

FLESHLINGS:
**LOST BODYSTOCKINGS AT THE BIRTH OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY
DRESS**

by

Kate Burnett Budzyn

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in American Material
Culture

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ABSTRACT

In the decades around the turn of the twentieth century, American and European women appeared in risqué performances and images wearing flesh-colored bodystockings. Although these garments—often referred to in period sources as *fleshlings*—were once a widespread material phenomenon, they have largely been lost today. Few known examples remain, and little scholarship recognizes them. This thesis pieces together a material history of these remarkable lost garments by examining two remaining examples and then tracing evidence of them in period photographs, catalogs and newspapers. Ultimately this paper argues that these faux-nude suits helped to create a radically new public vision of the female body. Though they were often seen as scandalous and objectifying, fleshlings helped to redraw the boundaries of female decency at the turn of the twentieth century. These garments presented the public with a form of clothing that allowed a new freedom of movement and showcased a natural silhouette, revealing women's legs and waists from beneath the centuries-old traditions of long skirts and corsets. Fleshlings thus helped push forward late nineteenth-century efforts at women's dress reform and were key participants in the birth of twentieth-century dress.

INTRODUCTION

“Missing me one place search another,”

-Walt Whitman

In the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth, a strange visual phenomenon swept pop culture on both sides of the Atlantic. Women appeared in risqué performances—on stage, in photographs, on film—wearing skin-tight suits that imitated the color of white skin. The thin garments clung to the performers’ bodies, covering over the explicit bodily details of nudity—areolas; pubic hair—while simultaneously exposing curves and revealing body shape. Wearing these flesh-colored suits, the performers were at once nude and not nude.

So widespread and enduring was this erotic nude illusion that it cut across genre, place and medium, becoming an idiom all its own. From the early 1890s through the 1910s, famous stage actors, vaudeville and burlesque performers, models, sex workers and physical culture contestants all engaged in this performance of faux-nudity (fig. 1). Hundreds and likely thousands of photographs were taken and sold in different formats—postcards, cabinet cards, tobacco cards, stereocards—across Europe and the United States. Early motion pictures caught the garments on film, and newspapers across the country told stories about the women who wore them. And yet, despite their strong presence in the visual culture of this period, the garments at the center of the phenomenon have been lost. Where are the nude bodystockings that women wore at the turn of the nineteenth century? Where is the object that allowed women to pose as though nude before late-Victorian audiences? This thesis attempts



Figure 1 *Melle X*. France, ca. 1907. Hand-tinted silver gelatin print on postcard. (Author's collection; photo by author. *Unless otherwise indicated, all objects and images are from the author's collection and have been photographed by the author.*)

to restore this remarkable missing garment to our understanding of the material culture of this period.

These nude performances were born out of the tradition of *tableaux vivants*, in which live people performed still poses in reference to scenes from classical art, mythology and other canonical works (fig. 2). *Tableaux* were a widespread phenomenon across the nineteenth century, and they were performed in both public and private spheres, in settings as varied as churches, living rooms and theaters. As early as the middle of the century, the neoclassical impulse combined with the burlesque tradition of wearing tights on stage to create a controversial new form of *tableaux*: female models and performers used their bodies, scantily clad, to reenact scenes from classical painting and sculpture. Various called living pictures, statues, *tableaux*, and *poses plastiques* (flexible poses), these performances were presented as feats of stillness and gesture on the stages of music halls, opera houses and burlesque and vaudeville theaters across the country. They were meant to animate artwork through live human bodies, and many performers and models considered them acts of fine art; many audiences and social commentators, meanwhile, found them to be overtly erotic and scandalous.

The trend of living pictures ebbed and flowed over the decades, but by the end of the century, they reemerged with new relevance and scandal as well-known actresses began to appear on stage and in pictures wearing nothing more than bodystockings (fig. 3). These nude performances pushed the boundaries of classical reference and became their own genre with heightened sexual innuendo. The initial allusion to classical allegory had become so diluted that the image of women striking dramatic poses in nude bodystockings had become its own scandalous phenomenon,



Figure 2 Herbert Randall, *Reconciliation*. Ann Arbor, ca. 1891. Photographic print. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.)



Figure 3 *De Gaby*. France, ca. 1900. Silver gelatin print on postcard.

referencing nudity more than myth. The bodystocking at the center of these performances had been made to serve an invisible purpose—the cloaking of nakedness in a thin covering of nude fabric—and yet it had become its own distinctly recognizable garment. Performers accessorized their nudity, adding belts and bracelets and flowers to their cloth skins. American newspapers wrote in prurient tone about the women who appeared publicly wearing nothing but tights, often referring to the garments by an evocative term: *fleshlings*.

These nude-not-nude spectacles very publicly walked a line between theater and pornography, between fine art and sex. In America, much of the Gilded Age (1865-1900) coincided with the Comstock Era (1872-1914), a period during which a single vigilante anti-vice crusader, Anthony Comstock, managed to win several major legislative victories against the distribution of a broad swath of sexually-related materials. Under the Comstock laws, the federal government outlawed the distribution by mail of everything from pornography to rubber dildoes to birth control sponges and abortifacient powders to medical pamphlets and classical nudes.¹ The censorship of “obscenity”—of nudity and sexuality—was one of the most widely discussed political battles of its time. So effective was Comstock’s crusade that he permanently altered the historic record around American sexuality by spending nearly four decades of his life seizing and destroying “obscene” materials.² *Fleshlings* emerged right in the midst of these virulent anti-sex efforts, and they played a central—although

¹ Amy Werbel, *Lust on Trial: Censorship and the Rise of Obscenity in the Age of Anthony Comstock* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

² Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles Over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 10.

historically neglected—role in this era’s negotiations around bodily representation and sexual freedom.

Wearing flesh-colored bodystockings within the Comstock Era’s pervasive sexual censorship, female performers danced between the public boundaries of obscenity and decency. Their nude suits served as the physical interface between naked bodies and public eyes, between exposure and censure. Although they stirred scandal in papers across the country, these stockinged performances largely managed to pass under the wire of legal censorship. Despite Comstock’s best efforts to limit the presence of naked bodies in the public sphere, he was unable to legislate against the wearing of nude tights in public.³ These garments thus allowed women to appear in a radical new state of bodily exposure, and they would prove to have a lasting effect on the way women clothed and presented their bodies. Packaged in bodystockings, women’s bodies had become fair game for public consumption.

While historians have amply recognized the phenomenon of living pictures and poses plastiques, the garment itself has all but disappeared from our cultural awareness of this period. Gilded Age or Belle Époque fashion is often remembered for its lavish fabrics and structural feats of hourglass figuring. The turn-of-the-century is also known as a pivotal time in women’s dress, as a time when women looked for alternatives to the corset and argued for the benefits of wearing pants. Costume collections in museums around the world are full of dresses, undergarments and accessories from the 1890s and early 1900s. Flesh-colored bodystockings, meanwhile, seem to have vanished almost entirely from the material-historical record. As objects,

³ Comstock’s “Anti-Tight’s Bill” is discussed further in Chapter 4. See also Werbel, *Lust on Trial*, 234.

they haven't managed to survive as representatives of their era, and yet they existed as part of a complex and fascinating cultural performance of bodies that was one of the defining cultural experiences of the turn of the century. They are as important a piece of clothing of this period as any of their more widely-acknowledged or more visually-appealing contemporaries.

This thesis pieces together the material story of this turn-of-the-century garment in the space of its physical absence. During the course of my research, I was able to locate and examine two extant bodystockings from this period. Given their rarity, I have decided to write about these garments from the inside out, beginning with the smallest material observations and working my way outwards to cultural interpretation, letting the objects lead. This thesis begins, after a brief historiography, with a close material analysis of these two extraordinary pieces. Next, taking outward steps, I explore the period photographs in Chapter 2, and then the catalogs that document the structural variations, styles and modes of use of the garment in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, I recover some of the stories of the women who wore them by looking at their coverage in newspapers. In the conclusion, Chapter 5, I analyze the relationship of these bodystockings to the broader history of costume and clothing, and I posit them as key participants in the turn-of-the-century efforts to reform and modernize women's dress. I argue here that though they were controversially sexual, fleshlings helped introduce the American public to the image of women's bodies in a radically new and natural state. Unshaped by rigid corsets, unswathed from layers of long skirts, displayed full-length with whole bodies visible—including *legs*—women in fleshlings helped pave the way for women in pants. Finally, in an epilogue, I

ponder the meaning of their disappearance; I explore the cultural significance, past and present, of this thing that we have lost.

Throughout this paper, I use various terms for this garment. Our contemporary term for a full-body, form-fitting garment is “bodystocking” (variously spelled “body stocking,”) but this term only entered regular usage in the 1960s.⁴ In the nineteenth century, the term “tights” was commonly used to describe hosiery worn on stage in theatrical productions.⁵ Unlike stockings, which consisted of two separate garments worn individually on each leg, tights were a single garment: two form-fitting legs connected by an integral crotch and waist, worn around the body like pants. In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, as I explore in *Chapter Six*, the fascinating term “fleshlings” began to be used in reference to stage tights, and eventually with specific reference to full-body tights used in nude performances. The term “suit” was sometimes used in conjunction with “tights” or “fleshlings” (as in “suit of tights”) to indicate that the garment consisted of connected top and bottom pieces. Period sources often describe the color of these garments as “pink,” or “flesh-colored,” both of which terms I retain in much of my analysis in order to reflect historical understanding of these things, despite the fact that they make white skin normative. I switch between contemporary and historic terms in describing this enigmatic garment

⁴ Valerie Cumming, C.W. Cunnington and P.E. Cunnington, *The Dictionary of Fashion History*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 33. See also Google Ngram, “bodystocking.”

⁵ Beginning in the eighteenth century, the term “hosiery” was used to refer broadly to knitwear, and in the twentieth century it referred more specifically to knit coverings for legs and feet. Cumming et al., *The Dictionary of Fashion History*, 144.

in order to help flesh out our understanding of what it once was, where it came from and what it means today.

The question of genre is a difficult one when considering how to write about this garment. Even within the world of dress, it defies category. While it is a garment made to serve a performative purpose—a costume born out of traditions of theater and dance—is has close cognates in other areas of clothing. Instead of sectioning it off as a costume, I have chosen to think of it more broadly as a unique cultural object within the history of dress, bodies, gender and sexuality. Although in one sense these performative nude suits are explicitly outerwear—made to be seen by the public—they are simultaneously intimate. On one side they touched flesh, and on the other they represented it. Few other garments serve such a directly metonymic role; fleshlings thus lend themselves to wide cultural interpretation. In places, this thesis attends as closely as possible to the quiet material language of clothing—a language that both documents and constitutes the everyday, momentary, tactile experience of humans. In other places, the paper considers broad cultural constructs like gender and race. Throughout, it attempts to return a lost object to our understanding of human experience around the turn of the twentieth century.

Like genre, geography is also a challenge here. While this is a thesis in American Material Culture and will focus on the American experience of this garment, nude bodystockings were truly an international phenomenon, with wearers across America and Europe. During the late nineteenth century, Americans often looked abroad—particularly to France and to Japan—for aesthetic influence and sophistication. They imported objects, images and design sources, and they modelled their material worlds out of these swirling cultural influences. Aesthetically, nude

bodystockings might almost seem the antithesis of Japonisme or Francophilia: bare, plain, unsophisticated, anonymous in appearance—literally made to look like nothing—they are perhaps as near to a materialization of the *vacui* as any Victorian could have feared. Despite their blankness, however, they created a distinct aesthetic that traveled back and forth across geographic boundaries, repeatedly caught up in transnational scandals, uniting distant countries under a shared material cultural experience. Although one of the garments that I examined for this thesis is located in Belgium, and the other is thought to be French, their places of origin are unknown. In many ways this placelessness suits these blank garments. Like Chinese export porcelain or Newport mahogany tea tables, bodystockings participate in the complex American tradition of material cultural exchange; unlike porcelain or mahogany, however, the raw materials and structure of bodystockings were common and simple enough to be made in many different possible locations around the world. They are garments without a specific place, but they are also highly representative of a particular transcultural moment.

Transcultural as they were, they were also an exclusively white garment. The nude performances documented in images of the 1890s and 1900s were explicitly *white* nude performances. Poses plastiques were a racialized performance of white femininity, white sexuality and white idealized form. In general, black women are notably absent from the remaining sexual material culture of the nineteenth century: unlike white women's bodies, black women's bodies were rarely represented as sexual objects in photographic images. The history of American pornography and erotica is, in general, a glaringly white history, despite the fact that, as many scholars have shown, the objectification and abuse of black women's bodies were at the center of

nineteenth-century American battles over race, gender and sexual and reproductive health.⁶ As Charmaine Nelson explores in *The Color of Stone*, the visual language of Greek sculpture is a language of whiteness; the color of Greek and Roman marbles has been used and reused for centuries as an unspoken representation of Europeanist racial ideals.⁷ Taking up this visual language of marble statues and classical nudes, white female poseurs clothed themselves in a racial stereotype that reinforced their bodily value. Indeed, the vaudeville and burlesque stages on which these poses were often performed were rife with performances of race, gender and ethnicity. Actors costumed themselves in bold stereotypes: black face, Chinese masks, Indian headdresses, old maid wigs. Although they were set apart as their own performative act, living pictures inhabited the same stages as minstrel acts, and they were part and parcel of a theatrical culture highly charged with racism and racial performance. As their name suggests, fleshlings were a racialized garment in and through which white women performed stereotypes of their own bodies.

For many of these women, they were also a garment of social transgression. In fleshlings, female performers found themselves newly unencumbered by skirts and free to move their bodies in expressive gestures. Some women credited fleshlings as

⁶ See, for example, Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of The Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Deirdre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2017).

⁷ Charmaine Nelson, *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 57-72.

objects that were key to their ability to support themselves through performance and modeling. Others found them vile and debasing of womankind. A few women became internationally famous for wearing them. Many wearers were openly criticized for their willingness to display their bodies so boldly. Spanning roughly 1890-1915, the “Fleshling Era,” as I define it, took place as women’s rights activists fought for temperance, dress reform and suffrage. Although they are not widely recognized as such, fleshlings are objects with a major story to tell within the history of women’s struggle for freedom. Like much of feminist history, they relate specifically to white women’s experience; they also, however, help document the wide berth of nineteenth-century women’s push towards new gender rules. Not all women who resisted social rules did so by fighting for legislative change. These remarkable garments participated in and anticipated a lasting feminist tension between women who wanted to free themselves—morally, legally, existentially—of the crushing burdens of sexualization and reproduction and those who worked to free themselves—financially—*through* sexuality, bodily display and sex work. They tell the story of another form of freedom—a freedom tinged with objectification, but also with sexual expression and bodily independence. More than any other garment of their time, fleshlings traversed the very boundaries of female sexual decency.

When I began my research on this project, I set out to find whatever I could about these mysterious lost bodystockings, but I also set out knowing that this was a project about cultural memory and forgetting. “History is what is written and can be found,” Jill Lepore writes; “What isn’t saved is lost, sunken and rotted, eaten by

earth.”⁸ While at first mention, fleshlings might sound like a historic oddity, they were in fact a widely used garment, much discussed during their time. *Why haven’t they survived?* I suspect that it is in part because they were working garments. Simply made, easily torn and soiled, they bore the imprint of the bodies who wore them. They are fleshy, bodily things—things that make one think about women, about sex, about vaginas and breasts, about stains, about the bawdy and the sordid. One might consider them ugly. They aren’t written documents, and they aren’t beautiful examples of high-end craftsmanship, and so they slipped through history’s coarse elitist sieve and into the rotting earth. Sometimes we save our grandmothers’ wedding gowns, but rarely do we save their stained pantyhose.

It is our loss. As the historian Marissa Fuentes has argued in her work on enslaved women and the archive, archival absence can serve as an ongoing act of violence against the very people who have been marginalized by history. When people aren’t represented in historic documents, their stories are drowned out by those of the people who silenced them in the first place.⁹ While images of white female bodies certainly aren’t archivally rare, primary sources on women’s sexuality, gender, race and bodily experience certainly are. I have chosen to pursue these bodystockings not only because they themselves are an exotic specimen of historic dress, but because they are first-person documents of women’s bodies; relics of another era’s struggles around the intersections of sex, race and bodily freedom. Their rarity tells its own

⁸ Jill Lepore, *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 6.

⁹ Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

silent story about the objects we value and how they shape what we know—or what we think we know—of the past.

This is, then, a history of an old forgotten piece of hosiery from the turn of the twentieth century. This is a history of women's bodies—of the ways in which we package them, display them, edit them, assess them and, most of all, experience them. This is all the while a meditation on the material struggle between presence and absence—between what remains and what is lost.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Because this project mediates between erotic images, printed media and clothing, it is essentially interdisciplinary, and as such it relates to *many* different bodies of academic work. Most specifically, I write this work in conversation with scholarship on historical dress and, in particular, with scholarship on underwear. While there is an important argument to be made that these bodystockings are not underwear but rather are explicitly *outer*—used as a wearable interface with the public—their closest formal cognates in dress are undergarments (hosiery, corsets, union suits, shapewear) and their relationship to nudity and to bodily display situates them thematically among those items of dress generally considered to have sexual implications. Valerie Steele’s indelible work on the corset, as well as her writing on fetish and dance fashion, offer foundational socio-historical arguments around bodyshaping, body modification and identity. The V&A’s *Underwear: Fashion in Detail* (2010), by Eleri Lynn, serves as an unparalleled example of close-looking at historic undergarments; it speaks in the language of stitches, weaves and silhouette, and it is a bible to anyone attempting this kind of work.

While the nude bodystockings of performances pushed the boundaries of public decency, women offstage also struggled to renegotiate the standards of clothing. Patricia A. Cunningham’s *Reforming Women’s Fashion, 1850-1920* (2015) and Gayle Fischer’s *Pantaloons and Power* (2013) offer essential histories on this pivotal period in western dress when women worked to improve their daily lives by seeking alternatives to corsets and heavy, voluminous skirts. Jill Fields’s work in *An Intimate Affair* (2007) begins, in many ways, where this thesis leaves off; it compiles a comprehensive socio-material history of twentieth-century undergarments by closely

examining individual types. The book's opening chapter, "Drawers," looks at the shifting forms and meanings of pant-forms in early twentieth-century underwear.

Michele Majer's beautiful *Staging Fashion 1880-1920* (2012) recognizes the essential connection between stage celebrity and larger fashion trends during this period, and it includes a lush treatment of the material culture surrounding these issues, although tights and bodystockings are notably absent. Donatella Barbieri's similarly material-culture-rich *Costume in Performance* (2017) claims essential critical space for the close material study of stage garments, and her chapter called "The Flight Off the Pedestal" approaches technical garments of the turn-of-the-century stage from the perspective of physical performance and movement. Pascal Jacob's *The Circus: A Visual History* (2018) includes a discussion of the relationship between tableaux and the gymnastic performances of the circus and looks particularly at the influence of Jules Léotard, whose short bodysuit with a plunging V-neck is a relative of the bodystocking. For background on the history of ballet and dance costume, Judith Chazin-Bennahum's *The Lure of Perfection: Fashion and Ballet, 1780-1830* (2005) and Mary Collins Joanna Jarvis's article, *The Great Leap from Earth to Heaven* (2016), are invaluable sources. More general theatrical histories of vaudeville, variety performance and stage performers by Leigh Woods (2008), Gillian M. Rodger (2010) and Robert C. Allen (2006) also provide essential historical background.

