instead, the ventilation and freedom of mobility that these wide, lightweight garments provided women offered an appealing alternative to the heavy ankle-length petticoats that had encircled their legs in previous centuries,

46 Ibid.
or the restrictive and weighty farthingale— the conical predecessor to the oblong-hooped petticoat— of the sixteenth century.48 Kimberly Chrisman builds upon this idea in her essay “Unhoop the Fair Sex: The Campaign against the Hoop Petticoat in Eighteenth Century England” in which she argues that “women adopted hoops as a means of protecting, controlling and ultimately liberating female sexuality”.49 Despite the fact that many men opposed hoops on the grounds that they looked awkward and took up space, women continued to wear them for decades. Hoops not only provided women with a way to hold their petticoats away from their legs, but also a way to express themselves through fashionable choices. Therefore, rather than finding themselves restricted by the physicality of their garments as before, women were arguably more free with their movements, and therefore their lives.

It is also important to note that despite their popularity among women and ability to provoke possibly inappropriate thoughts among men, hooped petticoats were not always considered very flattering or attractive. These oblong undergarments changed the dimensions of the woman’s body in a way that was deemed unflattering by some contemporaries. In a century where the ideal aesthetic, especially in architecture, drew from the classical ideals of the Greeks and Romans, hoops distorted the female body in a grossly ill-proportioned manner.

In addition to their unattractive qualities, which evoked a large stream of commentary throughout the eighteenth century from men, hoops were also arguably able to provide a physical barrier for women against unwanted sexual advances. Due to their sheer size and inflexible shapes, hoops did indeed provide a physical barricade which enabled women to move throughout public spaces. An article found in The Spectator in 1711 at the dawn of hoops’ popularity noted that the “[male] sexuality has of late years been very saucy, and that the hoop petticoat is made

use of to keep us at a distance." Because some hooped petticoats caused women’s gowns to extend at least two or more feet from their hips in either direction, it was difficult for anyone to come within close proximity to a woman’s body without her knowledge or approval. In this manner, women were able to take control of their own bodies and keep at bay anyone who might have attempted to come too close for their own comfort. It is here that, despite the attention hoops sometimes attracted towards women’s legs and feet, there is evidence towards the idea that hoops were also able to serve as both physical and figurative boundaries, both in their firm shape and perceived attractiveness.

Figure 9. Louise Philippe Boitard (British), Taste A-la-Mode, 1745. 1745. Paper, etching/engraving, 20.9 cm x 31.4 cm (209 mm x 314 mm). London: The British Museum, Y,5.42. Donated 1818. 51

---

51 Figure 9. A satirical depiction of fashion in 1745, where a large number of people are crowded in St James Park in front of Buckingham House, London. The center of the image is dominated by a short, fat woman wearing a large hooped petticoat and “robe a la française” with drapes down her back. Behind her, a young prostitute wearing a hoop lifts it to reveal her ankle to a gentleman nearby. Another woman, dressed similarly to the fat woman, stands behind her in a detailed gown. By looking at the image it is evident how hooped petticoats occupied an enormous amount of space in public settings. Even outside, where space is seemingly more infinite than indoors, the park is dominated by the hoops that women are parading around.
The Religious Response to Hooped Petticoats

Regardless of whether hoops did or did not ward off intimate advances and thoughts from men, these ideas were still present and displeasure was especially voiced from the religious communities within society towards these garments. The extravagance was attributed to the impracticality in performing daily tasks as well as their ridiculousness and extreme silhouettes, which were deemed unnatural. It is worthy to note that this religious objection is perhaps uniquely North American, as such concerns have not been found documented as often in England. Particularly throughout New England’s puritanically influenced communities, hooped petticoats were often deemed immoral for their encouragement of sensual attraction and thoughts of vanity among young women. One of the most well-known religious criticisms of hoops came from Solomon Stoddard, who was pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts, and who wrote a pamphlet in 1722 called *Answer to Some Cases of Conscience Respecting the Country*. Within this pamphlet Stoddard argued that “hooped petticoats have something of nakedness” and therefore infringed on the morality of those donning the garment. Indeed, Stoddard’s argument circles back to the idea that hoops were reminders of sexual promiscuity in daily life, and therefore the more conservative members of religious societies viewed them as indecent. The response to Stoddard’s harsh critique of these undergarments was a different anonymous (though attributed to its printer, James Franklin) pamphlet published in Boston called *Hooped-Petticoats Arraigned and Condemned, by the Light of Nature, and Law of God*, which made fun of the pastor’s prudish ideas and strict moral code. But this satirical response also sheds light on some of the concerns that the religious members of society shared in

regards to hoops. It emphasized how hoops “[made] bare the leg, and [uncovered] the thigh” which as we have seen before, was not that far from what hoops were sometimes prone to doing on windy days.

There was also the idea that, regardless of the social commentary towards hoops, they were simply too impractical and unnecessary for women to wear. A group of Quaker women in Burlington, New Jersey issued a letter in 1726 cautioning their fellow women against the immodest fashions of the day, including hooped petticoats, which caused the skirts of gowns to become wider, thereby clashing with the Quaker idea that clothes should be plain and decent.54 Perhaps smaller hoops in the beginning of the eighteenth century had been used to simply hold out a lady’s gown for better mobility; however, by c. 1726 as these petticoats gained enormous width, the practicality of this undergarment diminished and it is easy to see why they sparked distaste for their frivolity and ideas of vanity among Quakers and more religious citizens later on in the eighteenth century.

**Social Commentary on Hoops: The Issue of Space**

Regardless of the varied connotations associated with wearing hooped petticoats, a large portion of contemporary opinion towards these popular fashion items was ridicule; much of the published sources focused on how much physical space they occupied in public. Because of their outstanding width at the height of their popularity, hoops constantly created issues which generated satirical comments or complaints from those maneuvering around them. Based on evidence from contemporary newspapers, the thoughts towards hoops and their inconvenient nature, as well as their unattractive shape, were more at the forefront of the public’s mind than

---

54 Staples, *Clothing through American History*, p. 258.
the erotic thoughts these garments provoked. The idea that hooped petticoats took up so much space by the wearer in a public setting was commented on frequently throughout numerous contemporary sources, stating that there were constant blockages in stairways, theaters, and coaches. Men and women both complained about women taking up more than one seat with their wide petticoats.55 A newspaper from 1750 highlights debates between a society of ladies on the subject, stating:56

…Every person we meet, every post we pass, and every corner we turn, [hoops] incomber our way, and obstruct our progress… the whole side of a coach is hardly capacious enough for one of us. We go up a pair of stairs, as if we were pushing some great burden before us, and with our lifted hoops in our hands, expose such a hollow in coming down as surprises all below us.56

By the 1740’s, when hoops were at their widest, it comes as no surprise that men and women alike found themselves having to maneuver around each other on the street and within buildings. Hoops stirred up so much impatience that people began to think of them as ostentatious, their wearers arrogant, for taking up so much space without regard for the comfort of those around them. The upper classes were especially prone to donning hooped petticoats in their own daily lives because of the larger spaces in which they lived, and the lack of labor they were required to do; a lower-class working woman could not have functioned properly in a confined space without causing problems. An account even appeared in a newspaper warning

women not to wear hoops to a concert in a church in order to prevent the church from becoming too crowded. That is why it is arguable that hoops could only be worn in an infinite space, such as walking up and down grand staircases or being deferred to when the lady entered a room. Thus hoops caused a great disturbance throughout society as people criticized them for being inconveniently in the way of daily life within the public sphere. It also means that women from upper social classes had an easier time wearing hooped petticoats than those in lower or middling classes due to the manual labor, or lack thereof, required of them in their daily lives, in which hoops might served as an encumbrance.

Figure 10. John June (British), *The Review*, c. 1750. Paper. 22.9 cm x 30.9 cm (229mm x 309 mm). London: The British Museum, 1871,1209.2822. Purchased from Colnaghi 1871.

---


58 Ewing, *Dress and Undress*, 41.

59 Figure 10. A scene set on a busy London street satirizing female fashion, specifically hooped petticoats. In the foreground a woman stands with her back to the viewer, emphasizing the width of her hoops. To the left, a woman lifts her petticoat to reveal her shift underneath, deliberately flashing viewers with a glimpse of her legs, and in the distance a woman wearing hoops is lowered into a carriage by a pulley system because the width of her petticoat will not allow her to fit through the door. To the right, a woman is tried in court for wearing a hoop, which is suspended above her head in an archway. Far off in the background, the dome of St Paul’s cathedral towers over the
If the amount of space that hoops took up in public spaces was not enough for people to comment on, there was also the argument that these wide and cumbersome garments were just unattractive. Their disproportioned effect on the female silhouette served to perplex many people, in addition to their disposition to expose various parts of the body at random moments. Pamphlets in 1745 noted that hoops had increased in width and flattened in the front and back, and were described as “enormous abomination[s]” to fashion. Even women were commenting on how they thought hoops were getting out of hand: whereas earlier in the century hoops had merely held out the petticoats in a limited manner, over time they had increased in width so that by the 1750s comments were being made on how women looked as though they carried two hampers on either side of their hips under their gowns, hiding stolen goods. Clearly, the odd shape of these garments, kicking the shape of the hips out from the body, invited a vast number of comments and opinions to be made about them.