Despite scholarly attention within many different disciplines to the phenomenon of tableaux and living pictures, little attention has been paid to the garments worn in these performances. Davis S. Shields's online article "Carnal Glory: Nudity and the Fine and Performing Arts 1890-1917," provides fascinating coverage

of the nude performances of this period, and Shields offers a rare historical recognition of the garments worn during this period, although his focus is on the social construct of nudity rather than the material story of flesh-colored garments. Jack McCullough's *Living Pictures on the New York Stage* (1981) offers an extremely helpful theatrical history in which he traces the instances of living picture performances from the 1830s to the 1890s. McCullough shows that the genre evoked ebbs and flows of scandal for much of the nineteenth century, and that these scandals revolved around the performers' lack of dress. As early as the 1840s, when the eighteenth-century British and European tradition of tableaux vivants was reborn in America, costumes of "pink tights" were worn on stage beneath skirts and drapery.

As Robert M. Lewis's survey of "Parlor Theatricals in Victorian America" (1988) observes, classical posing was not restricted to professionals and was also enjoyed by amateur performers who staged tableaux in their homes before audiences of friends and family. Although these home productions typically featured groups of posers dressed in historical costumes, they also could include acts of nude illusion. J.H. Head's popular 1860 book of directions for these home productions, *Home Pastimes*, instructs that the scene "Venus Rising from the Sea" should feature a single "beautiful lady, whose costume consists of a flesh-colored dress, fitting tightly to the body, so as to show the form of the person."¹⁰ Elsewhere, Head suggests loosely draped dresses, low-necklines and thin, gauzy skirts for female home poseurs enacting classical scenes or posing as statues. Although these suggested costumes were all meant to display the female performer's bodies in an attempt at classical idiom, none

¹⁰ James H. Head, *Home Pastimes* (Boston: J.H. Tilton and Company, 1860), 31.

of them went so far as to reveal a woman's legs. Even the nude "Venus Rising from the Sea" wears a flesh-colored *dress*, not tights, in Head's family-friendly vision of the nude tableau.

In many of these theatrical and costume histories, flesh-colored tights appear in glints but never take center stage. History treats the garments as a given; "flesh colored tights" were objects whose material presence is never recognized as its own significant fascinating force within the histories of gender, performance, pornography, censorship, art and dress. During the nineteenth century, women's tights themselves tended to be perceived as a form of nudity—a garment that required covering or else risked accusations of indecency and immorality. In this way, these central garments, so closely linked with the exposure of bodies, almost disappeared in the history as garments in and of themselves. They represented an *absence* of dress. Perhaps this is why no one has isolated them for specific study.

Until the last two decades of the nineteenth century, stage tights were typically worn with additional garments atop to obscure the most "indecent" parts of the body. Surviving pre-1870s images show women wearing garments—drapes, briefs, shorts—atop their tights, and mentions of mid-century risqué nude costumes indicate that tights were worn with "short skirts" and "gauze drapes." Although these mid-century-era stage tights are immediate relatives of the nude bodystockings of the turn of the century, I consider them predecessors rather than constituents of the full-fledged fleshling phenomenon.

During the late 1880s and early 1890s, nude performances entered a new phase, reaching a peak of cultural poignancy and critical attention as, as Amy Werbel shows in *Lust on Trial* (2018), her venerable biography of Anthony Comstock,

proponents of freedom of expression rose up to confront the Comstock-led forces of obscenity suppression. During the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the artistic world came out to defend their liberty to present the divine human form in all of its natural glory in the face of the stodgy force of censorship, and nudity took center stage as the exhibition's unofficial theme. Artists presented performances, sculptures and paintings all featuring the revealed human form. Following the 1893 exposition, performances of nudity spread like wildfire across America, and the decades-old tradition of living pictures reemerged with fresh caché and with a new level of risqué as female performers exposed their bodies in full suits of flesh-colored tights, which frequently made headlines in American newspapers. In 1896, Comstock attempted—unsuccessfully—to legislate against the wearing of tights in public. It is during this period that fleshlings in their full form—full-body stockings of faux flesh—took shape as distinct garments, worn independently of skirts or drapes, worn in scandalous full-reveal of the female form. In the decades around the turn of the century, stage tights collided with Comstockian forces of censorship, each magnifying the other, to become a singular garment with a distinctly observable form and a traceable material history.

Technological advances in industrial knitting during the 1880s and 1890s allowed hosiery to become increasingly finer, cheaper and better form-fitting, and this practical factor underlies the entire phenomenon of the turn-of-the-century nude bodystocking. Sandy Black's *Knitting* (2012), Stanley Chapman's *Hosiery and Knitwear* (2002) and Milton N. Grass's *History of Hosiery* (1956) offer invaluable histories of the knitting industries that produced fine-gauge knit garments like these. David J. Spencer's comprehensive handbook on knitting technology (2001) also provides essential guidance on knit structures and terminology.

By the last years of the century, European photographs had begun to capture these garments in images. Titillating postcards featuring international stage stars posing in nude bodystockings proliferated in the first decade of the twentieth century. Lela Kerley's thorough and fascinating work on this period of Parisian nudity, *Uncovering Paris* (2017), explains the phenomenon of the figure at the center of these images, *la femme nue* (the nude/naked woman), the actress of the Belle Époque who scandalously appeared nude on the stages of music halls like the Folies Bergères and who faced censorship by French authorities just as American performers in living pictures faced censorship at the hands of Anthony Comstock. Kerley's concluding argument, that "*the nue woman*" participated in the progressive 1890s phenomenon of *the New Woman*, is kindred with my own concluding argument about fleshlings' relationship to the garments of dress reform: "*Les femmes nues* of the music hall defied the traditional boundaries of normative bourgeois femininity represented by separate spheres, physical modesty, and self-abnegation. In doing so, these professional outsiders exposed the very nature and condition of women's oppression and facilitated the construction of a new and oppositional womanhood."¹¹ Susan Waller's recent article, "The Corset, the bicycle and the Hottentot: Alexandre Falguiere's *The Dancer* and Cleo de Merode's modern feminine body" (2018) also looks at the intersection of sculpture, body ideals and the new womanhood in the late 1890s— an intersection at the heart of this thesis—but with very different source material.

¹¹ Lela Kerley, *Uncovering Paris: Scandals and Nude Spectacles in the Belle Époque* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 173.

Art historical writing on representations of the nude is nearly as vast as the patriarchy itself. That said, Charmaine Nelson's *The Color of Stone* (2007), Alison Smith's *The Victorian Nude* (1996), Amy Werbel's article "The Crime of the Nude: Anthony Comstock, the Art Student's League of New York, and the Origins of Modern American Obscenity" (2018), and Linda Nochlin's oeuvre—particularly her new work on depictions of misery in the nineteenth century (2018)—have provided me with guidance and insight around the issues of objectification, nudity, skin color and bodily representation.

Although there is a large body of literature on postcards, much of it was written in the 1970s and 80s and focuses on identifying examples for collecting purposes. There is a niche of publications dedicated to erotic postcards; these are generally by male "connoisseurs," whose commentary tends to assess the relative aesthetic merits of different poses and styles. William Ouellette's *Erotic Postcards* (1977) and *Fantasy Postcards* (1976) are the best of these. More helpful is George and Dorothy Miller's *Picture Postcards in the United States, 1893-1918* (1976). The more recently assembled essay collection, *Postcards: Ephemeral Histories of Modernity* (2010), edited by David Prochaska and Jordana Mendelson, offers critical insight from a theoretical and art historical perspective.

A rich and increasingly feminist body of historical writing on nineteenth-century pornography and censorship lays the political-historical groundwork for my thesis. Amy Werbel's previously mentioned book, *Lust on Trial: Censorship and the Rise of Obscenity in the Age of Anthony Comstock*, is one of the most exciting histories I've read in the past year and is by far the best biography on Comstock. Werbel accomplishes the astonishing feat of structuring her book around

Anthony Comstock while also leaving her reader with a much more vibrant impression of the panoply of figures who formed the “resistance” against turn-of-the-century sexual censorship. She details the American sexual material culture of this moment and includes a thorough discussion of the politics of nudity in the 1890s. Other essential histories on nineteenth-century American porn include Helen Horowitz’s encyclopedic masterpiece, *Rereading Sex* (2003), and Donna Dennis’s *Licentious Gotham* (2009), which focuses on the publishing industry. Both Werbel and Horowitz call for scholarship that revisits and rereads the historical record around nineteenth-century American sexuality in order to reclaim what heritage we can from Comstock’s overwhelming act of censorship; this project is an attempt to answer these calls.

Finally, the works that most inspire this project are those that rely on both images and extant historic garments in order to tell a story of gendered, bodily experience. Zara Anishanslin’s *Portrait of a Woman In Silk* (2016); Jennifer Van Horn’s chapter on Masquerade Portraiture in *The Power of Objects in Eighteenth-Century British America* (2017); Dorothy Ko’s *Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (2005); and Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass’s *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (2000) are all brilliant examples of how to bring clothing artifacts into conversation with other historical documents. These writers remind us that to recover censored histories, we must reconsider our source material. They show us that garments don’t participate in a separate historical narrative, but rather are integral—and yet so often missing—pieces of the story. Most importantly of all, these histories help us re-member the body itself as the foundational unit of the human story.

Chapter 1

BODIES IN COTTON: EXAMINING EXTANT BODYSTOCKINGS

Because turn-of-the-century bodystockings are extraordinarily hard to find, each known example carries heavy weight and offers a treasure trove of material information demanding close analysis. In following chapters, we will explore the larger stories and the historic setting of nude bodystockings, but for now we will focus on the minute and the tangible. Let us begin the story of fleshlings with the garment itself.

The MoMu Garment

One of the only known turn-of-the-century bodystockings in an institutional collection is currently held by ModeMuseum, or MoMu, a fashion museum located in Belgium's Flemish capital, Antwerp. The MoMu bodystocking has no provenance; there is no institutional record of where it came from or how it entered the collection in Antwerp, although it has been present at least since the 1980s, when the existing collection was first formally catalogued.¹² A twill tape museum label sewn into the lining marks the accession number and dates the garment, in handwritten marker ink, to 1890-1920. It is currently stored in a bed of acid-free tissue in a long, pale-blue garment box at MoMu's collection storage site. It has never been exhibited. This garment comes with no written paper trail, and in some respects it is a profoundly plain and anonymous object. We don't know where it came from or whose it was, and

¹² Institutional knowledge about the MoMu garment was provided via email correspondence and in person by ModeMuseum Curator and Head of Collections Wim Mertens.

yet it is a supreme rarity—one of the most difficult to locate garments in all of historic dress—a quiet treasure of MoMu’s collection. Laid out flat on a table, the story begins to take shape: the MoMu bodystocking looks like the shell of a body (figs. 4 & 5). The cut of the garment traces the outline, and the fabric bears the slightly stretched-out shape of hips, knees and toes. The whole thing is covered in swaths of yellowing and stains in different patterns and colors, gestural abstractions of age and wear. MoMu’s bodystocking is a riveting document, full of marks and material clues.

Fabric

The MoMu bodystocking is made of cotton, machine-knit in a fine-gauge stockinette, about 30 stitches per inch. Any knitter who has knitted and purled in alternating rows will know stockinette, also known as plain knit: it is the standard knitted structure, producing a simple, sturdy and versatile textile with a characteristic v-shaped stitch pattern on the right side of the fabric. As the name suggests, stockinette has long been used to produce stockings and hosiery garments, in part because it has good horizontal stretch, allowing it to have a flexible fit on bodies.¹³

Stockings haven’t always been knit. In England, in 1560, Elizabeth I was said to have received a Christmas gift of knit black silk stockings, made for her by her silk woman, Mistress Montague.¹⁴ They changed her life. Prior to the sixteenth century,

¹³ Janet Wilson, *Classic and Modern Fabrics* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2010), 203.

¹⁴ As reported in Edmund Howes’s *The Annals or General Chronicles of England* (London: Thomas Adams, 1615).



Figure 4 MoMu bodystocking, front. 1890-1920. Knit cotton. ModeMuseum, Antwerp, Belgium, T3116. (Courtesy, ModeMuseum. All photos of garment by author.)



Figure 5 MoMu bodystocking, back.

most European stockings had been made using woven rather than knitted textiles: flat pieces of the loomed fabrics were cut on the bias, tailored to fit around a person's leg and seamed up the back. Knitting changed everything. Knit fabrics stretched, providing a close, flexible, comfortable fit around bodies, and hand-knitting in the round produced stockings without seams.¹⁵ Finely knit silk, furthermore, had an even better fit and cling than did wool. The Queen declared that she would never wear "cloth" stockings again, and by the end of the century knit stockings had become ubiquitous in England.

Elizabeth's knit stockings were knit by hand, but the fabric that makes up the MoMu body stocking was knit by machine. By the end of the sixteenth century, the knitting process had been mechanized.¹⁶ In England, guilds of professional machine-knitters known as frameworkers produced knit fabrics and hosiery in bulk, but individual knitters, male and female alike, also used small mechanical knitting frames to produce stockings at home. By the early nineteenth century, new circular knitting frames had been developed, allowing long, continuous tubes of knit material to be made.¹⁷ These circular frames were soon powered by steam and became a mainstay of mid-to-late nineteenth-century industrial hosiery production in America and Europe, even as domestic knitters continued to produce stockings at home using small mechanical looms. The MoMu bodystocking's fabric was likely knit on one of these

¹⁵ Sandy Black, *Knitting: Fashion, Industry, Craft* (London: V&A Publishing, 2012), 23.

¹⁶ Black, *Knitting*, 61.

¹⁷ Milton Grass, *History of Hosiery* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1956), 190-232.

power-driven circular frames, which could produce large tubes of very finely knit stockinette that could then be cut up the side, creating a flat piece of fabric that could be cut into pieces and sewn into different forms.¹⁸

The stocking's cotton knit body has very little stretch compared to the socks and hosiery that we're used to today, because it lacks added elastics. Modern-day tights are made with highly elastic synthetic fibers, and they therefore don't hold the shape of the wearer's form: off the body, they look like shriveled, raisin-like versions of legs. Their elastic allows them to fit a range of different figures. In comparison, rather than clinging to a person's body, cotton stockings tend to form a more taught, tent-like covering that bags out with wear; the fabric stretches as it is worn but doesn't fully recover its shape unless washed. It bears a memory of its use.

Beneath the garment's discolorations and stains, its cotton fabric is unbleached and undyed, making it a pale, whitish garment—paler than any skin-tone. Although the unbleached cotton has a natural, creamy appearance, it would have contrasted tonally with any wearer's body, even if she were a pale white woman. The cotton thread is lightweight and uneven, giving the knit fabric a heathered appearance and near-translucence in places.

Construction

The bodystocking is sleeveless, with a high, round neckline, creating a vest-like upper half. It continues down from the torso, curving outwards along the hipline and gradually coming in to cover the thighs, knees, calves, ankles, feet and toes. Worn, the bodystocking would cover all but a person's arms, neck and head. It

¹⁸ Black, *Knitting*, 66.

has an extremely simple construction, consisting of five flat pieces of the machine-knit fabric: a front and back body piece, two foot soles and a diamond-shaped crotch. The pieces are all serged together internally along the sides in a three-thread overlock stitch (fig. 6). The seams run along the sides of the body, down around the outline of the foot and back up the leg to the crotch; they would be invisible when viewing the wearer straight on. The garment's arm and neck openings are edged with a binding made using strips of the cotton stockinette, roughly two inches wide, cut across the wale and folded over the edges of the garment. These bindings are machine-sewn onto the garment in a lockstitch.

While they might seem like a minor detail, the bodystocking's overlocked seams represent a major turn-of-the-century manufacturing triumph. Overlocking, or serging, is an essential technology for efficient pieced knitwear production, since knits curl and unravel along their cut edges; overlocking binds the edge of the fabric and helps it to lay flat while simultaneously seaming two pieces of fabric together. In a garment like a bodystocking, overlocking produces sturdy, low-profile seams that have a neat, finished appearance. This revolutionary sewing technology likely played a central role in the rise of bodystockings during this period, since it allowed for pieces of knit fabric to be cut out into different shapes and then quickly seamed together.

Overlocking machines were first patented and distributed in the late-1880s by an American company, Merrow Mills.¹⁹ In an 1889 promotional booklet (fig. 7), Merrow described itself as “the only firm in existence devoted to this line of business”

¹⁹ Joseph M. Merrow, Crocheting or overseaming machine, US Patent 413761A, filed October 15, 1887 and issued October 29, 1889.



Figure 6 MoMu bodystocking, detail of overlocked seams.

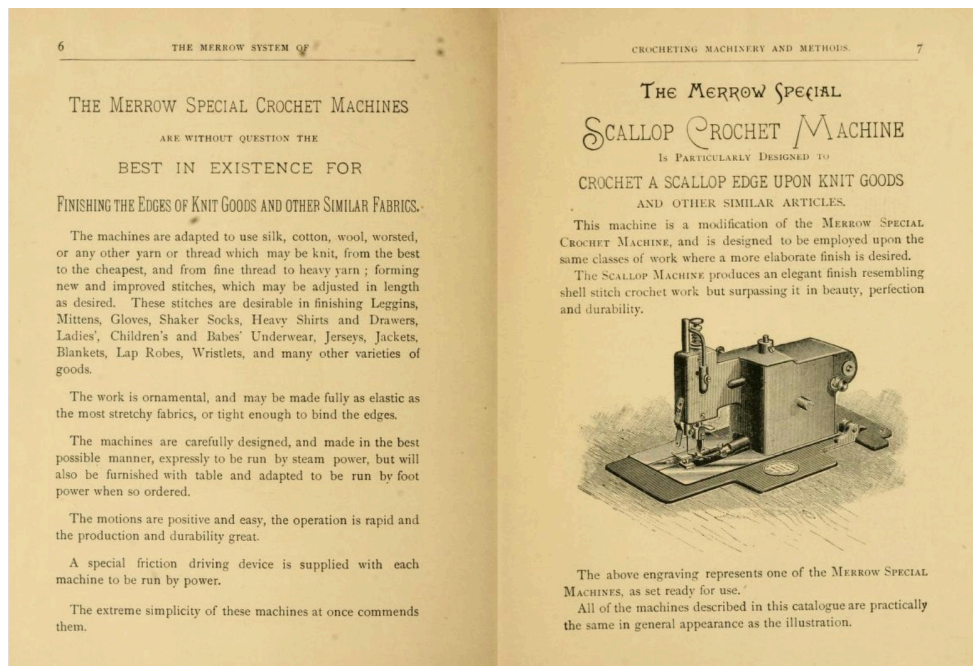


Figure 7 J.B. Merrow & Sons. *The Merrow System of Crocheting Machinery and Methods* (Norwich, CT, 1899), 6-7. (Library of Congress.)

and claimed to manufacture “the only machines in the world made expressly for this purpose.” The company advertised several different “Marrow Special Crochet Machines” for use in finishing different types of knit underwear and hose, and its catalog noted that it had also patented the machine abroad, in Canada, England, France, Germany and Belgium. According to company history, by 1905, Marrow sold its overlocking machine to textile manufacturers in 35 different countries.²⁰ The machines that stitched together the knit pieces of MoMu’s bodystocking were very likely an American product, but they were also in use producing garments around the world by the turn of the century, and the garment’s early example of overlocked seams therefore does not necessarily help identify its place of manufacture. Although America, Germany, France and England were major centers of knit textile production during this period, power-driven mechanical knitting machines were widespread at the turn of the century, and simple knits like the bodystocking’s stockinette could have been produced in many possible countries.²¹

In general, the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth was a time of great change in garment production, as the textile and garment industries increasingly mass-produced clothing. During this transitional period, consumers

²⁰ Marrow machine company (Hartford, Conn), *The Marrow system of crocheting machinery and methods for finishing the edges of fabrics* (Norwich, Conn: J.B. Marrow & Sons, 1889), <https://archive.org/details/merrowsystemofcr00merr>; See also “172 Years of Business,” Marrow Machine Company, Accessed January 26, 2019, <http://www.marrow.com/overlock-history>.