**Expressing Public Opinion through Satire**

Arguably one of the most common ways people expressed their opinions on hoops was through comedy and satire aimed at making fun of these ostentatious and oddly-shaped garments. Was the goal of this satire to get rid of hoops throughout society by means of embarrassment? The reason for the mockery is unclear, but what is clear is the general opinion about these garments and the amount of satirical evidence against them circulating through the buildings, perhaps to draw parallels between the architecture and female fashion of the period. In this image one gets a clear picture of the type of satire through which people express their opinions on hoops, but also a scene depicting all classes of people interacting with these wide garments in a public setting.

public. After a certain point, hoops were often considered to be machines rather than items of fashion due to the way in which their structures were made from metal rather than cane or natural materials, and outfitted with a series of pulls and rigs to render them collapsible in order to allow women to move more easily.62 Ironically hoops had become too cumbersome to maneuver efficiently, but rather than diminishing their extraordinary size, people simply adjusted them and continued on their way. There were also mentions of hoops within magazines such as the Tatler and the Spectator in which individuals commented on this garment, often satirically, for the entertainment of the ‘fairer sex’. One famous instance in which hoops were mocked mercilessly was found in the January 5, 1710 edition of the Tatler, where hoops were placed on a mock trial to call into question the rationale of society. The petticoat is ultimately found guilty and condemned as irrational and unnatural.63

In alignment with those who thought of hoops as ugly, some caricaturists likened women to donkeys carrying baskets of goods.64 In fact, the French term “pannier”- while used to discuss the fashionable garment- was literally the saddlebags put over the rump of a pack-animal. Other satirists drew their ammunition from the way in which these hoops forced women to walk, stating that these women walked through doors like crabs when their petticoats became too wide to compete with door frames.65 Indeed, the inability to walk through a doorway straight-on is something that we in the present day think of when considering eighteenth-century hoops; however, this was not the only difficulty women faced with these large structures under their gowns. Satirists made fun of a range of activities that hoops hindered; but most strikingly the

64 Ewing, Dress and Undress, p. 43.
65 McClellan, Historic Dress, 217.
ability to perform church functions properly, namely within the confessional booth. One newspaper article recounts an incident in which hoops hindered a woman’s ability to move and thus she embarrassed herself amongst her fellow parishioners:

… Of course it was necessary to enter the tiny confessional and prostrate herself before the iron grating between her and the priest. In vain did she make vigorous efforts at the door to compass her unyielding dress; it stoutly refused, swelling, like an air-be, in all sorts of ludicrous tumors, at every new endeavor, until, scarlet with confusion, the lady turned, and hastily made her escape, unshrived, with a few additional sins of impatience, ander, and wounded vanity to enumerate on her return.66

Here it is interesting because the immorality of hoops is expressed through a comical situation in which the woman found herself unable to perform her religious obligations due to her extreme fashion choices, and ultimately paid the price; both socially and religiously. Therefore, one can assume that not only did this article provide a social commentary on the ridiculousness of the hoops, but also on the sinful nature they inadvertently provoked.

Ultimately hooped petticoats continued to take up space both in the minds of their contemporaries and within social settings from the moment they were created to their demise in the early nineteenth century. While their foremost purpose was for the sake of fashionable appearances, hoops were undeniably looked at through the lens of sexuality and erotic thought as they provided viewers with more of the female body than had likely been anticipated. While

this idea is countered by Mackie and Chrisman in their respective essays, it is undeniable what people assigned connotation and character to these garments rather than their original intention. Regardless of the fact that they were disproportionate and unsightly at times, it is evident that men found them tantalizing in their ability to expose the occasional ankle or leg of a female passerby, which women did sometimes use to their advantage anyway. Additionally, the religious community within society had opinions towards hoops and saw these vestments as immoral due to their encouragement of promiscuity and vanity among the general public. This is important because although it was not a dominant idea expressed within society, it was still present. A wide amount of evidence for the social commentary on hoops is often the satire and the sarcasm people often used to make fun of them. Whether it was in fashion magazines, newspapers, diaries, letters, or any number of sources in which people were expressing their opinions on hoops, eighteenth-century commentators often mocked these garments and commented on for their size, odd shape and ability to command the immediate space around the wearer.
One theory which explains why hooped petticoats were so widely worn despite the spatial problems they created and unappealing visual they sometimes provided non-wearers is the idea that they could signify to the public the social class or rank of the wearer. Of course, the origin of these garments is difficult to pin down which makes it hard to determine the social standing of the women who wore them, but there is strong evidence that suggests this theory could be one of the reasons these oddly shaped undergarments became so popular throughout the eighteenth century. The idea is that the function of clothes has always been grouped under the same categories, including protecting the body from the elements, cleanliness, eroticism, and as a method of class distinction. Using undergarments as a method of class distinction, however, only works as long as there is some sort of visible result, which is achieved with hooped petticoats and the distortion of a woman’s silhouette. The function of hooped petticoats as an undergarment was not a practical one, given their size and shape, and therefore could be used as a visual indicator of social rank.

The consumer revolution in the eighteenth century had an enormous impact on the way people spent their money. The elite members of society continued to spend lavishly on luxury commodities, or indeed everyday commodities made in higher qualities. However, now ordinary members of society were starting to spend their own money on more material items in their lives, giving lower class people the opportunity to emulate upper class materialism and display. With this new upswing in the way people spent their money came a change in the way people viewed

---

67 Mackie, "Lady Credit," 36.
68 Cunnington, History of Underclothes, pp. 14-17.
things such as personal accessories and especially clothes. Hooped petticoats were initially popular among the upper classes for formal events, and over the course of the century were adopted by lower class women trying to emulate this new sense of luxury and fashion. Ultimately, it was the popularity of hooped petticoats that led to an increase in production and subsequent rise in availability for larger numbers of women throughout society. In this way, clothing was one of the largest mass commodities to be able to cross class barriers, and thus the aristocracy had to change the way they wore things to distinguish themselves from those subtly trying to emulate them. Hooped petticoats made it easier to cross these barriers because of their obvious visibility, which attracted comments from critics not only for their cumbersome nature but also the way in which people were now able to seemingly imitate the gentility of their social superiors.

Who Wore Hooped Petticoats?

If the purpose of hooped petticoats was to indicate that the wearer was of high social rank or class, then it is important to investigate who actually wore these garments, as well as when they were worn and why. While there is plenty of literature and contemporary images that suggest every woman, regardless of her class, would not leave her house without wearing some type of silhouette-modifying under petticoat, this was not the case, at least in the beginning of the century. Rather hooped petticoats were not worn either in the countryside or by lower classes simply because there was no use for them. For instance, it would have been exceedingly

---

70 Chrisman, “Unhoop the Fair Sex,” 16.
71 Ibid., 17.
73 Ibid.
difficult and indeed impractical for a woman to wear a hooped petticoat while working in the fields alongside her husband. Even in more urban settings, a woman working in a retail space would have had difficulty maneuvering around small, confined rooms to interact with customers while wearing a hooped petticoat. Thus, the initial purpose of hooped petticoats was mainly to showcase fashionable taste and affluence.


Throughout the eighteenth century, because wearing hoops displayed a certain level of opulence, evidence suggests that hooped petticoats were almost necessary to complete the wardrobe of a lady of gentle birth. An inventory from 1720 supports this assertion with a list of a lady’s essentials and, among a number of items such as jewels, combs and pomatums, also included whalebone and hoops. This list suggests that hoops were considered not only an everyday item for an elite woman, but one that was important for maintaining a fashionable appearance. Another account of a young woman of gentle birth from Virginia documents her

---

74 Figures 11 and 12 depict the front and side views of a British Court gown dating back to c. 1750, which was the only place in which the widest hoops survived after the 1760s. While this is not an example of daily wear, it certainly provides a visual for how hoops conspicuously displayed the fabric of a woman’s petticoat. Because the hoops extend straight out from the wearer’s figure, it also gives the viewer an example of the extreme silhouette hoops created on a woman. The side view also emphasizes the fact that while hoops were oblong in shape, they were often no larger than the body from front to back.

wardrobe and all its contents of the most proper and fashionable attire included a hooped petticoat, which suggests again that by 1737 this undergarment was a staple in any fashionable young woman’s ensemble. This is arguably the case because it distinguished the wearer as a wealthy member of society who had the ability to master a certain degree of elegance that such a garment required.