²¹ For a period analysis of worldwide knitting technologies, see J.M. Marrow “Special Report on Machinery for Knitting and Embroidering: Class of 55” in *Reports of the United States Commissioners to the Universal Exposition of 1889 at Paris*, Vol. III, Sixth Group (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1891), 365-405.

engaged in multiple modes of wardrobe-acquisition, still relying on professional seamstresses and home-sewing but also increasingly purchasing ready-made garments from stores and catalogs.²² The MoMu stocking is an excellent representative garment from this period, because it suggests a blending of mass-produced and customized qualities. Because the garment's knit cotton doesn't have much give, it would have needed to closely match its wearer's measurements in order to achieve a form-fitting effect. The garment covered the majority of the wearer's body, including many differently-sized body parts—feet included. It therefore seems likely that it was not a one-size-fits-all garment but was custom made to accommodate a particular set of measurements.

The garment's proportions are indeed distinct rather than generic: the torso is long and slim, but the hips and thighs are a bit roomier. The waist measures just under 25 inches—roughly a ladies' small, by today's fit. The bust is 32 inches, the hip 35. From shoulder to heel, the garment measures 53 inches: 4 feet, 5 inches. Estimating roughly an additional foot for neck and head, one can almost picture the form and figure of the person who wore it, standing somewhere around five and a half feet tall.

Closures

Given its lack of stretch, the body stocking has curiously few closures. The garment opens along the top of each shoulder, where there are three small brass garment snaps on each side. These are stitched onto an inch-wide strip of woven linen (or linen-cotton bend) that reinforces the seam. Each snap is stamped "KIN" (fig. 8);

²² See Barbara Burman, ed. *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption, and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford: Berg, 1999).

this is the mark of a company founded in Prague in 1902 called Koh-I-Noor.²³ The KIN snaps on the MoMu stocking don't show any indication of having been replaced and therefore would indicate that the garment was produced after 1902. The snap-lined shoulder openings are the only way into the garment; they allow the upper portion of the stocking to open only as far as the arm holes (fig. 9). To don the body stocking, a person would have to wiggle into it from this single opening; this makes it hard to get into, but also hard to get off. Using the bathroom would involve disrobing entirely, as would having sex.

Condition

The stocking is in excellent condition structurally. The seams are largely sturdy and intact. One notable exception is at the crotch, where the seams have been stressed and there are small holes along the front and back points of the crotch piece (fig. 10). Many wearers of hosiery will recognize the phenomenon of the crotch hole, because this is an area of particular stress in stockings. The crotch acts as a major joint in the garment, and it receives tension in two different directions as the garment stretches to cover both the front and back of a person's body. Here at the crotch, the knit cotton has pilled, indicating that the fabric has been rubbed against itself through the movement of the legs. Nowhere else on the garment is there this kind of wear to the fabric.

²³ The company, named after the famous Indian diamond, still exists and still sells garment snaps internationally. "History," KOH-I-NOOR, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.kin.cz/en/koh-i-noor/history>.



Figure 8 MoMu bodystocking, detail of “KIN” snap.



Figure 9 MoMu bodystocking, detail showing shoulder opening.



Figure 10 MoMu bodystocking, detail of crotch.

A single glance at MoMu's bodystocking is enough to assure any viewer that the garment has been worn. Although structurally sound, it is covered in a subtle language of discoloration and staining. Although a museum might typically attempt to have stains like these removed for aesthetic reasons before displaying a historic garment (or for practical reasons—stains can attract pests and accelerate fabric decay,) stains can also offer powerful material evidence of the garment's use; they are part of the object's story. MoMu's bodystocking has no written record, but its stains assure us that it has had a life of use.

Staining and discoloration can happen at any point in a garment's life—during use or in storage—but many of the MoMu bodystocking's stains are consistent with patterns of wear. Deep brownish-yellow staining across the upper back, around the underarms and waist and around the entire crotch piece are all typical marks left by sweat. The dirtiest parts of the stocking are its feet. Both soles are deeply soiled with a blackish foot imprint—heavy at the balls and heels and letting up at the arches—as though indicating that the tights were worn barefoot. These stains, however, travel up the back of the heel, an area that would not typically have much contact with the floor. They were likely caused by dye rubbing off from the inside of footwear, therefore indicating that the garment was worn with shoes. A faint crescent of blueish-green marks the top of the toe, and the same green color can be found cutting around the back of the heel, where it makes a criss-crossed mark (fig. 11). These marks appear to trace the outline of a green slipper with a low vamp and an attached ribbon at the ankle. Shoes in this style can be found in many photographs of the bodystockinged nudes (fig. 12).



Figure 11 MoMu bodystocking, detail of foot.



Figure 12 France, ca. 1904. Hand-tinted and embellished silver gelatin print on postcard.

Mysterious brownish marks around the waist, including one prominent, oval-shaped stain near the center, hint of some kind of belt or waist decoration worn over the stocking (fig. 13). A string of small rust-colored dots across the lowest part of the hip also appear to have been caused by some external accessory to the stocking; perhaps a low-slung belt. A prominent grey spot on the left knee indicates that the wearer kneeled on the ground while wearing the stocking. Perhaps more than any other mark on the garment, this one brings it to life—gives it gesture (figs. 14 & 15). The knee spot also points out the garment's high vulnerability to staining; a white cotton garment like this was likely covered in marks with just one use, and the thin cotton body would not likely have stood up to numerous campaigns of spot-scrubbing and laundering.



Figure 13 MoMu bodystocking, detail of stains at waist.



Figure 14 MoMu bodystocking, detail of legs.



Figure 15 France, ca. 1904. Hand-tinted and embellished silver gelatin print on postcard.

Juliette: A Second Garment Surfaces

In February of 2019—almost a year after I began to conceive of this project—I became aware of a second extant turn-of-the-century bodystocking. I purchased it from a dealer in the Netherlands who specializes in a dazzling array of rare theatrical antiques; I had asked her to look for such a garment for me, and though she had never seen one before and thought it highly unlikely that she would find one, she kindly agreed to keep her eye out. She found one a few months later. This second garment (figs. 16 & 17) adds a critical second data point to our understanding of fleshlings as physical objects. Comparing these two rare garments, we begin to get a sense of the subtle but significant differences that existed between individual examples of these bodystockings.

Fabric

The second fleshling is also made of machine-knit cotton stockinette. It has a slightly coarser gauge, about 20 stitches per inch, and heavier weight than the MoMu garment, and the fabric has a cool, silky touch and a slight sheen; the cotton has been mercerized, making this a fleshling in “silkoline,” as advertised in one early-twentieth-century catalog.²⁴ Unlike the MoMu garment, this cotton stockinette is dyed: the garment is pale pink—the color referred to in turn-of-the-century sources as “flesh.”

A cotton-tape label sewn onto the inside of the shoulder strap identifies the suit as belonging to a particular person: “*Juliette*,” the label reads in faint handwritten script (fig. 18). Labels such as this are common in theatrical garments, as they help

²⁴ See Chapter 3, “Flesh for Sale.”



Figure 16 Front view of “Juliette,” bodystocking in pink mercerized cotton, ca.1880s-1890s, author’s collection. All photos of garment by author.



Figure 17 Back view of “Juliette” bodystocking.



Figure 18 Label reading “Juliette” on the inside of the garment’s shoulder strap.

distinguish between different performers' wardrobes. The label points out the individuality of this garment. The stocking was made to fit a particular body and would not have easily accommodated another. The name could have indicated the name of either the performer or her character.

Construction

Compared to the MoMu example, Juliette's bodystocking has a slightly more complex construction. The body of the garment consists of a single piece of stockinette folded in lengthwise on both sides and seamed down the middle of the back. The waist and legs were then cut into this tube of fabric and sewn to fit around the contours of the wearer's body. Seams run down the inside of the legs but not along the external edges, where they would be more highly visible and detrimental to the nude illusion. The feet consist of two sole pieces attached to a heel that is integral to the legs (fig. 19). The crotch, as in the MoMu garment, is formed with a diamond-shaped piece of stockinette attached on four sides between the legs (fig. 20). Unlike the MoMu garment, this one has unfinished seams; they are not serged, and the raw edges of the fabric are visible along the insides of the stocking. The waist and leg seams are machine sewn, but the edges around the arms and neck are hemmed by hand.

The pink silkoline fleshling is similar in overall shape to the MoMu bodystocking, but it has a lower, wider neckline and a more dramatic hourglass silhouette—a smaller waist and comparatively larger hips—than the MoMu example. The waist is 22 inches while the hip is 33; this waist-to-hip ratio suggests that the garment may have been worn atop a corset. From toe to shoulder, the garment measures 50 inches, and the feet are about 8.5 inches long.



Figure 19 Foot, inside out, of the “Juliette” bodystocking, showing seams and darned heel.



Figure 20 Interior view of the “Juliette” bodystocking’s crotch construction.

Closures

The garment opens and closes with a line of large brass hook-and-eye closures down the center of the back (fig. 21), where they are concealed beneath an integral placket reinforced with woven linen tape. These hooks are somewhat difficult to manipulate into and out of their grommets, and a wearer would likely have needed assistance closing the garment around herself.

Condition

The second fleshling smells of scented detergent and appears to have been laundered fairly recently. It has far fewer notable stains than the MoMu garment. There are several brownish marks on it, but they are less visible on the pink fabric than those on the undyed cotton example.

The pink silkoline has been carefully mended in places. There are darned patches on the bottoms of the feet, at the ball of the left sole and the heel of the right, and also at the points of the crotch.²⁵ The darning thread closely matches the pink of the stockinette. These repairs occur in the same general areas of the garment that showed the greatest wear on the MoMu example. Although the date of the darning is unknown, its presence points to the possible value of the garment to its user and/or owner. This garment's mercerized cotton stockinette was no doubt a higher-grade fabric than the lightweight untreated cotton stockinette of the MoMu stocking, and it was likely valuable enough to be well worn and mended.

²⁵ Darning is a mending process that restores worn-out areas of knit fabrics by interweaving stitches into the surrounding fabric and across the hole.



Figure 21 Upper back of “Juliette” bodystocking, turned inside-out to show seams.

Provenance

Before coming into my possession, the garment was purchased from a private French collection of circa-1880s theater-related objects. The previous owner believed it to have been originally owned by an actress in Brittany, France.²⁶ While the MoMu garment appears to date to the early twentieth century, this one seems more likely a late-nineteenth-century fleshling. The absence of serged seams and the hook and eye closures are consistent with 1880s garments, although dating the object precisely is difficult, and it could also date to the 1890s or early 1900s.

Pink vs. White

Perhaps the most salient difference between these two garments is color. The warm, pale pink of Juliette's garment distinctly suggests white flesh, while the unbleached white of MoMu's garments is a less human tone—much closer to the color of white marble statue. In black and white images, the variable tone amongst individual garments is hard to discern, but the extant garments themselves demonstrate the clearly different effects that these colors would have had in person or in live performance. They also point out two different forms within the broad genre of living pictures: some poses directly imitated nudity (fig. 22), while others imitated nude statuary (fig. 23). Some photographs were hand-colored to restore the garment's pink color to the visual effect, while other photographs made use of lighting to whiten the stockinged figures into marble-esque forms.

²⁶ Information about the garment's previous owner was provided to me second-hand by the dealer and cannot be independently confirmed.



Figure 22 Pink colorized nude bodystocking. Reutlinger. Paris, ca. 1900. Hand-tinted silver gelatin print on postcard.



Figure 23 Black and white nude bodystocking. Lucien Walery. Paris, ca. 1900. Silver gelatin print on postcard.

Aniline clothing dyes emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and, as they were continuously developed over the next decades, they generated various trends in color while also posing health risks by exposing wearers to their often toxic chemical compounds.²⁷ Colored stockings were a particular locus of concern, as these garments came into immediate contact with the skin in areas of the body prone to moisture and rubbing, and many cases of poisoning by dyed socks were prominently reported and became well known: “By the second half of the 19th century, the general public knew that ‘accidental poisoning’ lurked in every corner. It was so common as to be almost unremarkable.”²⁸ The subtler, more natural palettes that became popular in the late-nineteenth century are often said to have arisen out of a (justifiable) cultural fear of the toxicity of bright dyes, and many reform garments were touted specifically for their undyed, non-toxic fibers. While pale pink is a subtle color and was often achieved, pre-aniline, by using natural dyes, chemical dyes also would have been used to produce these colors in the mid-to-late nineteenth centuries. Although many of the most prominent cases of dye toxicity were associated with vivid hues like arsenic-green and magenta, Juliette’s pink fleshling may also contain toxic dye compounds.

Stage performers were well aware of possible health risks associated with their costumes. In 1862, a star dancer of the Paris Opera, Emma Livry, famously died from burn injuries when the highly-flammable gauze of her tutu caught on fire during a dress rehearsal. Her charred flesh-colored tights remain as a relic to the dancer, held

²⁷ Allison Matthews David, *Fashion Victims: The Dangers of Dress Past and Present* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 104-123.

²⁸ David, *Fashion Victims*, 106.

in the Musée-bibliothèque de l'Opéra in Paris.²⁹ One American performer in the 1890s, reflecting on wearing fleshlings on stage, said this: "I would never object to wearing them myself unless the coloring was to give me blood poisoning."³⁰ Considering color alone, then, the different material qualities of "Juliette" and MoMu's bodystocking presented distinct physical considerations for their wearers. Although these garments are simply constructed and are quite similar in general appearance, their subtle materialities offer valuable insights into the experiences of the women who wore them.

Bodies in Cotton

When I first found an online reference to MoMu's bodystocking, it had been referred to as "body in cotton." Although the museum does not currently use this term to catalog the garment, it is an apt descriptor. In historic dress, "bodies" is a term often used for stays, early-modern support garments that laced around the torso, like a corset, to create a rigidly shaped and supported form.³¹ Early knit shirts, worn as undergarments by men, women and children in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were also referred to as "bodies."³² The term reflects the inherent relationship that clothing—and particularly underwear and shapewear—bears to

²⁹ David, *Fashion Victims*, 155-158.

³⁰ *The Pittsburgh Press*, Pittsburgh, PA, March 13, 1891, 1. The context of this quote is discussed at length in *Chapter 6*.

³¹ Cumming, Cunnington & Cunnington, 33.

³² For examples of these knit undershirts, see Black, *Knitting*, 31-32.

human bodies. These garments not only adorn bodies, but also shape and constitute them.

It is a different type of history that an undergarment records. It is a material document—a document of tactile reality. It is the bearer of the everyday, momentary bodily experience. It is what is happening always, constantly, as the daily events unfold—as momentous things happen, as the bigger, more abstract acts of life are performed. Panties in a bunch; dress with pockets; scratchy sweater; favorite bra. These things matter in a day, and they shape how we move, physically, through our world. Touching the bodystocking in Antwerp, I learned just how thin this garment was, and just how little give its knit structure had. Large breasts could hardly have been supported by its flimsy fabric. Its white tone revealed my “white” skin to be pink by contrast. The Juliette garment, on the other hand, is far pinker than any skin color. The MoMu garment’s soft, matte cotton would have breathed, would have wicked away sweat, would have been comfortable in warm conditions but not in cold ones. Juliette’s silkoline would have had a slightly more substantial weight and a cooler, silkier touch against the skin; it perhaps would have created a smoother covering over the body. We cannot know who once wore these bodystockings, but we have direct documents of these women’s bodily experience—their bodies *in cotton*. These objects ground our understanding of a big, abstract, cultural phenomenon in a tangible material reality.

Chapter 2

TROMPE L'OEIL NUDITY: FLESHLINGS IN PHOTOGRAPHS

Although “Juliette” and the MoMu bodystocking are rare extant examples of this object, the garment’s existence and usage is abundantly documented in turn-of-the-century photographs. A large body of photographic evidence thus allows us to extrapolate a big story from scant material remains. Photographs show us that the garment was used across America and Europe and that it was worn in different types of settings, both in and outside of photography studios, both on and off stage. Hundreds of different women—each of whom almost certainly wears her own unique suit—are documented in these period images. In their time, fleshlings were not the rare things that they have become today.

The fleshling images are haunting: pale white female forms float against dark, velvety backgrounds. Posed in their nude suits, the female performers present their bodies boldly, offering forth their poses with a mixture of sexual innuendo and prudity, familiarity and strangeness, humor and grace. Their bodystockings mold their forms into smooth, solid masses. The visual effect is striking. In one glance, the figures are naked; their garments are highly revealing of the curves and contours of their bodies. In another glance, they are fully clothed; their suits cover over the naked skin, the folds and cracks and dimples, the tonal variations and sculptural subtleties of bodies. In black and white, the trompe l’oeil effect of the flesh-imitating garment is uncanny, presenting a surreal bodily blankness that simultaneously gives the impression of nudity and abstracts it, anticipating the Surrealists and Dadaists from over a decade ahead. Relics though they may be of a long-past sexual aesthetic, these photographs present a powerful tension between dress and undress, between costume

and underwear, between the timidly suggestive and the overtly erotic. They feel prescient; they are hard to ignore.

The bulk of images that we have of women wearing full-body, nude tights are European in origin; they exist mainly in the form of photo postcards and were taken and printed predominantly in France and Germany. Images of American women in fleshlings also exist, in various photographic forms, but they are less common than European images. No doubt many American photographs of women wearing bodystockings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exist in collections throughout the country, but no institution holds a significant grouping of these images catalogued as such. This absence points to the lack of consistent terminology and scholarly awareness of these garments and their wearers. Although many were worn in the enactment of understood performance categories—“living pictures” and “poses plastiques” chief among them—the photographic evidence demonstrates that their usage was, in fact, broader than the tableaux tradition.

In France, the phenomenon is often referred to as “*nu en collant*,” literally, “nude in tights,” and the garments are referred to as *maillots*, a general term for hosiery and also for swimsuits. These terms are useful to our understanding, because they encompass the broad cultural reality represented by these garments. Performers in France as well as other in parts of Europe, Britain and America all used the garment in *poses plastiques*—the French term for classically-inspired poses enjoyed international usage—but women also wore them more generally in performance of nudity, as “nudes in tights.” These knit nude tights were, thus, the iconic garment worn by poseurs engaging in trendy classical reenactments, but they were also worn by artists’ models, actresses posing for photographs, women participating in physical

culture competitions and by women who sold sex. Centering the garment rather than any particular type of performance allows us to see how far-reaching the phenomenon of faux-nudity was at the turn of the twentieth century.

This chapter closely examines several important American photographs of women wearing flesh-colored bodystockings in the years between 1890 and 1915. It then offers a visual sampling of the European images that bear witness—in exponentially greater number—to the garment’s remarkably wide reach during this period.