Stays and hooped petticoats, when combined, were essential pieces to the construction of what was considered a fashionable silhouette, and required a certain mastering of the gait and bearing one required to pull them off elegantly. Thus, the privileged classes wore them as a sign that they had the ability to adequately master these accessories with the required elegance that was so important to those who wished to distinguish themselves within society. In the American colonies, it was especially important to those who wished to imitate their counterparts in the British upper classes to include these fashionable accessories as part of their own wardrobes in order to express their own rank and social status. Even though there was no aristocracy in America, different people sought to distinguish themselves by wearing hooped petticoats. It has even been noted that there were advertisements for children’s hooped petticoats so that little girls were “ballooning” through the streets of Boston and New York just like their stylish mothers. Thus, the extravagance for a garment that made more of a statement than added to the functionality of one’s daily dress aided in the distinction of those who could afford to wear them out daily and to functions that required such a luxurious undergarment.

---

However, as the eighteenth century progressed, hooped petticoats in both England and the American Colonies were not limited to the privileged classes, and by the 1750’s it was very common for a middle or lower class woman to add these undergarments to their wardrobe due to the many varieties and sizes of hoops were made available in. Hoops could vary according to one’s occupation and the time of day, making them more easily maneuverable for a working class woman to wear throughout her daily routine. Indeed there are numerous advertisements in newspapers throughout London in the eighteenth century that promote a large quantity and variety of hooped petticoats for sale, which shows how readily available they became for women of all social classes who wished to show off their own fashionable tastes.

Figure 13. Charles Mosley (British), *The Tar’s Triumph, or Bawdy-House Battery*, 1749. Paper, etching. 24.5 cm x 33.9 cm (245 mm x 339 mm). London: The British Museum, 1800,1113.2919. Purchased from Edward Hawkins, 1818.

81 Figure 13. *The Tar’s Triumph, or Bawdy-House Battery* provides an example of hoops being worn by women in all social classes in many different jobs. The image specifically satirizes a point at which a number of brothels were wrecked by sailors in 1749. Here a number of prostitutes are running from a fire, and at least two of the women are depicted wearing hooped petticoats. In the foreground, the woman’s hoop flips up to reveal her legs as she kneels on the ground, pulling at a bedsheets. Because hoops are not the point of the satire in this image, it is important that the women are depicted wearing them because it shows that hoops were becoming more widely worn in the middle of the eighteenth century by more than just the elite upper classes.
Hoops Worn Throughout Society

Due to the changes brought upon society by the consumer revolution in the eighteenth century, the imitation of higher social status became easier for lower classes. Men and women were able to gather news on the latest styles from newspapers, fashion plates, and personal accounts in popular media from which to keep updated on the constantly changing fashions. Therefore, over time hooped petticoats were not limited to the privileged classes, and it was very common for a middle or lower class woman to add these undergarments to her wardrobe due to the many varieties and sizes in which hoops were made, thus allowing the wearer to maintain a fashionable appearance. Hoops could vary according to one’s occupation and the time of day, making them more easily maneuverable for a working class woman to wear throughout her daily routine. Numerous advertisements in newspapers throughout the eighteenth century promoted hooped petticoats for sale, showing how readily available they became for women of all social classes. One private letter printed in a Boston newspaper from 1737 describes the Portuguese queen and princesses’ dresses in Lisbon, stating that their gowns resembled the French fashion with hoops so wide that one “might [have laid] a bale of goods on each of them,” showing that it was even possible to keep ladies in the American colonies informed on what the styles were directly from European royal courts. Additionally, servants provided a direct link between different social classes and were therefore able to pass on fashionable trends either through word of mouth or receipt of clothing from their mistresses’ wardrobes, solidifying hoops as a symbol for lower class aspirations to gentility. All of these sources show how easily fashions moved

82 Steele, The Corset, 28.
85 Chrisman, “Unhoop the Fair Sex,” 17.
across society, transferring from one social group to another, until hoops became accessible for women across all social classes who wished to emulate the stylish tastes of the elite.

Dictated by the undefinable nature of human whim, ultimately opinions shifted and fashions changed, causing hoops to decline in popularity with the emphasis on the female silhouette shifting towards the back with the introduction of “false rumps.” By the end of the eighteenth century, hoops were solely worn within Court settings in England, further solidifying their identity as a garment of the highest social class. For the lower classes, hooped petticoats either took on a more moderate shape for society occasions or they would have been left out of one’s ensemble altogether. 86 At Court, however, hooped petticoats were still a way of showing off yards of silk and embroidery designs with their large expanses of flat surface on the front and back of women’s petticoats. 87 Once hoops were no longer worn by the majority of women within society, the continuation of this practice within Court further solidified the divide between popular styles worn by the masses and those who were part of the highest ranks within society, though at this point their hoops were outdated rather than fashionable. In this way, the hooped petticoat became a symbol of the ancient regime more than anything else and solidified itself as an integral component of late eighteenth-century fashion, famously associated with its extremely oblong appearance, giving an almost rectangular shape to the lower half of a woman’s body. 88

86 Carter, Underwear, 26.
87 Ibid., 25.
88 Staples, Clothing through American History, 275-6.
Figure 14. Designer unknown (Europe), 18th Century Court Mantua, c. 1750s. Silk, gilt metal, linen. 250 cm wide (2.5 m). Edinburgh: National Museum of Scotland, K.2013.67.1-2.89

89 Figure 14. This image serves to highlight the extreme widths that hoops reached by the mid-Eighteenth century. The petticoats on this Court gown reach 2.5 meters in width (approx. eight feet) and would require careful maneuvering of the wearer in a public setting.
Conclusion

Body modification to obtain the most fashionable silhouette has been used over centuries to fit the ideologies and practicalities of each time period, and following the farthingale of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the introduction of hooped petticoats in the 1700s offered another way in which the female body was presented to society. Throughout the eighteenth century, hoops shaped not only the female silhouette but also how people within society viewed themselves and each other. However, even though they declined in popularity in the late 1700s, hooped petticoats would be revived in the nineteenth century in the form of large crinolines that are often associated with the silhouettes of women who lived during the American Civil War (1861-1865).

While the baseline function of these garments was to hold out one’s skirts away from the body and widen one’s lower silhouette, the shape and size of hoops changed dramatically over the course of the eighteenth century, and ultimately their purpose as well. Hoops reached their widest width in the middle of the century at the height of their popularity, thus prompting a wave of backlash and satirical commentary on them. These wide undergarments not only enlarged the lower half of the female silhouette but also took up a large amount of space in public settings and therefore required careful and sometimes extensive planning to maneuver comfortably. Because of their wide stature, hooped petticoats were not functional garments that would have been easily worn by the average working or lower class woman. Thus, it can also be argued that hoops were not simply a fashionable accessory designed to hold one’s petticoats away from the body in a superfluous manner. Instead, they were specifically used by the upper classes as a way to distinguish themselves from those who would not have worn these impractical garments due to
the inconvenience they could cause in daily life, especially in a finite space. However, by the
mid to late 1700s, hoops had become accessible in many shapes and forms to all members of
society as fashionable garments before starting to decline in popularity in the later parts of the
century.

Hooped petticoats are an iconic piece of eighteenth-century material and social culture,
and this thesis ultimately serves to highlight how hoops were worn and viewed by their
contemporaries, thereby helping historians understand why these garments gained such
widespread use in their time. The historical garment analysis explored in this thesis can also give
insight to how people in the past viewed the world around them and what they considered
socially acceptable. Hoops are a visual representation not only of the silhouette of the eighteenth
century, but the structure of societies in which the women wearing them lived. By researching
hooped petticoats we also find certain similarities between the past and the present, such as the
idea that hoops were often impractical and, at times, very awkward garments, which ultimately
affirms the idea that the past is not as foreign as one might imagine.

The ideas in this thesis also reflect the general patterns across time and space which
highlights the larger theme of the female form and how different societies emphasize an
exaggerated silhouette for women. The idea that hooped petticoats enlarged the lower half of a
woman’s body is not a new concept by the eighteenth century, though their representation of this
idea is, and it has certainly not been the last example over the past few centuries. Fascination
with over-the-top female silhouettes extend across different cultures and centuries to include
examples of things like the Paleolithic cave sculpture of a woman with exaggerated anatomical
features called “the Venus” from 40,000 years ago, or the early nineteenth-century woman, Sara
“Saartjie” Baartman otherwise known as the “Hottentot Venus” in England who was treated as
an anomaly due to her large buttocks. Even in the present, fashions and the fascination with an exaggerated female form maintains popularity through voluminous wedding dresses. Although present fashion trends do not follow exaggerated shape-wear to the extent that eighteenth century hooped petticoats did, the emphasis on popular trends remains to highlight the female form. In a way, the present is connected to the eighteenth century not by impractical and awkward shape-wear garments, but through the emphasis on the importance of the female silhouette through the fashionable standards of the time in which we live.
Appendix A:
The Skills of a Hoop Petticoat Maker: Reconstructing an Eighteenth-Century Hoop


As part of the research process for my thesis I interned at Colonial Williamsburg studying and documenting an eighteenth-century hooped petticoat currently in their collection, and working on a reproduction of this garment. Through this process I was not only able to better understand how this particular hoop was constructed, but also the larger trade of hoop petticoat-making in the eighteenth-century, the methods and skills, and ultimately something about the people who worked in the trade.