Ida Florence, the California Prize Beauty, c.1880-1885

This American cabinet card (fig. 24) features a young woman standing full-length, face forward, her body clothed in a close covering of opaque tights. She stands on a round white pedestal, her arms held behind her back so that her curvaceous form is on full, uninterrupted display. A gauzy tumble of sheer white tulle floats around her figure. The card’s mat offers several identifiers, including the name and location of the studio (Houseworth’s Celebrities, 12 Montgomery St., San Francisco) and a name and caption for the poser: *Ida Florence, The California Prize Beauty*. Ida Florence is a living statue—a flesh-and-blood woman posed as a classical white form and housed beneath the parlor dome of a full-length veil.

Thomas Houseworth was an active landscape photographer who produced large volumes of stereocards around the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1874, his business struggling, he opened up a portrait studio at 12 Montgomery Street in San Francisco and went on to publish a large series of celebrity portraits in the form of



Figure 24 Thomas Houseworth and Co., *Ida Florence: The California Prize Beauty*. San Francisco, 1880-1885. Photographic print on cabinet card. (Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, Ohio State University.)

cabinet cards. The business lasted for ten years, until about 1886.³³ This dates the portrait of Ida Florence to sometime between 1874 and 1886.

In 1881, the San Francisco Chronicle ran an advertisement for the Bella Union Theater, “Home of Delight; Resort of Fashion,” whose headlining show, “ANTICS,” is described as being “Full of Ticklish Fun, New Songs, New Music, Emotional Surprises, Effervescent Hilarity and a High Old Time Generally.”³⁴ The show’s main attraction is listed as “Ida Florence,” whose name is written three times, on three successive lines, all in bold caps at the center of the column. “The Prize Beauty,” the advertisement proclaims; “The Handsomest-formed Woman in California will appear.” It is hard to imagine the pensive-seeming, unsmiling figure of Houseworth’s cabinet card as a participant in a raucous show of *ticklish fun* and *effervescent hilarity*. Of course, the act of posing as a classical sculpture had a certain thematic gravitas to it, and Ida Florence performed her statuesque act well. But the glimmer of a story presented by the image and the advertisement leaves one with a strong sense of a human being painfully objectified. Ida Florence may have chosen her performance career, and she may have developed her own act as “the California Prize Beauty.” She may have enjoyed making a living by showing off her widely-appreciated body. But there is also always a cost to being valued for one’s appearance. Bodies always change, and their social value so often changes with it. In her portrait, Ida Florence is

³³ Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers of the Far West: A Biographical Dictionary, 1840-1865* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 306-307.

³⁴ *San Francisco Chronicle*, Jun 14, 1881, 4.

so clearly packaged up and offered forth as an object for the viewer's assessment, enjoyment, consumption; staring at her from almost a century-and-a-half's distance, it is hard not to feel complicit in her objectification.

The garment she wears is short-sleeved and appears to be a matte fabric with body to it—perhaps a heavy-weight cotton. A similar type of garment can be seen worn by two figures in another cabinet card photograph that also likely dates to sometime in the 1880s, although it has no identifying labels on the mat (fig. 25). In this example, the waists and crotches of the posers are obscured with sashes, and it is therefore harder to make out the construction of their outfits; the garments do, however, show clear bunching around the joints of the figures. Both of these cabinet cards illustrate a pre-1890s version of the nude bodystocking, and compared to garments seen in later photographs, these earlier versions appear to have a slightly less form-clinging fit; they were likely knit in a coarser gauge.

This image is one of the earlier American photographs of a woman in a full-body nudity garment. Ida Florence's status as the "California Prize Beauty," and the "handsomest-formed woman in California" provides us with a very clear picture of American body ideals for women in the 1880s. She was what we today often refer to as "curvy," and if she were modelling in our early-twenty-first-century world she would likely be categorized as a plus-size model.



Figure 25 European or American, ca. 1880. Albumen print on cabinet card.

The Human Form Divine, 1899

Within the large collection of stereocards held by the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, a section of images catalogued as “erotic” contains one sighting of a fleshling—or, in fact *two* sightings (fig. 26).³⁵ In this example, two brown-toned albumen prints are pasted onto a peach-colored card which is marked along the right edge “Copyright 1899, by B.W. Kilburn.” The back of the card reads “Photographed and Published by B.W. Kilburn, - Littleton, N.H.” Benjamin West Kilburn was a prominent landscape photographer, and his company was one of the world’s largest producers of stereocards between 1860 and 1910.³⁶

The card is captioned “The Human form divine” and shows a lushly decorated studio setting containing two figures: on the left, a seated man in a black suit, his hand raised to a large easel, looks across to a standing woman who boldly displays her body, her arms held up and folded, hands behind her head. The woman wears a full bodysuit of whitish tights. Although the garment blends with the figure’s light skin-tone in the image, its sleeves can be discerned to end right around her exposed armpit. It appears to have a scoop-neck at the base of her neck and, although her feet disappear into a shaggy fur floor covering beneath her, the stocking appears to

³⁵ Stereoscopic images consist of two images of the same scene, taken by two slightly separated camera lenses, printed and mounted side by side on a single card. The images become three-dimensional when viewed using a simple mechanical viewing device—a device so popular during the mid-to-late nineteenth century that it could be found, along with collections of stereocard scenes, in virtually any American household. See Melody Davis, *Women’s Views* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, 2015).

³⁶ Henry H. Mecalf, ed., *The Granite Monthly, A New Hampshire Magazine*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Concord, N.H.: The Rumford Press, 1909), 68.

continue down from the ankle to include integral feet. The figure's right leg stands forward in contrapposto to reveal what appears to be a longitudinal seam running down along her inner thigh. This scene—an artist at work attempting to capture the “divine” female form while faced with its irresistible titillations—engages in a popular trope of the moment: the sexually charged atmosphere between male artists and their female models. The scene also captures an important application of the bodystocking: its use as modesty garment worn by artists' models.

Although the garment's appearance in the image exists on two ambiguous interpretive levels—worn within the scene, as an object that helps illustrate the studio setting; and worn in the photograph itself, as an object that allows the stereocard to present a titillating “nude”—it also takes part explicitly in the wry humor of the image. The most exceptional detail of the figure's posing suit is faint and easily missed, but it is the comic *coup-de-grâce* of the card: on the center of her suit's torso is a simple line drawing of a spiderweb. With this detail, the model's body becomes a sticky net poised and waiting for her man prey to enter into her treacherous sexual spell. The popular period trope of woman-as-spider (fig. 27) sets a delightfully vivid image to the misogynistic notion that women's sexuality is a despicable, devouring force lying in wait for unsuspecting men. The web on the garment also references the fabric itself: posing suits and their accompanying gauzy drapes were often recognized in period commentary for their thin, net-like quality.³⁷ As a decoration, the web marks the surface of the garment, pointing out its distinction from the human skin that it both covers and portrays.

³⁷ See, for example, “Audacious Hammerstein: His Living Pictures at Koster & Bial's Wear No Clothes at All,” *The Evening World* (New York, NY), May 11, 1894, 5.



Figure 26 B.W. Kilburn, *The Human form divine*. Littleton, NH, 1899. Albumen prints on stereocard. (Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.)



Figure 27 Charles J. Howard. *A Nice Man-Trap*. American, 1870-1890. Comic valentine. (Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.)

Flor de Cuba Series, undated

This series of cards was produced in Mexico (figs. 28 & 29). Although these cards were not manufactured in the United States, they currently exist in the New York Public Library's collection, and they represent one medium by which foreign bodystocking images could have entered the States during the turn-of-the-century period: as tobacco cards. Tobacco cards were small collectible images that came inside of cigar and cigarette packages, and they often featured titillating images of actresses and performers. Most risqué American tobacco cards picturing actresses of this period show women in low-necked gowns or wearing stage costumes, and although some of the more scandalous of these figures reveal their legs in tights, the Flor de Cuba series presents a markedly more explicit display of women's bodies. Although NYPL attributes the cards' place of origin to Mexico, tobacco cards often pictured an international mix of stage stars and made use of internationally produced photographic images. Clara Beth, for example, appears wearing a bodystocking on several postcards produced by the Parisian photography studio of R. Gennert. These Mexican tobacco cards thus demonstrate the international reach and reuse of these images.

The presence of bodystocking images in tobacco collectibles also demonstrates the role the garment played in "packaging" the bodies of female performers for consumption by collectors. Tobacco products bore a de-facto association with men, and images of female actors were tucked into their boxes and printed on labels. Bodystockings allowed women's "nude" bodies to arrive as bonus products alongside tobacco, thus serving as a commodity wrapper that turned women's bodies into "gentlemen's" collectibles. Plaster casts of classical sculpture were another popular



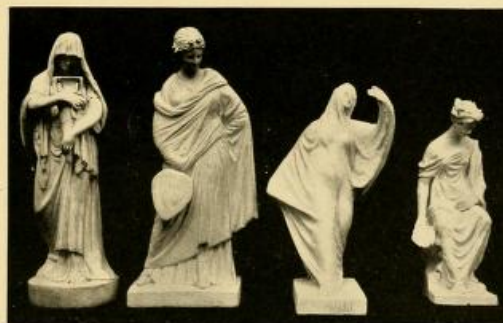
Figure 28 *Clara Beth*. Mexico, ca. 1900.
Cigarette card. b 15262620.
(New York Public Library
George Arents Collection.)



Figure 29 *Duparc*. Mexico, ca. 1900.
Cigarette card. b 15262620.
(New York Public Library
George Arents Collection.)



1546 1547 1548 1549 1550



1551 1552 1553 1554



1555 1556 1557 1558

Figure 30 P.P. Caproni & Brother, *Catalogue of Plaster Cast Reproductions: From Antique, Medieval and Modern Sculpture* (Boston: P.P. Caproni & Brother, 1901), 127. (Courtesy, the Winterthur Library Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)

collectible that became increasingly affordable in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, and consumers could choose from large catalogs of white plaster reproductions put out by plaster studios (fig. 30). The imagery of these plaster offerings is strikingly similar to that of the bodystocking nudes, and it suggests a conscious visual interplay between inanimate plaster casts and the bodies of real women in tights; photographed against black backgrounds, both were highly collectible specimens.

American Mutoscope and Biograph Company Living Pictures, 1900

In 1900, the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company recorded a series of living picture performances at its rooftop studio in New York City (figs. 31-33). These early, silent motion picture scenes were filmed as several separate acts, but in 1903, they were combined into a single film, now held by the Library of Congress.³⁸ In each of the scenes, two female figures dressed in tights and pageboy costumes draw back a set of velvet stage curtains to reveal female performers holding still poses within themed tableaux. Nearly all of the figures wear a nude bodystocking of the same basic shape: the garments are sleeveless with round necklines and have full legs with integral feet. Compared to Ida Florence's suit, these examples appear to have a tighter fit and a thinner fabric body. They have a pale tone that matches the color of the performer's skin closely in the black and white images, although the garment is also clearly discernible throughout the scenes.

³⁸ The series can be viewed on the Library of Congress's website. *Living Pictures* (New York: American Mutoscope & Biograph Co, 1900, 1903), film, 2 min 13 sec. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017604950/>

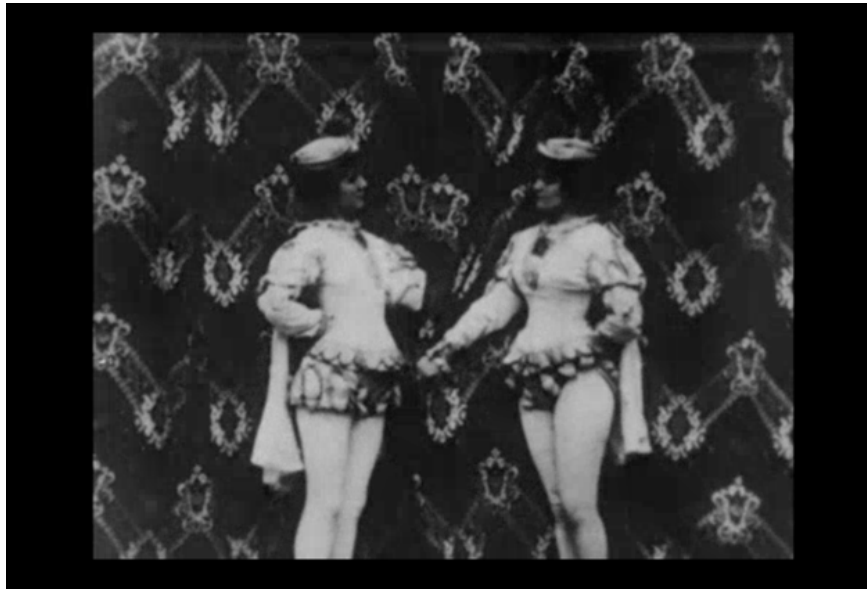


Figure 31 American Mutoscope & Biograph Co., *Living Pictures*. New York, 1903. Screenshot. (Library of Congress Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division.)

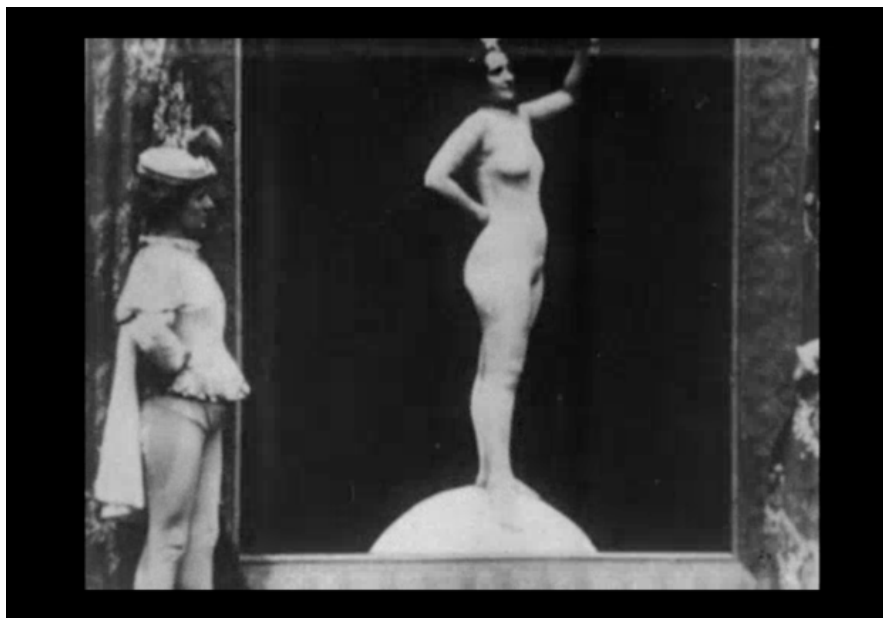


Figure 32 American Mutoscope & Biograph Co., *Living Pictures*. New York, 1903. Screenshot. (Library of Congress Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division.)

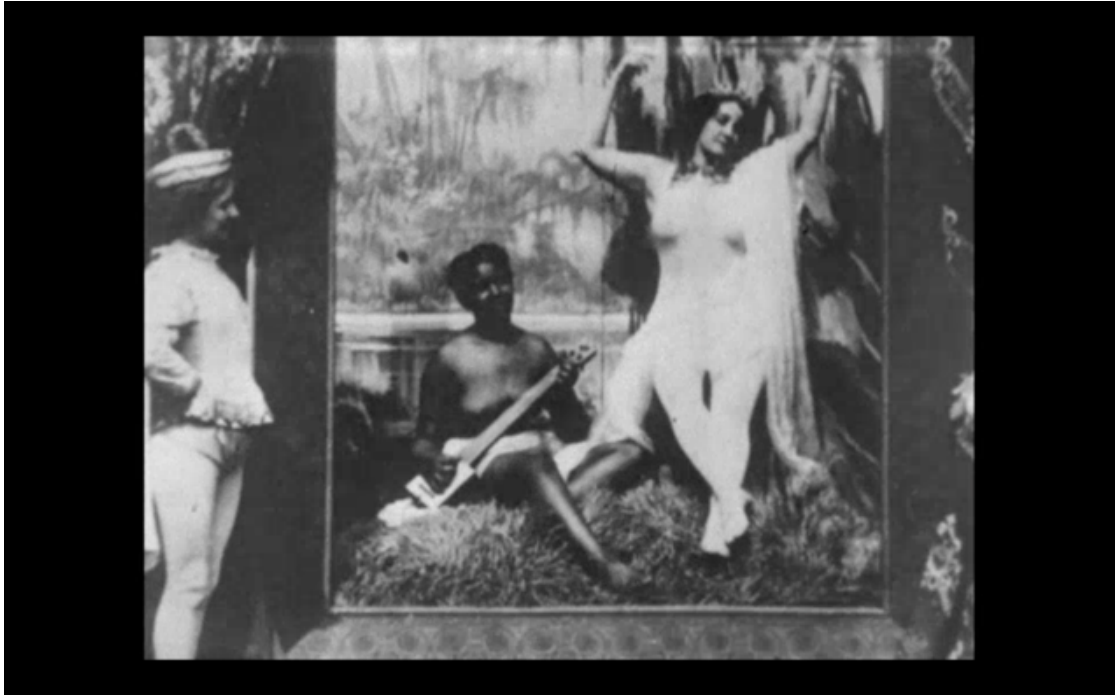


Figure 33 American Mutoscope & Biograph Co. *Living Pictures*. New York, 1903. Screenshot. (Library of Congress Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division.)

Except in one case. In one living picture titled “Music”—the only one to contain two female figures—a stockinged poseur sits in a lush renaissance-inspired scene, a swath of bacchanalian drapery around her form, while to her right sits another performer holding a prop lute. This seated performer is black and, in stark contrast to the white poseur, she is topless. She wears no suit of imitation flesh and her breasts are exposed, just visible from within the hazy quality of the early film. The contrast between the two women’s performance of nudity is stark. The white woman’s cloth coating of modesty jumps out as a bizarre and highly racial conceit in comparison to the black woman’s bare body. The scene reveals the flesh-colored bodystocking to be a garment of racially-privileged modesty that distinguishes white female nudity from black female nudity. In this filmed living picture, the garment serves to highlight one performer as the central figure—the artistic poseur—while the other is left unclothed, strangely sidelined by her lack of clothing. The scene performs a remarkably direct contrast between the cultural constructs of nudity and nakedness. The white performer’s body, tightly wrapped in its stocking, is a classical nude, while the black performer’s actual nudity relegates her to a disempowered state of bodily reveal. She is undressed, exposed, seated low in the picture plane, while the bright-white body of her co-performer poses triumphantly, arms outstretched overhead, on display high above.

Other pictures in the series perform more typical tableaux. In one titled “Tempest,” a woman stands within a set of ocean waves; in another called “Morning star,” a model poses atop a globelike structure, a starred tiara crowning her head. In all of these living pictures, the performers are revealed from behind the stage curtain in perfect stillness. All movement between scenes happens behind the curtain, and the

performers appear as though they are inside life-sized dioramas. The series offers an unparalleled document of American living pictures, capturing the posers as though they were appearing live on a theater stage.

A scene that was filmed separately a year later, *The Birth of the Pearl*, (figs 34 & 35) updates the previous living pictures with a significant addition: movement.³⁹ In this picture, a large clam shell opens to reveal a sleeping female form curled up inside it. The figure awakes and rises sleepily from her shell, standing to reveal her thin body clothed in a white bodystocking and enshrined by the ray-like ridges of the open shell behind her. The picture stages the classical birth of Venus in slightly more quotidian terms, turning the main character from a goddess into a personified natural object, a pearl. The visual metaphor likens the performer's pearly white body to the gemmy ocean miracle inside an oyster shell. The mechanism of revelation—the opening of the clam shell—plays on the vaginal imagery posed by shells and their fleshy inhabitants: the female performer appears, a naive but nubile form, newly opened and awakened for the audience's visual consumption.