The hooped petticoat is shown in Linda Baumgarten’s book *Costume Close-Up: Clothing Construction and Pattern 1750-1790*. Baumgarten’s book dedicates an entire section to this garment, looking at how it was cut, constructed, and worn, including detailed descriptions of the garment and a pattern guide for readers to better understand the different pieces that make up the hoop. Baumgarten’s research was instrumental as a starting-point for my own, and her pattern was an important guideline at the beginning of my own work reconstructing the hoops using eighteenth-century materials and techniques. With the pattern I was able to produce the pieces used to make the hoop petticoat with the same measurements as the original garment. There was,
however, still much study to be done regarding the sewing techniques and the preparation and shaping of the hooping material.

Working closely with Mark Hutter, the Master Tailor in Colonial Williamsburg’s Department of Historic Trades and Skills, I carefully examined the eighteenth-century hoops and document the experience through photographs, which I was able to use later as references for accuracy in the construction process. The hoops are missing some stitches where they have worn out, and the bent canes that create the desired silhouette are either broken or missing. However, by looking at the placement of old stitch holes in the linen, we were able to deduce where the hoops had been sewn into the fabric so that we could recreate the garment ourselves as accurately as possible. Analyzing stitching techniques helped us to understand the order of construction.
Because little was written in the period about hoop making, we had to learn through experimentation. The most challenging part of the process came in the form of handling the bamboo that we used as the caning for our hoops. The original hooping material is a cane or bamboo, imported to eighteenth-century England, and therefore for the reproduction we chose to work with bamboo. We split each length of bamboo into half-round pieces and bound two pieces together side-by-side for each of the three hoops (Fig. 16). This ensured that the bamboo in each tier of hoops bent identically once we applied heat and water. We went through several different trials of heating the bamboo strips and saturating them with water before coming to the conclusion that both were necessary to bend the bamboo to such an extreme as achieving ovals for a petticoat.

The cabinetmakers in Colonial Williamsburg offered their expertise on bending wood, agreeing that both heat and water would be needed to effectively bend the bamboo. They also assisted in a trial-run by attempting to bend the bamboo encased in linen around an iron tube heated by a small flame. Although we discovered that using their bending iron would take too long and did not administer enough heat, we determined that the heat had some affect on the
bamboo and decided that if we had a large enough heat source and kept the cane damp, the bamboo could be pressured into the desired oblong shape. The cabinetmakers were kind enough to lend us a large iron trough, which we used to boil water to submerge the bamboo in for over an hour, to ensure that it would be adequately prepared for bending.

Once the hoops were boiled, we used a custom-shaped wooden jig (Fig. 17) made by senior tailor apprentice Michael McCarty in the exact measurements of the original hoops to bend the bamboo very slowly around and fasten it into place with clamps borrowed from the Joiners trade shop while it cooled off. After waiting a few days for the hoops to dry, we were able to take them off the jig to assess whether or not the bamboo was going to maintain its new oval-shaped form. The bamboo stayed half-bent when we took the clamps off; however, the cane was not fully dry so we then tied the hoops back into place with twine to wait a few more days to ensure that the bamboo canes had completely dried within their linen cases. This process proved much more complicated than initially anticipated, but the trial and error led to a much better result and understanding of the trade.

Figure 17. An image of the custom-made wooden jig, constructed to mimic the size and shape of the hoops. The bamboo has been wrapped around the frame and is being held in place by two clamps and a large zip-tie. Author’s photograph.
The final step was to take the newly oval-shaped bamboo hoops and cover them in clean linen to attach them to the petticoat to give it the desired silhouette. The hoops are quite quickly and easily sewn to the interior of the linen skirt. The top edge of the skirt is gathered to the uppermost hoop, to which yoke panels are then added. Once that was completed, we shaped the panels around the waist, stuffing the opening edges with wool, and sewed a casing for the linen tapes so that the wearer could tie it around her waist.

Ultimately this process led me to a much better understanding of why hoop-making was a trade and why hoop petticoats were professionally made garments. The procedure used by those making hoops took a lot of practice and skills that were learned and perfected over long periods of time. There are no written sources documenting the process by which hoops were made; rather this was a trade that was learned and passed down through years of apprenticeships.

While the hoop petticoat-making trade was one in which both men and women participated, numerous sources document women not only as laborers but owners of independent businesses. One source in the mid-eighteenth century announced that a woman hoop-petticoat maker, by the name of Mrs. Vanes, had been granted a patent by the king for making a “new-fashion machine hoop petticoat,” which shows that not only were there women in the business, but they were also successful at it. Many more advertisements for hoop petticoat-makers appear in newspapers citing women as the primary trades-workers of these shops. Two more examples of women running hooped-petticoat trades in the second half of the eighteenth century show how they placed notices in the newspapers to help advertise and expand their businesses. The first woman, Mary Jones, stated that despite the end of her partnership with another woman, she was

---

still continuing her hooped-petticoat business in the same house and wished her customers to keep returning.91 The second woman, M. Millner, found herself having to dispute claims being circulated that were intended to prejudice her in her profession, stating that she had declined her business, and assures her friends and customers that her business is as strong and successful as usual.92

Through my work learning these skills, I better understand the work of tradeswomen who may otherwise be anonymous or forgotten.


---

Figure 19. Finished reproduction of the eighteenth-century hooped petticoat in Colonial Williamsburg’s Collection. Author’s photograph.
Appendix B:
List of Known Surviving Eighteenth-Century Hoops


C. 1760-80 “A pair of leather pocket-hoops with very large openings at the top.” Nordiska Museum, Stockholm.


Appendix C: Glossary of Terms

**Artificial Silhouette**- throughout the eighteenth century the fashionable ideal body shape was achieved by adding padding, hoops, stays and heeled shoes underneath women’s outer garments. Generally this was a conical torso, extended hips, and long skirt.

**Bumroll (bolster)**- a crescent-shaped pad worn underneath ladies’ petticoats in the 16th through 18th centuries to accentuate the hips and hold out one’s skirts.

**Corset**- associated with the 19th century, a structured garment fitted to the individual and worn underneath one’s attire to achieve a fashionable silhouette, usually associated with achieving a smaller waist and “hourglass” figure.

**Dress**- the term used to define one’s entire outfit ensemble in the eighteenth century (ex. Travel dress, night dress, sports dress).

**False rump**- “buttock” shaped padding popular in the late 1770’s and 1780’s that tied at the waist and held out one’s petticoats to emphasize fullness in the rear rather than at the sides.

**Farthingale**- a cone-shaped hooped petticoat worn in the 15th and 16th centuries to extend and shape women’s petticoats (See also French farthingale, Spanish farthingale).

**French (drum, wheel) Farthingale**- a bolster-like roll at the hips that held out the petticoats in a wheel-shape, creating drapes.

**Gown**- a woman’s attire in which the bodice and skirt are attached as one garment. The modern equivalent would be a “dress.”

**Hooped petticoat**- a structured petticoat that goes underneath a woman’s outer garments that holds one’s petticoats out from the body to achieve a fashionable silhouette, changing in proportion and in shape throughout the century.

**Outer petticoat**- the exterior-most visible petticoat of a woman’s ensemble, it often matches the gown (See also Petticoat).

**Panniers**- structured undergarment worn at the hips to extend the petticoats on either side of the female silhouette, but not sewn directly into the petticoat as one finds in a hooped petticoat. It derives from the French term “basket” and is only later used in English.

**Petticoat**- The term used for all forms of women’s lower body garments made of panels of fabric that are pleated or gathered into the waist. What would, in the present day, be considered the skirt of the outfit. (See also, hooped petticoat, outer petticoat, under petticoat).
**Spanish Farthingale (verdugale)**- the cone-shaped hooped petticoat worn in the 16th and 17th century that originated in Spain.

**Stays**- the conical, boned eighteenth-century garment fitted to the individual and worn underneath a woman’s attire to achieve a smooth upper-torso and provide back support. It is not the fashionable waist-cinching garment of the 19th century.

**Undergarment**- the type of clothing worn beneath outer layers of clothes to provide a barrier between the body and outer garments, and sometimes provide support for the fashionable silhouette of the time period.

**Under petticoat**- the petticoat that goes underneath the outer petticoat.
Bibliography

Primary Sources:


*Boston Evening-Post, published as The Boston Evening-Post.* Boston, Massachusetts, September 29, 1740. America’s Historical Newspapers. (April 9, 2019).


*Boston Newsletter,* Friday Nov. 3 to Friday Nov. 10, 1727. America’s Historical Newspapers. (April 9, 2019).


[https://search.proquest.com/americanperiodicals/docview/126430101/pageviewPDF/EC14604D31C84B6CPO/2?accountid=15053](https://search.proquest.com/americanperiodicals/docview/126430101/pageviewPDF/EC14604D31C84B6CPO/2?accountid=15053)


Stoddard, Solomon, *Answer to some Cases of Conscience,* Boston, 1722


Secondary Sources:


**Images:**

Museum of Catalan Art  
National Portrait Gallery London  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation  
The British Museum  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
National Museum of Scotland