³⁹ *The Birth of the Pearl* can be downloaded on LOC's website or viewed on YouTube. *Birth of the Pearl* (New York: American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, 1901, 1903), video, 56 sec. <https://www.loc.gov/item/96520051/>



Figure 34 American Mutoscope & Biograph Co. *The Birth of The Pearl*. New York, 1903. Screenshot. (Library of Congress Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division.)



Figure 35 American Mutoscope & Biograph Co. *The Birth of The Pearl*. New York, 1903. Screenshot. (Library of Congress Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division.)

Bodystockings in Bellocq's Storyville Portraits, c. 1912

Perhaps the single most art-historically prominent appearance of fleshlings can be found within the oeuvre of the New Orleans photographer E.J. Bellocq.⁴⁰ Bellocq's series of "Storyville portraits" offer strange and intimate glimpses into the world of New Orleans's famous red-light district, where prostitution was made legal for exactly two decades at the turn of the century, 1897-1917. Although the city ordinance that created Storyville had tacitly allowed New Orleans sex workers to do their work, it more overtly restricted the physical boundaries of their lives. The law sectioned them off from the rest of the city, forbidding them to "occupy, inhabit, live or sleep in any house, room or closet" beyond the limits of the new district, which consisted of a few square blocks just northeast of the French Quarter.⁴¹ Within this small neighborhood of bordellos, women developed a distinct social and aesthetic world that would make Storyville legendary. Although a few of the most successful New Orleans madams became famous, Bellocq's images document the lives of some of the anonymous women who sold sex in Storyville.

Two of Bellocq's eighty-nine known glass plates (all dated ca.1912) show a female figure wearing fleshlings. In the first, a woman leans back in a chair in the

⁴⁰ Little is known about Bellocq, but when his 1910s glass plate negatives were found in the 1960s by photographer Lee Friedlander, who quickly began printing them and exhibiting them in major museums, Bellocq's small but dazzling oeuvre entered the American canon. See Bellocq, Ernest James, Lee Friedlander, Susan Sontag, and John Szarkowski, *Bellocq: Photographs from Storyville, the Red-Light District of New Orleans* (London: J. Cape, 1996).

⁴¹ Emily Epstein Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness: Sex, Race and Memory in Storyville, New Orleans* (New Orleans: LSU Press, 2013).

center of a sparsely decorated interior. She rests her head in her hands in a pose that suggests power and ownership (fig.36). The second image is taken in the same room, and although this is one of Bellocq's plates that has been intentionally scarred—the figure's head is entirely scratched out—she is almost certainly the same woman as in the other image (fig. 37).⁴² In both images, the figure wears the same bodystocking: the garment has a high turtleneck that is slightly bunched around the poser's neck. The suit has long sleeves and integral feet. In both poses, the figure's uplifted arms reveal seams running down the center undersides of the sleeves and around the shoulder. In the standing pose, a visible seam runs down the figure's right side, disappearing around her mid-hip, and another seam can be seen along the inside of her left leg. This shows us that the body of the garment was constructed of two main pieces, a front and back, which were seamed together along the sides. The sleeves were attached separately, and the feet appear to have been constructed with a flat sole piece attached to the bottom of the legs. Under magnified view, it is clear that the garment's fabric is ribbed, and it seems to be a heavy-gauge knit with a thick, matte body—likely a cotton or cotton/wool blend.

Despite the apparent thickness of the fabric, the figure's reclining pose reveals glimpses of her body beneath the garment. Slightly darkened spots at her breasts

⁴² When Bellocq's glass plates were found in New Orleans, many of them had been water damaged, and a significant group of them bore large, harsh scratch marks where someone had intentionally erased the faces of the sitters. Some believe that Bellocq himself made these scratches in an effort to protect or obscure the identities of his sitters; others believe that they were made by an unknown later censor of the material. In whichever case, these scars in the images became part of their iconography in the post-modern art world.



Figure 36 Ernest James Bellocq, (1873-1949) © Copyright. [Storyville Portrait]. Printer: Lee Friedlander (American, born Aberdeen, Washington, 1934) ca. 1912, printed 1980s-90s. Gelatin silver print from glass negative. Sheet: 8x10 in. (20.3x 25.4 cm). Purchase Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation and Alfred Stieglitz Society Gifts, 2013 (2013.1048). The Metropolitan Museum of Art New York, NY USA. **Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image Source: Art Resource, NY.**



Figure 37 Ernest James Bellocq, (1873-1949) © Copyright. [Storyville Portrait].
Printer: Lee Friedlander (American, born Aberdeen, Washington, 1934)
ca. 1912, printed 1980s-90s. Gelatin silver print from glass negative.
Sheet: 10x8 in. (25.4 x 20.3 cm). Purchase Robert Mapplethorpe
Foundation and Alfred Stieglitz Society Gifts, 2013 (2013.1035). The
Metropolitan Museum of Art New York, NY USA. **Image copyright ©
The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image Source: Art Resource, NY.**

suggest the areolas beneath, and a small patch of darkness at the garment's crotch suggests a strip of pubic hair. These raw, unedited glimpses of the poser's genitals indicate that she wore her garment without anything underneath; her body touched the fabric in its entirety.

These two photographs of a Storyville woman wearing a nudity suit document one of the most remarkable—and otherwise archivally absent—usages of this garment. In Bellocq's photographs, we witness a nude bodystocking offstage, its anonymous wearer posed informally in her quasi-home, quasi-work interior. These images document the garment's use by a woman who lived in Storyville and therefore, we may assume, sold sex for a living. Did she own a bodystocking through work as a performer outside of Storyville—perhaps in her past—or did she own it for use specifically within Storyville, as part of her work entertaining male customers? Her standing pose, arm outstretched above her head, seems perhaps to be an intentional *pose plastique*. Perhaps she engaged in stockinged poses as part of her unique sexual/performative identity, or perhaps the garment offered her security and protection in whatever role she played in Storyville. Whether the garment was part of her sex work or part of a separate life as a performer, the bodystocking's presence in New Orleans circa 1912 shows us that the garment had a life and an application outside of the theater and beyond the photographer's studio. Here in these images, posing before Bellocq's gaze, the subject conceals her nudity in a way that none of Bellocq's other nudes do. These photos offer an impression of a garment that could serve both as a means of sexual revelation and as a means of coverage and privacy.

Variations on the Form

Although sightings of full-length, flesh-colored bodystockings are relatively rare in the American archive, photos of many closely-related stage costumes can be found in actor portraits of this period. One of Ida Florence's fellow "Houseworth's Celebrities" is Dolly Adams, whose cabinet card shows her in a head-to-toe suit of black tights (fig. 38). Adams's outfit consists of two separate garments; the top covers her neck, arms, torso and hips, and ends around her upper thigh with a fringe trim. Her body is clearly corseted and, outlined in the black hosiery, it serves as a stark contrast to Ida Florence's form. Many performers of the mid-1870s to early-1890s posed for cabinet pictures wearing stage tights, but these costumes tended to be highly embellished and accessorized, and the women's forms were firmly girded and shaped, like Adams's, by corsets worn underneath. These women's bodies have a hard, coated appearance, as if wearing armor, and their tights were typically worn with briefs atop, to cover the crotch (fig. 39). Women also appeared in cabinet cards as living statues, but these images tend to document an earlier, less revealing version of the posing tradition, in which posers powder their hair and skin and wear heavily draped robes in close imitation of Greek statuary (fig. 40). A more risqué form of the draped posing costume can be seen worn in the 1890s by the women of the Sandow Girls, a troupe of physical culture poseurs who performed in sleeveless, form-revealing wraps of drapery. These gauzy gowns extended in long trains, far past floor-length, and created an impossibly long and statuesque appearance (fig. 41).



Figure 38 Thomas Houseworth and Co. *Dolly Adams*. San Francisco, 1880-1885. Photographic print on cabinet card. (Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, Ohio State University.)



Figure 39 Newsboy Tobacco Company. *Josie Gregory*. New York, ca. 1890. Photographic print on cabinet card.



Figure 40 Columbian Photo Studio. Chicago, ca. 1893. Photographic print on cabinet card.



Figure 41 *Miss Maude Odell*. Illustration from “The Woman Beautiful—Sandow’s Ideal of Womanhood.” *The Tatler* (September 13, 1905.)

European Images

Compared to American examples, European photographs of women wearing nude bodystockings around the turn of the twentieth century *abound*, suggesting that such images were produced in huge numbers during their time. Many of these images are postcards and, although not all are marked, most appear to have been made outside of the United States. The majority were taken in French and German studios and printed by European publishers. Many of the postcards bear the hallmark mirroring of silver gelatin prints, but some are photomechanically printed. Less common than postcards although also present are albumen prints mounted on cardstock.

Where the American photographic record is scant, the European record steps in. While we may assume that there were important material differences in bodystockings produced in different countries, and we may hope that these differences might one day be studied if more garments are uncovered, we can also observe that the phenomenon of the garment—the idea and aesthetic of it—passed fluidly across borders. Its simple construction relied mainly on the widely-available technologies of machine knitting and serging. Nude bodystockings were a transcultural fashion.

Three major Paris photography studios, Reutlinger, Walléry and Manuel, appear to have been the most prolific producers of bodystockinged nudes, although German studio Georg Gerlach also made significant contributions. Some images were taken by French or German studios but reproduced by printers in other countries, and while many of the performers posed in Paris studios, they themselves weren't always French. Many stage stars of the Belle Époque participated in an international Euro-American demi-monde of fame and notoriety.⁴³

⁴³ See, for example, the discussion of Clara Ward in Chapter 4.

Garment Details

As a group, the European photographs offer an extensive visual catalogue of the garments' material details. In them, we can observe the variations that existed in the construction, fabric, cut and styling of nude bodystockings during this period. The most common version seems to have been a sleeveless garment with a scoop neck and legs with integral feet (fig. 42). Occasionally a garment appears to have feet with individuated toes (fig. 43) and, even less commonly, fingers (fig. 44). Some instances have long sleeves (fig. 45), and some have turtlenecks (fig. 46), although these forms are both rare.

Several of the European photographs show women wearing obvious corsets underneath their suits (fig. 47). These images offer a fascinating counterpoint to the documented American usage of nude bodystockings. The corseted posers showcase forms that have been shaped into idealized hourglass figures, while the uncorseted examples show a radically new vision of women's bodies in their natural shape, unmolded by restrictive shapewear (fig. 48). The corseted examples are particularly surreal, as though attempting to pass off as natural the strange silhouette of a severely restricted waist by coating it in a skin of nude cloth.

Because the photos are all black and white images, it is impossible to know the color of the garments, although variations in tone are clearly observable. Many of the bodystockings are worn with accessories atop; these include belts, flowers, jeweled bras and girdles, drapes and scarves (fig. 49). They are also very often worn with shoes, an article that poses a decided incongruity in the nude illusion.

In all of these accessorized images, we witness the garment holographically popping in and out of focus: it represents nudity—the lack of clothing—while its embellishments simultaneously point out the surface of the garment. The accessories



Figure 42 Sleeveless garment with scoop neck and integral feet. France, ca. 1908. Hand-tinted and embellished silver gelatin print on postcard.



Figure 43 Garment with integral feet and individuated toes. Edouard Stebbing.
Detail of *H. de Serville*. Paris, ca 1904. Silver gelatin print on postcard.

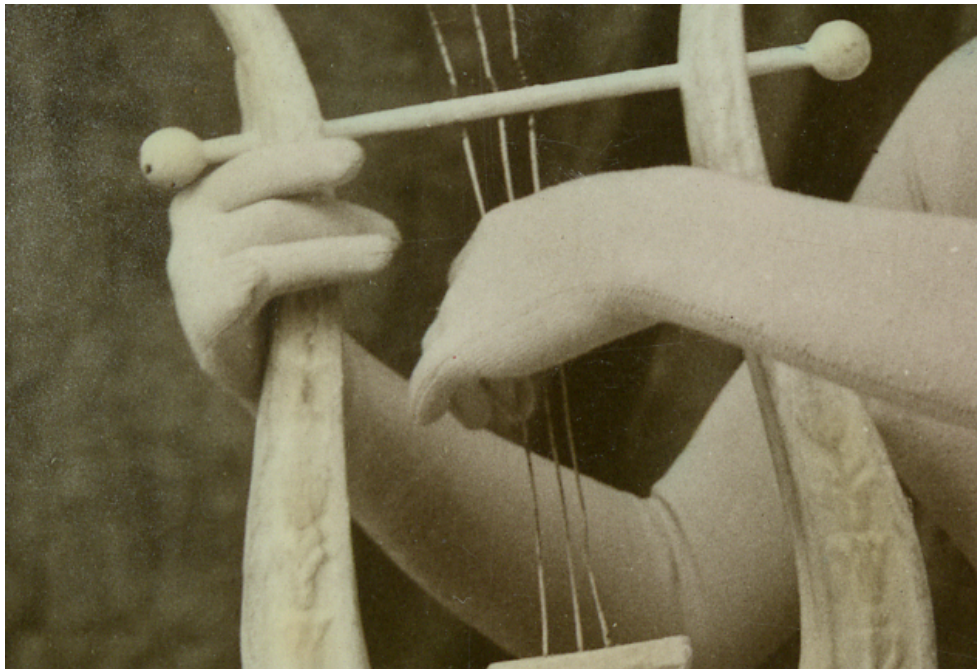


Figure 44 Garment with integral hands and individuated fingers. (Detail of Fig. 46.)



Figure 45 Garment with long sleeves. Louis Martin, *Electrema*. Paris, ca 1904. Silver gelatin print on postcard.



Figure 46 Garment with turtleneck. E. Le Deley. France, ca 1904. Photographic print on postcard.



Figure 47 Garment worn with corset. Henri Manuel. Paris, ca. 1900. Silver gelatin print on postcard.



Figure 48 Garment worn without corset. Europe, ca. 1900. Silver gelatin print on postcard.



Figure 49 Garment worn with accessories. Georg Gerlach. *Hero*. Berlin, ca. 1908. Silver gelatin print on postcard.



Figure 50 Edges of garment concealed by scarf.
Reutlinger. Paris, ca. 1900.
Silver gelatin print on postcard.



Figure 51 Edges of garment concealed by model's hair.
France, ca. 1903. Hand-tinted and embellished silver gelatin print on postcard.

are often strategically placed to cover the seams and edges of the garment in assistance of the *trompe l'oeil* (figs. 50 & 51), but they also meanwhile accentuate the poseurs' costumes by adding decoration to them. Many of these accessorized images are hand-colored with tints of pastel and occasional dabs of glitter.

Image Editing

This body of European images demonstrate that fleshlings were not simply performative garments but were also photographic garments. Almost all of these images were taken in studio settings, against backdrops and with set arrangements of props. Because of the nature of black and white photography, and with the assistance of studio lighting, the suits become particularly effective representations of skin. Professionally lit, and captured in the medium's limited palette, the light tone of the garment easily blends with the tones of the white models' skin. The illusion of a seamless surface of nudity is often assisted by photographic editing: under close inspection, many of the prints show areas of negative retouching. These edits typically occur around the seams and edges of the garment; they visually blend the clothed areas of the bodies into the bare parts so that the garment is less discernible. Touch-ups can also occasionally be seen around waistlines and other areas where bodies were made to look smaller or more shapely (fig. 52). Nipples and underarm hair are also frequent sites of negative retouching (fig. 53).

Photographic edits aside, the studio images illuminate the garment itself as its own material manifestation of image editing. Flesh-colored bodystockings concealed the unpresentable parts of women's naked bodies and packaged up their forms into firm, clearly-outlined figures that popped against dark backdrops. As objects, they



Figure 52 Negative retouching used to alter body shape at waist. Detail of postcard, France, ca. 1900. Silver gelatin print on postcard.



Figure 53 Negative retouching used to disguise nipples seen through fabric and to blur transition between garment and skin at arms and neck. Lucien Waléry. Detail of *La Femme au Masque*. Paris, ca. 1906. Silver gelatin print on postcard.

attempted to erase their own visual presence: a photographic *trompe l'oeil* in the form of a physical, tangible garment.

The Medium of Postcards

The vast majority of these images take the form of postcards, and this medium is in itself significant to our understanding of the garment. The international fad for postcards in the decades around the turn-of-the-century allowed people from different socio-economic classes to amass large collections of images. For most of its history, the act of collecting had been limited to the upper- and middle-classes, but postcards were available to all. Bodystockings added to this trend the ability to collect images of women's bodies—and specifically those of stage stars and other well-known performers.

Many of the existing bodystocking postcards have been written on and postmarked, thus serving as neat and tidy documents of their own usage and dissemination (figs. 54 & 55). We know that these photographs of fleshlings moved across time and space, changing hands not only between acquaintances, but also between anonymous mail carriers, neighbors, family members and anyone else who might have encountered a person's mail in passing. The sent cards are most commonly postmarked in French cities, but there are also cards sent to Italian, German, Portuguese, North African, British, Canadian, Caribbean and Indochinese addresses and stamped with international postage. This wide-open public presence throughout Europe demonstrates a communal acceptance of the images as decent enough to be seen by anyone. There are examples that contain messages written from men to women, from women to men, from men to other men, and from women to other women. They passed between family members, lovers and friends. They were



Figure 54 German postcard posted in England to an English address.
G.G. Co. Germany, ca. 1913. Silver gelatin print on postcard.



Figure 55 French postcard addressed to two women.
Henri Manuel. Paris, ca. 1903. Photographic print on postcard.

no doubt displayed in postcard albums and on postcard racks, and they were certainly glimpsed by children. Although the postcards were addressed and stamped directly on the card's surface, the bodystockings served as visual envelopes that allowed women's bodies both to be mailed within public view and to be collected in private hands.

American Absence: Censored Evidence

Early twentieth-century American postcards featuring women in nude bodystockings also exist, but they are significantly harder to find than their European counterparts (figs. 56 & 57). This discrepancy in photographic representation does not necessarily correspond to the relative use of the garments in America and Europe. As we will see in the following chapters, flesh-colored bodystockings were produced and sold by American companies, and the garments were common enough to be mentioned frequently in turn-of-the-century newspapers. They could be witnessed firsthand in theaters across the country in the 1890s and 1900s. By this period, however, Anthony Comstock's efforts had had a profound impact on the nation's distribution and policing of erotica. Having spent two decades tirelessly raiding, fining, imprisoning and shutting down the erotic industry's printers, publishers, and distributors who were clustered in New York's Lower East Side, Comstock had significantly shaped the period's erotic print culture.⁴⁴

Picture postcards in general had become popular in America in the years following the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where they had been introduced as commemorative souvenirs. By the middle of the first decade of the twentieth

⁴⁴ See Donna Dennis, *Licentious Gotham* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Amy Werbel, *Lust on Trial* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).



Figure 56 American postcard showing German model Hero (also shown in figure 48.) Photographic print on postcard, ca.1907.



Figure 57 American postcard showing French model H. de Servelle. Photographic print on postcard, ca. 1900.

century, several years after taking hold of Europe, the fad for postcards had become full-fledged in America. The international turn-of-the-century taste for small, mailable images was led by several French and German studios, whose technical capabilities and photographic skill far surpassed those of any American competitor.⁴⁵ During this period, many Americans still interested in making and distributing printed sexual material often turned to Europe for imports of negatives and prints, which may explain why most of the existing faux-nude postcards that were printed in America in the late 1890s and early 1900s are reproductions of European-made images.

Under his federal authority as Special Agent to the United States Post Office, Anthony Comstock took a special interest in policing postcards, and he seized hundreds of thousands of “indecent post cards” and “foul pictures” in the years between 1905 and 1910.⁴⁶ As we will see in Chapter 4, although Comstock never successfully legislated against the wearing of nude tights, and as his 1896 “War on Tights” attests, he clearly found bodystockinged nudes reprehensible and worthy of censure. His efforts to eradicate risqué postcards no doubt played a large part in preventing the phenomenon of nude bodystockings from being accurately documented in American photographs.

Caught between the visual cultures of Comstock-Era America and Belle Époque Europe, then, there is evidence of a profound material phenomenon that travelled widely in the years around the turn of the century. Despite their relative rarity in postcards, American flesh-colored bodystockings made important

⁴⁵ George and Dorothy Miller, *Picture Postcards in the United States, 1893-1918* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1976), 15-32.

⁴⁶ Amy Werbel, *Lust on Trial*, 253-256.

appearances elsewhere in the visual culture of this period. While Europeans held fleshling postcards in their hands and wrote casual notes to their friends and loved ones on them, Americans seem to have seen fleshlings more commonly in the flesh than in photos: they experienced these garments as actors on stage and as audiences in theaters, as poseurs in studios and as workers in bordellos. While the garments proliferated in mass-produced European images, they simultaneously appeared prominently in other forms of American material culture, where they managed to remain beyond the grasp of the censor.

Chapter 3

FLESH FOR SALE: BODYSTOCKINGS IN TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY CATALOGS

Owning Bodystockings

In the winter of 1895, an unknown illustrator published a comic image showing nine vignettes of New Yorkers engaged in the activities of the season (fig. 58). The cartoon provides a portrait of life in the big city at this moment; each scene captures a different slice of New York society, a different character to represent the time and place. In the middle left section of the grid, a stylishly dressed female figure leans forward as she walks resolutely in the face of winter. Her collar is pulled up high around her neck, and she wears a translucent veil wrapped around her face. A small white package is tucked underneath her arm. “Homeward trips the weary actress, bold and brave she fears no harm,” reads the caption; “That’s her Living Picture costume in the bundle ‘neath her arm.” *Her Living Picture costume!* No nude garment is pictured in the image, but the cartoon offers a vivid sense of an object with a palpable, recognized material presence in its time and place. This was not simply a costume that appeared, through the magic of theatrical mystery, out of thin air and onto performer’s bodies on stage. This was an object that real people purchased, owned, transported and cared for. The actress in the cartoon isn’t wearing fleshlings, but she has them in her immediate possession, wrapped in paper and tucked under her arm as she forges ahead through the cold city winter. The garment is tantalizingly just beyond view.

This remarkable image helps us to think about the cultural significance of “living picture costumes” in the early 1890s, but it also delineates them as a distinct material phenomenon of their time. Whether or not they were scandalous, they



Figure 58 *Midwinter in the Great Metropolis*. New York, 1895. Print. b17539114.
(Wallach Division Picture Collection, The New York Public Library.)

represented a concrete physical reality for the women who wore them. Where did they come from? How much did they cost? The image implies that the garment is a personal belonging that not only defines this actress's work but also defines her presence in the wider world; it follows her home at night. In what world, we might wonder—the professional or the personal—would someone have obtained a flesh-colored bodystocking?

Catalogs

In the late nineteenth century, standard hosiery was available to consumers through many different outlets. Many women still knit stockings at home on small mechanical circular frames. Catalogs advertised wide assortments of stockings that could be ordered by mail, and dry goods stores carried them in shop. Bodystockings for living pictures, poses plastiques and other nude performances, however, were not available in regular clothing outlets. Performance-related hosiery was sold by specialty purveyors—manufacturers and dealers who specialized in theater costumes and athletic wear. Although these businesses marketed their wares to professionals, they also welcomed customers who were amateurs and enthusiasts to purchase from their pages. Fleshlings may have been primarily the purview of stage performers, but anyone shopping for a costume or athletic outfit could also have perused them. Existing examples of bodystockings provide us with primary material evidence, and photographs document their use, but period catalogs add another layer to our understanding of these garments. These commercial publications show us how companies advertised, priced and sold these unusual garments, and they document the wide range of subtle variations that were available. In these pages, we begin to imagine how a person might have selected and purchased a “living picture costume.”

Dazian's, ca. 1880

The inaugural catalog, circa 1880, of a New York theatrical goods dealer, Dazian's, offered a whole section of "theatrical and equestrian hosiery."⁴⁷ These included "knee hose," which ended just above the knee; "full-length" stage tights which went up to the waist, fully covering the legs and crotch; form-fitting tops, variously called "shirts" and "opera vests"; and several different forms of full-body suits. Full suits pictured in the catalog include two types of "clown suit" (fig. 59) and a "harlequin suit," although also available were "suits in one piece, all colors, heavy or fine." Hosiery was available in "all sizes," and a measurement guide at the back of the section directed customers to take several different leg and chest measurements in order to achieve the correct fit. Leotards—suits that covered the upper body, crotch and at least part of the leg—required an extra measurement, the length from the neck to the crotch. Dazian's offered its hosiery in a wide range of fibers (cotton, silk and wool) and colors. There were also decorative options: "handsomely embroidered, spangled, or patterned." Between choices in fabric, structure and customized finishing, Dazian's offered its customers an infinite number of variations in performance hosiery.

Color options mentioned for the different forms of hosiery include "Flesh Color, White, Rose, Pink, Light Blue, Dark Blue, Brown, Black, Scarlet, Cardinal, Yellow." Other colors were "made to order." This list's opening series of tones—

⁴⁷ The company had, by its own description, existed for fifty years but this is thought to be its first published catalog. W. Dazian, *Catalogue of Theatrical Goods, Costumers' Supplies, Regalia, Church & Military Trimmings, Society Goods, Etc.* (New York: The Company, c. 1880), <http://taramaginnis.com/1880-dazians-catalog-of-theatrical-goods-costumers-supplies-regalia-church-military-trimmings-society-goods-etc-w-dazian/scan0002/>, accessed March 20, 2019.

flesh, white, rose, pink—is itself a fascinating statement of the company’s assumptions about its clientele. Flesh is a color apart, distinct from the nearby tones of white, rose and pink, and at the top of the list. As often remains the case even today, the term assumes an implication of white people’s flesh color.

The company’s linking of stage tights with equestrian tights demonstrates the unique relationship these types of garment bore to movement. Performers and athletes alike required clothing that provided support while also allowing a free range of movement. Hosiery covered the body while also allowing a person’s form to show. Such form-revealing garments wouldn’t have been universally flattering, so the company offered its customers the option of having their theatrical hosiery padded in different areas in order to achieve a desired body shape (fig. 60).

These body pads were made of “selected lamb’s wool,” and were guaranteed to provide an “elegant shape.” Dazian’s lists padding options for several specific body parts—including calves, thighs, hips and arms—but it doesn’t mention more explicitly female body parts that a wearer might want to pad—namely breasts. The company nonetheless assures the customer that paddings are available for “all parts of the body.” Silk pads were also available. In introducing its wide range of hosiery options, the catalog explains that the company was a world-leader in this type of garment and that it had its own dedicated manufacturing facility:

We call especial attention to our increased facilities for the manufacture of every description of Woven Goods in Silk, Cotton, Worsted, Lisle Thread, Spun Silk, etc. Our factory, the most complete one of its kind in the world, where only the most experienced artists in all branches are employed, is prepared at all times to fill all orders, whether large or small, with the greatest despatch. **Our Perfection Pad** for all parts of the body is the only correct and artistic pad made. In all instances we guarantee a perfect fit and elegant shape. **We manufacture every style of Hosiery.**



Figure 59 Full-body knit clown suits. W. Dazian. *Catalog of Theatrical Goods, Costumer's Supplies, Regalia, Church and Military Trimmings, Society Goods, Etc.* (New York, ca. 1880), 142-143. (Courtesy, Tara Maginnis.)

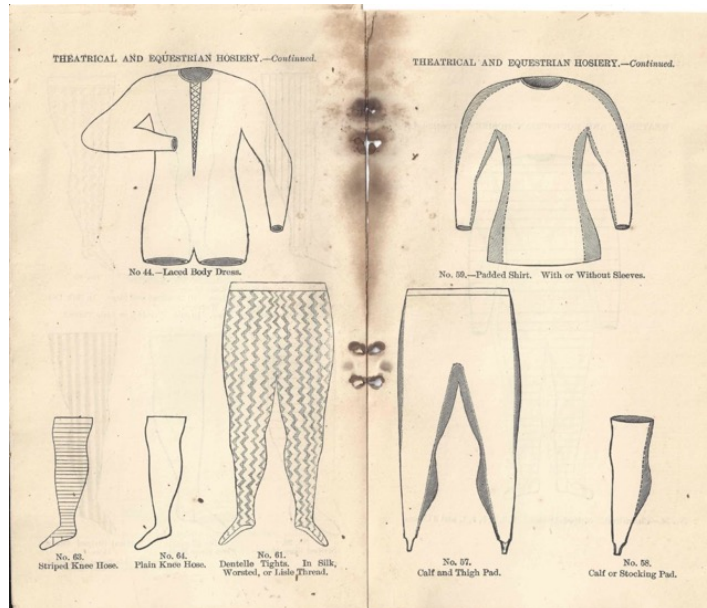


Figure 60 Padded hosiery. W. Dazian. *Catalog of Theatrical Goods, Costumer's Supplies, Regalia, Church and Military Trimmings, Society Goods, Etc.* (New York, ca. 1880), 140-141. (Courtesy, Tara Maginnis.)

This paragraph documents the American production of flesh-colored, full-body hosiery as early as 1880. Although Dazian's was an importer of European goods, it also manufactured its hosiery locally, in the States. Although the catalogue does not explicitly state where its New York was a logical place for this manufacturing to take place, as it was the center of the American theater world. By producing its own theatrical hosiery products, Dazian's ensured that its customers could purchase highly customized stage garments at short notice.

Chicago Costume Works, ca. 1908

It is in the catalog of a Chicago company, Chicago Costume Works (fig. 61), that we glimpse the single most direct commercial documentation of American fleshlings in all of their material variations.⁴⁸ The catalog caters to wide range of performers and donors of costumes—professional and amateur alike. It advertises a luscious spread of costumes, props and every imaginable type of theatrical accessory, many of which are illustrated in highly detailed, mechanically-reproduced photographic images. There are cowboy costumes, wigs, backdrops, costumes for party-goers; stage makeup, Odd Fellows paraphernalia, printed plays and Halloween decorations. Although the catalog is not dated, it carries images of goods emblazoned with the year “1908.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *Chicago Costume Works, Catalogue 5* (Chicago: Chicago Costume Works, c.1908).

⁴⁹ A copy of the catalog held by the Chicago Public Library is hand-stamped on each page with the words “On account of war conditions all prices subject to change without notice,” indicating that although the catalog itself was printed before the beginning of the first world war, it remained in use by the company for several years.



Figure 61 Cover. Chicago Costume Works. *Catalogue 5* (Chicago, ca. 1908.)

NO. 120 Special Bloomers made to order.

Estimates on theatrical and vaudeville productions, cheerfully given.

Union Suits for Living Pictures, Statues, Etc.

No. 129. Full sleeve cotton Union suit, hooks and eyes in back, per suit.....\$2.50

No. 130. Medium weight worsted, laced in back, any color, per suit, \$5.50

No. 131. Heavy weight worsted, laced in back, any color, per suit, \$7.50

No. 131A. Medium or Heavy weight worsted Union Suit, front or back lacing, to measure only, all colors. Guaranteed fit. Per suit.....\$9.00

By mail, 25c. extra

No. 132. "Silkoline" Union Suit. Special to measure only, in all colors. Fit Guaranteed. Per suit.....\$9.00

By mail, 25c. extra

No. 133. Heavy weight, pure silk, any color, laced in back, to measure only, per suit, \$20.00

No. 134. Same grade as No. 133, with individual toes, to measure only, per suit,\$25.00

Note. All Union Suits by mail 25c extra.

No. 129



No. 142 Supporters



No. 142. Supporter made specially for the Stage and Athletics. For men and women, 5 in. wide heavy elastic band, cloth front and back. Colors: Black and White. Finest and best supporter made. Price\$1.00

By mail extra 12c

Please give waist measure for supporters.

Figure 62 Union Suits of Living Pictures, Statues, Etc., and Supporters. Chicago Costume Works. *Catalogue 5* (Chicago, ca. 1908), 20.

The catalog contains an ample section devoted to theatrical hosiery, and the company claims, in bold font, that its tights are ““universally used by Burlesque shows.” On one page of hosiery offerings, a small square in the lower corner offers a particular type of single-piece garment: “Union Suits for Living Pictures, Statues, etc.” (fig. 62). This small but significant moment in the catalog documents the existence of a single-piece hosiery suit made explicitly for the performance of still nudes—*living pictures, statues, etc.* The listing is sectioned off on the page by a line of text: “Estimates on theatrical and vaudeville productions, cheerfully given.” These garments were the common purview of stage performers, and therefore might be priced in bulk to costume whole productions. The term “union suit” links this performative garment with another more widely worn garment—a one-piece knit suit of long underwear—which was first produced in America in the 1860s.⁵⁰ Elsewhere in the catalog, in introductory lists of available items, the company uses the terms “posing suits,” and “posing union suits,” indicating that there wasn’t a single set name for the garments.

The catalog’s illustration for the “union suit for living pictures” shows a white female figure posing in sinuous contrapposto and wearing a skintight black bodysuit. The figure’s hair is tied up into a stylish Gibson-girl poof, and her arm is bent overhead in an intentional posture that references the poses of living pictures. In the background, a smaller figure models the backside of the garment; this example is shown in a colorless version instead of black. The dominant illustration of a black garment rather than the standard white flesh-colored garment used in living pictures is

⁵⁰ Union suits and other single-piece body suits are discussed further in Chapter 5.

intriguing and suggests that the company may have intentionally avoided prominently featuring a risqué female nude in its pages. The color of the garment changed everything: in black, it clothed a female form; in white, it denuded it.

A long list of variations is offered for the posing suits, each option a step more expensive than the last. The simplest form is cotton and has “full sleeves;” it is closed in the back with hooks and eyes, like those on the “Juliette” garment. This type of closure would have made the garment impossible to put on without assistance. This basic version cost \$2.50. The next option was a “medium weight worsted” garment—a woolen garment, more substantial than the cotton version. The worsted suit was “available in any color,” and was priced at more than double the cotton version’s cost: \$5.50. A heavier-weight worsted suit was also available, for an additional two dollars.

Except for the most basic option, the garments are described as being “laced in back,” making it feasible that someone could draw her own garment closed around her body by pulling the laces and tying them at the neck (the back diagram indicates that the laces started at the middle of the back and continued upwards towards the neck.) Lacings are a fascinating form of closure for these garments. Unlike snaps or hooks and eyes—other types of closure available during this pre-zipper period—laces allow a garment to be cinched tightly around a person’s body. They are a feature that provides a built-in customizable fit, allowing even a custom-made garment to adjust to a body’s daily changes. Lacings would have likely been highly visible, however, suggesting that they would have needed to be concealed somehow—either through positioning, photo editing or wearing accessories.

All of these garments were available in set stock sizes, but if a person paid more, a suit could be custom made to her measurements. These made-to-order suits

were guaranteed to fit, unlike their ready-made counterparts. They were available with either front or back lacings, for \$9.00. For the same price, a “Silkoline” union suit could also be had. Silkoline was a light-weight mercerized cotton that had a smooth, lustrous surface similar to that of silk. It would have had a glossier appearance and slightly clingier wear than normal knit cotton; it would have looked less matte and more like skin.⁵¹ The most expensive living picture suits offered by Chicago Costume Works were made of “heavy weight, pure silk.” They were available in any color and had to be made to measure. For \$5 extra, silk suits could be made with individual toes. These highly customized garments cost \$25—*ten times* the cost of the simple cotton suit. In comparison, in 1905, an average pair of women’s stockings could be had for around twenty-five cents.⁵²

All of the company’s posing suits were also available in “all colors.” A list of colors in the general “tights” section consists of thirteen tones: “White, Black, Pink, Flesh, Tan, Red, Light Blue, Dark Blue, Nile Green, Grass Green, Purple, Indian and Brown.” Many of the images of tights found in the Chicago catalog are the very same illustrations that were used three decades earlier in Dazian’s New York catalog. A “schedule for measuring” at the head of the hosiery section shows customers, as Dazian’s did, how to measure themselves to achieve correct fit. Unlike Dazian’s sexless line diagrams of leg measurements, however, Chicago Costume Works offers a sketch of a distinctly female form as its measurement diagram (fig. 63). The fleshy legs and crotch reveal a standardized female form that has a narrow waist and full hips

⁵¹ Phyllis G. Tortora and Ingrid Johnson, *The Fairchild Books Dictionary of Textiles*, 8th Ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁵² Sears, Roebuck & Co., Spring 1905 Catalogue (114C), 731.

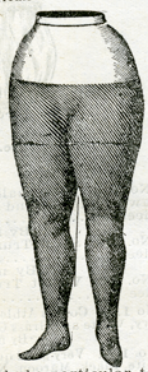
TIGHTS AND TRICOT WEAR

All Fancy Tights by Registered mail 25c. Extra.

Schedule for Measuring

Tights and Symmetricals

1. Waist—inches
2. Hips—inches
3. Thigh—inches
4. Knee—inches
5. Calf—inches
6. Ankle—inches
7. Foot—inches
8. Knee to Heel
9. Inseam—inches



When ordering Symmetricals be particular to mention if you want full padding or if you only require padding in certain parts. Outline on this cut. State if you want feet or Straps.

No. 116. "Silkoline" Tights and Shirts, to measure only, full fashioned, knit seams, in all popular colors. Per garment, each.....\$3.50
By mail 12c extra

Note—This grade of Silkoline Tights is very popular with circus performers.
Special price per dozen.

No. 117. Heavy Weight Pure Silk Tights, any color, 9-inch cotton top, each.....\$9.50
By registered mail 25c extra

No. 118. Heavy weight pure silk up to the Waist, any color, per pair.....\$12.00
Sizes 0, 1, 2 and 3.
By registered mail 25c extra

No. 119. Heavy Silk Shirts to match No. 118 tights, any color, each.....\$12.00
By registered mail 25c extra

Note—Nos. 116, 117, 118 and 119 are made to measure only, fit guaranteed. An additional charge made for garments larger than size No. 3.

No. 119S. "Spun Silk" imported tights only, in white, flesh and red colors. Sizes 1, 2 and 3. Each\$3.95
Special colors dyed to sample, 75c per pair extra.

CHICAGO COSTUME WORKS

Telephone Central 6292 143 N. Dearborn St.

Tights

No. 108. Best quality Imported Silk Plaited Tights. Our own importation. Sizes 1 to 5 in stock. Following colors: White, Black, Pink, Flesh, Tan, Red, Light Blue, Dark Blue, Nile Green, Grass Green, Purple, Indian and Brown. Per pair\$2.45
By mail 12c extra
Special price by the dozen.
"Universally used by Burlesque Shows."

No. 109. Shirts to match 108, same colors. Each\$2.45
By mail 12c extra

Note—Special colors dyed to sample, per garment, extra50

No. 110. Best quality Cotton Tights, per pair.... \$0.75
By mail 12c extra.
Special price by the dozen pairs
Following colors: White, Black, Flesh, Pink, Tan, Red, Yellow, Light Blue, Dark Blue, Indian, Brown and Grass Green.

No. 111. Cotton Shirts to match No. 110 tights, all colors..... \$0.75
By mail 12c extra

No. 112. Medium weight Worsted Tights, fine quality per pair.....\$2.00
By mail 12c extra
Special prices by the dozen pairs.

No. 113. Medium weight Worsted Shirts, long sleeves to match No. 112 tights, each\$2.00
By mail 12c extra.
Following colors: Flesh, Pink, White, Black, Red, Grass Green, Brown, Light Blue and Purple.
Special price by the dozen.


No. 114. Fine grade, heavy weight Worsted Shirts and Tights, each per garment.....\$2.50

No. 115. "Silkoline" Tights and Shirts, sewed seams, in 16 popular colors in stock. Per garment\$2.00
By mail 12c extra

Padded Tights or Symmetricals

No. 120. Woven with lamb's wool inside for padding. Can be worn under tights without detection. Price per pair\$9.00
Express only.

No. 121. Same as above, made to order to correct all defects.
Guaranteed Fit
Price 12.00




No. 120

We carry in stock sizes 1, 2 and 3. Please state if you wish light, medium or full padding.

Calf Pads

No. 122. Calf Pads.
Price\$3.50

No. 123. Calf Pads made to order.
Price 4.50



No. 122

By Express only

Note. If accustomed to wearing tights, please give size. Sizes range from No. 1 to No. 5.

Please do not cut this Catalogue. Order by number only.

Figure 63 Instructions for measuring for tights; selection of padded tights. Chicago Costume Works. *Catalogue 5* (Chicago, ca. 1908), 19.

and thighs. The drawing is anatomically explicit in comparison to Dazian's unisex outlines of tights, and it suggests that hosiery had become more explicitly gendered—more likely a female purchase than a male one.

As in Dazian's, the Chicago catalog's measurement instructions explain that the company offered padding as an option for all performance hosiery. It referred to these padded tights as "symmetricals," because they helped even out bodily imperfections:

If a person has any defects in their limbs such as being knock-kneed or bow legged, whichever may be the case, the defects can be covered up by wearing the padded tights or symmetricals. These, of course, must be made to measure in order to insure a perfect fit. Then again, a person may have had a long illness and lost weight; here again the symmetricals come in for good use, and your figure will be restored to its normal size, if you wear symmetricals.

It is notable that in both of the suggested reasons that a customer might require padding, the correction serves to fill out a person's form rather than reduce it.

The catalog also offered supplementary structural garments that could be worn in conjunction with posing suits to help achieve a desired figure. Next to the "union suits for living pictures" is pictured a type of garment called simply "supporters" (fig. 62). The illustration shows a wide belt-like form with a crotch band. These are available for both men and women and are "made specially for the stage and athletics." Worn under a posing suit or tights, these would have obscured a poser's genitals and created a firm, supported form. In the back of the catalog, meanwhile—in a seemingly unrelated section for "paper maché goods and properties" (fig. 64)—the company offers another supplementary undergarment to the posing suit: a firm, structural bra. Amidst an array of miscellaneous oddities (molded paper Santa Claus faces, a mantle, a tree stump and a dead turkey,) an incongruent form floats at the



Figure 64 Paper-maché goods. Chicago Costume Works. *Catalogue 5* (Chicago, ca. 1908), 73.

center of the page: “*No. 1245. Paper Maché Bust Forms*” (fig. 65). Notably, the illustration provided for the bust form is not photographic, unlike the other illustrations on the page. These bust forms are described as being made “very durable and covered with cloth,” and their use is specified: “worn under posing suits to give the correct figure.” Supplementary support garments such as these might have been particularly useful to models with larger breasts, since the thin knit garment alone might not have been sturdy enough to shape and support their bodies effectively.

Among the catalog’s paper maché goods are also a lyre, column, urn and cupid figure, all of which are similar to many of the classical posing props that can be seen in the bodystocking photos. Other available accessories include a section of “jeweled belts, girdles & necklaces for the stage,” where a wide range of costume jewelry and other faux-luxuries could be had. There are crowns, scepters, gilded diadems and gypsy head dresses; a “Snake Jeweled Armlet,” \$4.75; and a rhinestoned “Salome Girdle made with colored jewels,” \$35 (fig. 66). The “Salome Breast Plate,” a decorative bra dripping with rhinestones, costs an astounding \$65 (fig. 67). Similar accessories to these can be seen in many of the bodystocking postcards, worn atop the models’ posing suits (fig. 68).

A remarkable number of the products sold by the Chicago Costume Works cater to the performance of racial and ethnic stereotypes. Wigs, costumes, masks, shoes and accessories are all available in styles that mimic and codify human types. The catalog contains hundreds of products sold specifically for blackface minstrel productions. Several pages of stage makeup offer a dizzying array of products for dressing the skin: grease paints, discoloration paint, stage makeup, theatrical powder, youthful tint liquid, nose putty, burnt cork, cream liquid powder, cold cream, mouches

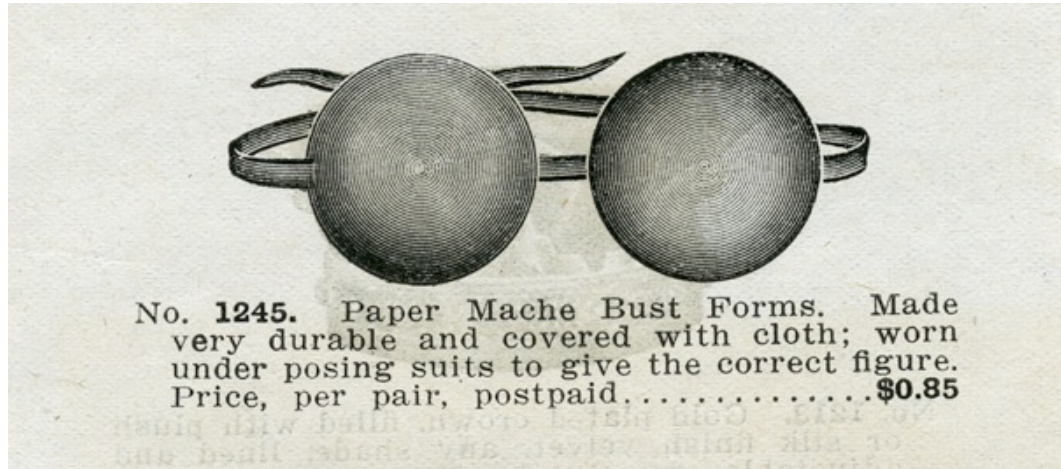


Figure 65 Paper-maché bust form. Chicago Costume Works. *Catalogue 5* (Chicago, ca. 1908), 73.

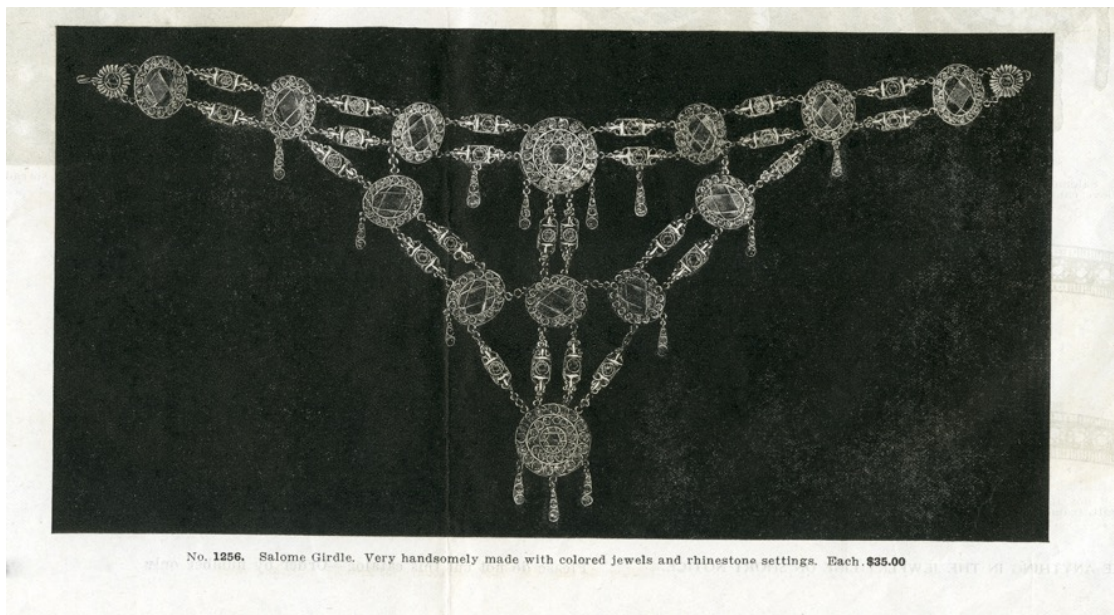


Figure 66 Salome Girdle. Chicago Costume Works. *Catalogue 5* (Chicago, ca. 1908), 75.

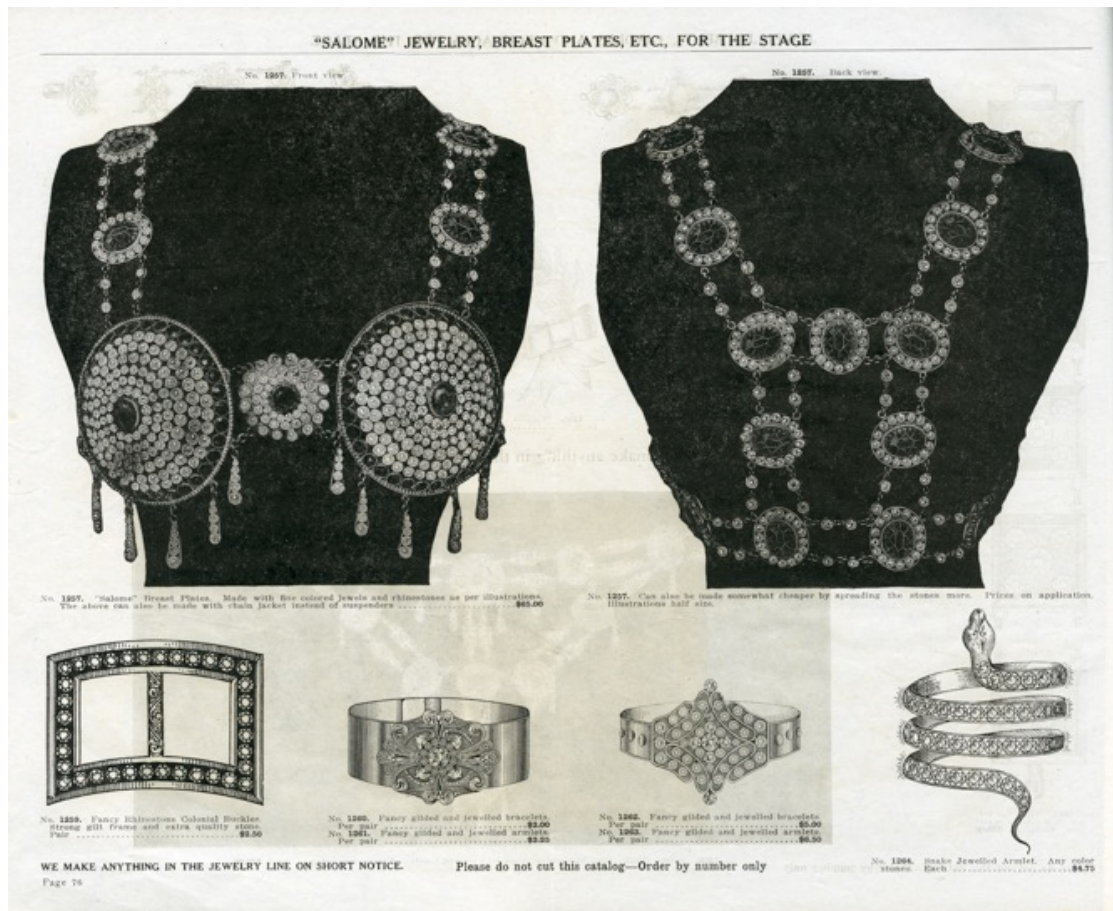


Figure 67 Salome breast plates and jewelry. Chicago Costume Works. *Catalogue 5* (Chicago, ca. 1908), 76.



Figure 68 Jeweled breast plate and girdle worn with bodystocking.
Louis Martin. *Lanzetta*. Paris, ca. 1900. Silver gelatin print on postcard.

or beauty spots. The skin tints come in a huge range of tones (fig. 69). A line of products by a brand called Leichner's, "considered by Professional People of the stage as the best there is to be had," includes these colors:

Lady; Very young man; Young man; Man; Man, dark color; Warrior or sailor; Illo (Wallenstein); Flying Dutchman; Yellowish; Old Man; Envy (Intriguant); African; Mogul; Red Indian; Aida; Othello; Mulatto; Moor (African); Indian; Gypsy; Clown.

Meyer's Grease Paint offers a slightly different spectrum:

Very Pale Flesh Color; Light Flesh, Deeper Tint; Natural Flesh Color, for Juvenile Heroes; Rose Tint Color, for Juvenile Heroes; Deeper Shade Color, for Juvenile Heroes; Healthy Sunburnt, Deeper Shade; Sallow, for Young Men; Healthy Color for Middle Ages; Sallow, for Old Age; Ruddy; Olive, healthy; Olive, lighter shade; Gypsy Flesh Color; Othello; Chinese; Indian; East Indian; Japanese; Night Negro; Black; White; Green; Yellow.

And Hess's Theatrical Powder is available in these tones:

White Powder; Flesh Pink Tint, for blonde and juvenile; Flesh Pink Tint, lighter shade; Deep Shade Pink; Brunette Flesh Tint; Light Flesh; Rose Tint; Ruddy Old Man; Sallow; Sunburn; Olive, for Creole, Spaniard, Italian, etc.; Chinese; Indian; Othello; Gypsy; Mulatto, Moors, Arabs, etc.; Japanese.

The offerings read as a poem to skin-based bigotry in all of its clumsy yet finely-divided impressions. Colors intended for the performance of white people include a subtle range of complexions, ages, moods and meanings: *envy, rose tint for heroes; ruddy old man*. The spectrum becomes coarser and coarser as it shifts towards the darker tones. By the end, the color of *Mulatto, Moors, Arabs, etc.* can all be had in a single "flat screw top can." Skin paints and powders were a common accessory used in the performance of living statues and tableaux, and they were also likely used in conjunction with posing suits to help achieve a seamless appearance of nudity. Their use is more visible in the highly draped, overtly classical versions of poses (as in figs.



No. 969-96. Dry Rouge. Price. \$0.20



No. 969-18. Dry Rouge. Price. \$0.20

No. 970. Grease Paints.

Color Numbers.

1. Lady.
2. Very young man.
- 2½. Young man.
3. Man.
- 3½. Man, dark color.
4. Warrior or sailor.
- 4½. Illo (Wallenstein).
5. Flying Dutchman.
- 5½. Yellowish.
6. Old Man.
- 6½. Envy (Intriguant).
7. African.
8. Mogul.
9. Red Indian.
10. Aida.
11. Othello.
13. Mulatto.
14. Moor (African).
15. Indian.
16. Gypsy.
20. Clown.



No. 970

No. 970.
This is the
size mostly
used by pro-
fessional
people.
We only
show the
staple
colors.

Thick sticks
paint, 4
inches long,
¾ in. in
diameter.
Price, each,
\$0.20.

No. 971-57.
Eye Brow
Liners.



No. 971-57.
Eye Brow
Liners, in
black,
brown and
blond, 4 in.
long.
Each . \$0.20



No. 975.
Eyebrow
Pencil.
Metal tubes.
Price . \$0.15



No. 973.
Lip Rouge
in Jars.
Side View.



No. 973.
Lip Rouge
in Jars.
Top View.

No. 973. Light and Dark. Moist Lip
Rouge. Price. \$0.40



No. 974-138. Fett Powder. Small Size. Price, per
box \$0.25



No. 974-103. Fett Powder. Large size. Price, per
box \$0.50

Figure 69 Leichner's Imported Face Paints. Chicago Costume Works. *Catalogue 5* (Chicago, ca. 1908.)

2 & 40), in which posers powdered their hair and painted their skin in a coat of marble-esque whiteness; however, it seems likely that many of the nude performers pictured in images also wore makeup to assist in the nude illusion.

These products, along with the catalog's page-after-page assortments of performance goods coded by skin color and ethnic stereotypes, deeply embed fleshlings in a culture of racial meaning. Posing suits enabled a performance of ideal white female beauty. They participated in the same theatrical world that produced minstrelsy—a world in which white performers could enact a racial hierarchy by donning particular skin colors. In the case of flesh-colored tights, women with light skin colors performed the broad racial category of whiteness. Women who no doubt had a range of different complexions united under a single vision for female nudity, a vision modelled to them by the myths of marble statues. They made use of this tonal whiteness as an icon of ideal beauty and, using bodystockings and tinted makeup products, they translated it to signify the pinkish hue so often referred to generically, problematically, as “flesh.”

John Spicer Knit Goods, ca. 1910

Although Chicago Costume Works and Dazian's were both devoted specifically to theatrical goods, flesh-colored bodystockings were also sold by purveyors of athletic wear. One New York knitting company, John Spicer Knit Goods, produced bodystockings as part of its wide assortment of sports-related garments. An undated catalog, circa 1910, offers a series of garments called union

suits and combination suits (fig. 70).⁵³ The garments are suggested for wearing “under bathing suits, to take the place of bloomers.” Despite this suggestion, the catalog pictures models wearing only the form-fitting suits. One of the models is named, “O’Diva,” and is described as being “without a doubt the world’s greatest woman diver.” O’Diva’s form is on full display on the page—an image that would have been unimaginable in a business catalog just a few years earlier. These suits are, however, pictured in a very distinct black—these are clearly not fleshlings. Black and navy blue were the dominant colors of bathing costumes for women and men throughout the twenties and well into the thirties, perhaps because they were so clearly *not* nude—not to be mistaken with nakedness.

Later in the catalog, the company offers a range of theatrical tights. In this section, the illustrations are the very same drawings found in Dazian’s catalogue, suggesting that the demand for theatrical hosiery had not changed significantly since the 1880s—and also suggesting that perhaps these garments were too risqué to be illustrated with photos. Among Spicer’s theatrical hosiery is a full-body suit with a lace-up neck called a “combination suit” (fig. 71). In the catalog’s listing of available colors, it notes that different ranges of colors are available for different hosiery fabrics. Interestingly, the colors “pink,” “flesh,” “light brown” and “dark brown” are available exclusively in cotton fabrics (both light and medium weights) and in silk, which can be made in any color. Like Dazian’s, Spicers offers “symmetrical” padding to help achieve a desired body shape. As to selecting a proper size, the catalog notes that

⁵³ The catalog contains an image of an athletic sweater with “1910” knit across its front.

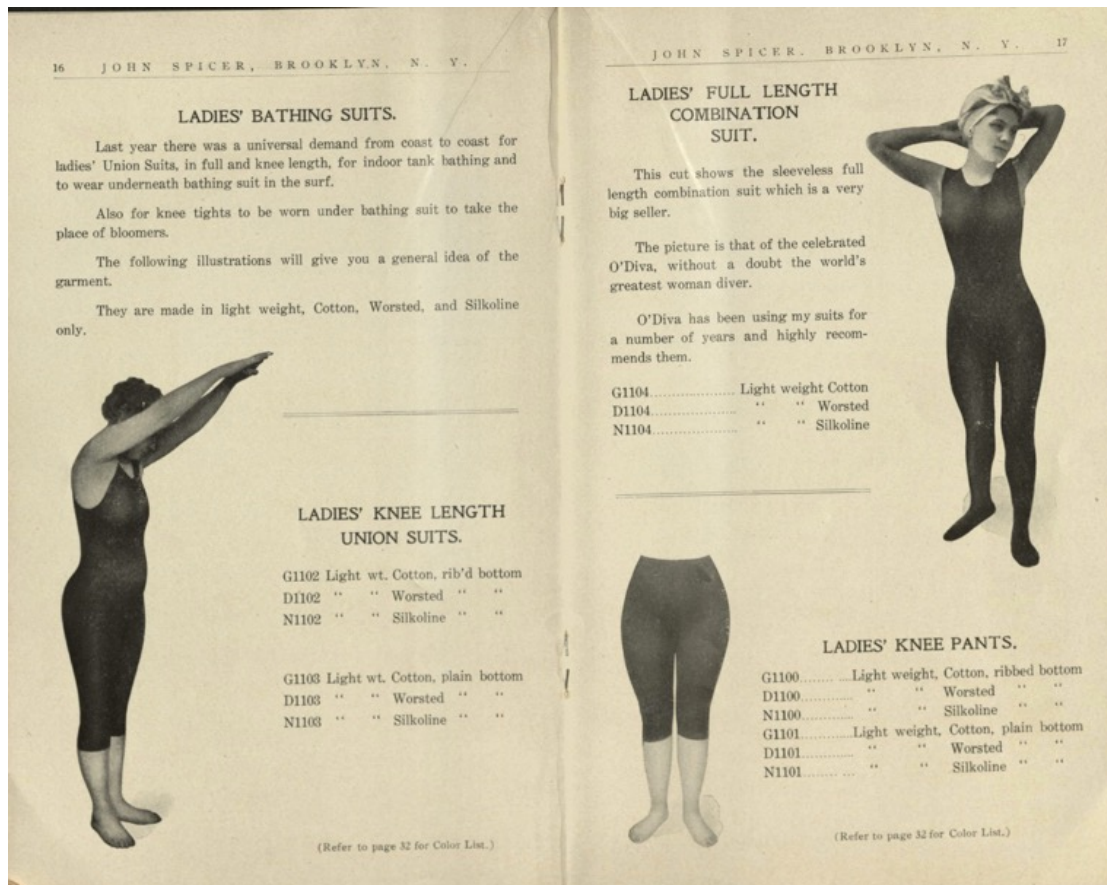


Figure 70 *Catalogue of John Spicer Knit Goods* (Brooklyn, New York: 190-), 16-17. (Courtesy, the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)



THESE GOODS ARE MADE IN FULL FASHIONED ONLY IN PURE
SILK, SPUN SILK OR WORSTED.

Refer to List for Prices

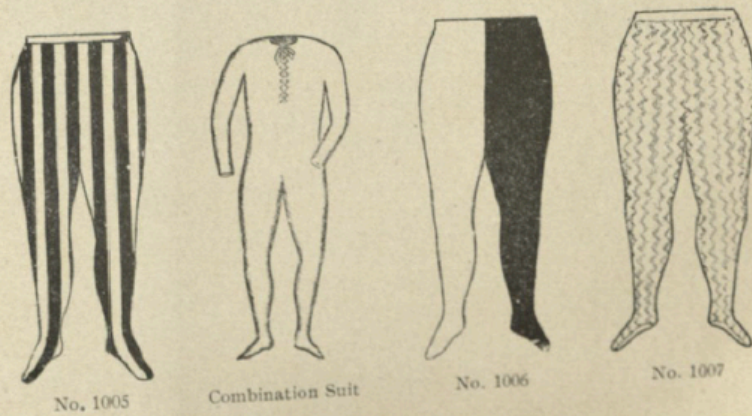


Figure 71 “Combination suit,” bottom row, second from left, in *Catalogue of John Spicer Knit Goods*, 23. (Courtesy, the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)

“knitted goods being of an elastic nature, they will give and take a little.” Their tights were available in a fixed set of standard hosiery sizes, 00-4.

By offering form-fitting ladies’ bathing suits in a separate section from theatrical suits of hosiery, John Spicer Knit Goods demonstrates categorical distinctions between different combination suits despite their similar forms, materials and methods of manufacture. The circa 1910 catalog meanwhile demonstrates the close formal and technological relationship that nude bodystockings of the stage bore to new forms of women’s active wear that were being developed in the first decades of the twentieth century. Both types of garment were produced by mechanical knitting companies in order to serve the performance- and movement-related needs of their consumers. As we will see in Chapter 5, nude bodystockings of the stage played a key role in enabling women offstage—including athletes like O’Diva—to appear in public wearing form-fitting and body-revealing garments.

Flesh for Sale

These catalogs help us to understand the technical language of these garments; they unpackage the bundle held beneath the New York actress’s arm in the 1895 cartoon, and they lay before us the many options that were once available to the women who wore flesh-colored bodystockings. There were garments with toes to be had; white cotton suits, worsted wool, flesh-colored silkoline. There were custom-made varieties and in-stock sizes. They could be padded out, worn atop shapewear, decorated externally. They were called different things by different companies, and they coexisted amongst a menagerie of highly racialized theatrical goods and also amongst a burgeoning class of garments made for athletic purposes. The prospect of purchasing a fleshling was, surprisingly, a fairly nuanced shopping experience. In

catering to the trend of nude performance, specialty manufacturers sold knit skins to suit the individual requirements—and the cultural idealization—of white women's bodies.

Chapter 4

THE FLESHLING ERA: NUDE TIGHTS IN THE NEWS, 1890-1915

While theatrical catalogs advertised their wide ranges of customizable nude body stockings, elsewhere in print writers struggled to describe the provocative garment that had entered the zeitgeist. Between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of World War I, American newspapers called their readers' attention over and over again to the scandalous and increasingly widespread appearance of women wearing tights—and only tights—in public performances. As they did so, reporters and columnists attempted to stir up as much controversy as possible while simultaneously maintaining a veneer of respectability. A language of vague titillation surrounded the press's coverage of the flesh-colored garments that allowed women to appear nude.

Beginning in the early 1870s, just as Anthony Comstock was forming the New York Society for the Prevention of Vice and beginning his decades-long mission of rooting out and destroying American pornography, a striking word began to appear with increasing frequency in American newspapers: *fleshlings*. Used in the theater world since the 1840s as a synonym for stage tights, the word served as a neat package of provocation and euphemism.⁵⁴ *Flesh*: the pillowy first syllable evoked the meaty and carnal while the guttural second, *-lings*, minimized the damage with a diminutive, a patronymic. *Fleshlings*. These garments were the little offspring of human bodies. The term conveyed the scandalous implications of the skin-tight garments while also undermining their power. Although it dotted newspaper pages around the

⁵⁴ McCullough, *Living Pictures on the New York Stage*, 19-70.

middle of the century, the word reappeared in the 1870s, and by the late 1880s and early 1890s, it could be found commonly in newspapers across the country. It had begun to indicate not just any stage tights, but more specifically a full pink suit of them. The term carried with it the implication of the garment's color; where some reports mentioned "pink tights" or "flesh-colored tights," *fleshlings* stood in as noun and descriptor in one. Although other phrases were often used to describe these garments, this was the most widely used—the closest the public came to finding a communal name for the peculiar garment that had lately become so visible.

As visible as they were on American stages, however, newspapers did not typically publish pictures of fleshlings. Even the most tawdry and gossipy publications in the 1890s and early 1900s refrained from printing images of performers wearing their nude suits. This absence gives us a sense of the degree of impropriety fleshlings represented: they weren't overtly sexual enough to be legally unmentionable, but they were too risqué to appear in newspaper illustrations. Garments at the border of controversy, fleshlings help us envision the moment's understanding of the boundary between decency and indecency.

In a critique of an 1891 production of *The Clemenceau Case*, an Alexandre Dumas play that had shocked the country for a scene in which the female lead appears as though nude, one anonymous newspaper reviewer offered a lucid impression of fleshlings:

And then the 'model scene' about which so much has been written! At the beginning of the third act for about half a minute Iza is seen posing in a suit of fleshlings. Then her husband covers her with a mantle and the affair is over. To the seeker after the sensational this must have been eminently unsatisfactory. On the burlesque stage any day just as much of the female form "divine," as somebody once characterized it, can be seen. The "model scene" must be counted as a flat failure so far

as anything extraordinarily wicked is concerned. Fleshlings are commonplace things after all. There is more suggestiveness in the glance of an eye, the expression of a face or the display of an ankle than there is in the parading and posturing of a phalanx of pink-tighted women on the stage.⁵⁵

Although the reviewer found the rest of the play to be “simply filthy” and having “absolutely nothing by which to commend itself,” it was not, in her mind, the garment itself that was responsible for the depravity of the play. Fleshlings, the writer tells us, are *commonplace things after all*. In this commentary, the scandalized buzz around the garment is seen as a misunderstanding, a distraction from the real cultural threat posed by the play: the inanity of provocation for provocation’s sake. By the time of the *Clemenceau Case* scandal, pink tights had appeared for decades and in “phalanxes” on American burlesque stages; what was new, this reviewer explains, was the way that the public had begun confusing them with nudity itself.

This 1891 description of the garment at work on stage helps establish a starting point in our understanding of the turn-of-the-century fleshling era. Transitioning from a term that had, for the past several decades, been used to refer rather generically to stage tights, this new usage was more specific and much more closely related to nudity. Fleshlings had become a “suit,” a full body of flesh-colored cloth. Over the next two-and-a-half decades, hundreds of mentions of “fleshlings” and “flesh-colored tights” appeared in American papers as reporters and commentators covered the era’s extended, highly-charged cultural conversation around obscenity and nudity. This Chapter surveys some of the stories most central to our understanding of how turn-of-

⁵⁵ *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, NY), March 17, 1891, 5.

the-century Americans thought about the garments that were being worn en masse in the performance of nudity.

The Anti-Tights Bill, 1891

In March of 1891, a Pennsylvania State Representative from Lancaster, Augustus G. Seyfert, proposed a bill that became known around the state as the “Famous Anti-Tights Bill.” If passed, Seyfert’s bill would have outlawed the wearing of theatrical tights on stage, but instead it became “one of the greatest jokes of the year at the state capitol” and was quickly tabled.⁵⁶ While Seyfert’s ban on tights did not explicitly refer to nude tights, it clearly participated in the same censorious zeal as Comstock’s ongoing efforts against pornography and obscenity.

Newspapers across the state ran stories on Seyfert’s bill. *The Pittsburgh Press* ran a front-page article covering the reactions of Philadelphia stage professionals to the Anti-Tights Bill. One opera house manager, Mr. Zimmerman, thought the bill was absurd: “Do they want us to close up?... I can’t believe any one [sic] would seriously consider such an idea. All the beautiful effects of the spectacular would be destroyed. Comic opera could not be mounted at all and after the passage of such a law all talk of grand opera would be idle.” For Zimmerman, tights were inseparable from the production of theater.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *The Times* (Philadelphia, PA), January 28, 1897, 4.

⁵⁷ *The Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), March 13, 1891, 1.

Several women interviewed in the article agreed that the bill was absurd, and they provided more personal insights directly related to the wearing of tights. One performer, Laura Joyce Bell, gave a long and insightful quote: “Women in tights are to be looked at, not touched. Hundreds of women would be deprived of their livelihood by the passage of such a law, which can certainly benefit no one. I do not believe in the wearing of tights simply to display the forms of shapely women, but I do believe that all plays should be mounted appropriately. If tights are called for then let us have them, and for lands’ sake, see that pretty women wear them. I would never object to wearing them myself unless the coloring was to give me blood poisoning, as it did poor Fred Leslie.” Bell’s observations offer a range of insights into her understanding of tights. Her opening observation that tights were for looking, not touching, indicates that the garment served as a kind of barrier in her mind between display and personal experience: they might reveal a body, but they don’t provide access to it. Bell went on to add that, in her experience, she felt protected on stage while performing: “We are shielded from the audience by the footlights. They cannot reach us, and to them we are but animated pictures, as it were.”

Unlike Zimmerman, Bell’s concerns about tights were centered on safety and on the physical protection of her body during performance. As long as they did not contain toxic dyes, she felt safe wearing tights on stage. She also, however, felt strongly that although they shouldn’t be worn simply as an act of bodily display, they should only be worn by women who were “pretty” enough to be seen in them. Bell indicates that she understands these garments to be appropriate in some cases but not in others, but her distinction is vague and subjective. They should not, in her

judgement, be worn simply for the purpose of revealing a shapely form, but they should be worn by women who look good in them.

Another performer interviewed about Seyfert's anti-tights bill, Helen Bertram, reported simply that she wore tights "not because she likes them, but because it is her business." Like Bell, Bertram thought of tights as a critical tool of her trade: they enabled her to perform on stage and thus to support herself financially. They weren't a matter of preference but of necessity and profession. Actress Annie Myers, meanwhile, felt that tights were a form of physical freedom: "If there is one thing I love, it is a boy's suit, nice and raggedy, or a brand new pair of tights. They are, to me, more comfortable than dresses, and, just between you and me, they give a lady a chance to move about a bit." Myers likens wearing tights to wearing a costume of loose menswear: for her, they allowed a degree of movement and comfort that she did not experience in dresses. She gives the sense that wearing tights involved some degree of gender transgression for her—in tights, she performed outside the normal female boundaries of a skirt. This was a transgression that she felt physically empowered by and wholeheartedly approved of: "Give me tights all the time. I like to see them."

Another commenter identified simply as a "modiste," a fashionable dressmaker, directly compared theatrical tights to garments worn by women off the stage: "Nearly every society woman in Philadelphia wears tights, and they will certainly oppose the bill. Fine dresses are all made to fit over tights nowadays. You know, the reigning style of dress shows nearly every line of the form... We will not fit fine dresses over any other sort of underwear. The tights worn by these women are made of lisle thread or silk and are just as carefully made as the finest worn by opera

singers.” Although she misunderstood the gist of Seyfert’s bill, which would have prevented women from wearing exposed tights in public performances, the modiste’s comments reveal a poignant connection between stage garments and wider fashion trends. She understands “tights” to include not only hosiery worn on stage but also undergarments worn by women in order to achieve the “reigning style” of curve-hugging garments. Tights were not, then, simply a revealing garment worn by actresses; they were a garment that served a distinct purpose in dress. Stage women and fashionable society women alike required a garment that neatly hugged the body.

While the 1891 Anti-Tights Bill of Pennsylvania had no lasting legal impact on the public wearing of tights and was generally treated as farcical, it provoked a marked response and helped spark a cultural dialogue about these performative garments. People, particularly women, had thoughts about tights; thoughts about how they should be worn and why; thoughts about what they meant. A similar bill arose in Minnesota, where it also stirred smirks and controversy and failed to pass. In a column of humorous riddles, one Missouri paper offered a “reading telegram”: “In view of the legislative agitation against fleshlings, what is the proper length of ladies’ crinoline?” The answer was in the joke’s title: “A Little Above Two Feet.”⁵⁸ Try as they might, small-town legislators could not ban what had become widely-recognized reality: public audiences had become accustomed to seeing women’s legs and bodies unveiled from their crinolines and skirts, clothed only in tights.

In 1891, Fleshlings were on the minds of Americans across the country. The conversation had only just begun.

⁵⁸ *The St. Joseph Herald* (St. Joseph, Missouri), April 19, 1891, 4.

Miss Kirwin & Lady Henry, 1894

In August of 1894, Susie Kirwin, who described herself as a “producer of animate art exhibitions,” wrote a letter to the *New York Herald* in defense of her art form. The letter was lucid, articulate and strong. Kirwin had decided to take a stance within the highly public, gossipy controversy swirling around her: “Lady Henry Somerset, the English Philanthropist, has made her coming to these shores chiefly notable by her extreme opposition to living pictures...I may perhaps be pardoned for expressing my non-concurrence with the views of our distinguished visitor.”⁵⁹ Lady Isabella Caroline Somerset was a prominent British women’s rights activist who, in the 1890s, paid many extended visits to the United States in support of the American temperance movement and other women’s causes. In 1894, shortly before sailing to America for a tour with the World Women’s Christian Temperance Union, Somerset had written a letter to the London press excoriating the city’s theaters for allowing women to perform “unclothed” in tableaux vivants: “This letting women make public merchandise of the beauty of their bodies is the gravest insult and dishonor put upon women in our time,” she wrote.⁶⁰

Miss Susie Kirwin, meanwhile, was an American actor—a headlining Vaudeville performer and “prima donna” recognized for her lovely singing voice and

⁵⁹ Susie Kirwin, “Defends Living Pictures” (Letter to the Editor), *New York Herald*, August 19, 1894, 7.

⁶⁰ *The Weekly Standard and Express* (Blackburn, Lancashire, England), August 4, 1894, 6.

comedic intelligence—who had lately begun participating in the living picture fad.⁶¹ In taking on Lady Somerset in the American press, Susie Kirwin both defended her faux-nude performances and cemented her status as the moment’s leading name in living pictures. The American press seized on the ripe opportunity to stage a nationwide pop-cultural debate, and for months gossip and theater columns across the country ran pieces on the question of living pictures. Lady Somerset protested that she never had had any intention of pursuing this issue as part of her women’s rights efforts in the United States, but papers nonetheless continued to feature stories relating to the “living picture controversy.”

In her response to Somerset’s critique of scantily-clad tableaux performers, Kirwin had framed the issue as a matter of class. Her letter’s primary argument is that women of her time had extremely limited means of supporting themselves, and that posing in living pictures was a decent means by which working-class women could earn money to feed and clothe themselves and their dependents. She framed the performance of living pictures as an art form worthy of as much respect as painting or sculpture. Kirwin had no patience for any of the Comstockian angst over classical images of nudity (“it is idle to waste discussion upon the nude in art,” she wrote) and she dismissed this aspect of the debate entirely. Nudes had always been in art and always would be, she reasoned. The real issue was “bread and butter”: “The professional model, whether of the studio or the living picture cabinet, is less fortunate [than wealthy philanthropists] in worldly endowment. There are widowed mothers and

⁶¹ One notice for a comic opera in which Kirwin was a star performer noted that “Pictures are now all the rage and it seems that no well-regulated establishment can afford to be without them.” *The Evening World* (New York), July 3, 1894, 5.

orphaned sisters to feed and clothe in this particular sphere of life, just the same as if the breadwinners were clerks and typewriters and slaves of the needle.” What right had a wealthy aristocratic teetotaler from England—or anyone else, for that matter—to question the means by which a woman kept herself out of poverty? What right had one woman to question another’s decision to display her body as a means of financial independence?

In Lady Somerset’s initial letter to London papers, she had written explicitly about the matter of clothing: “In some of the tableaux, young girls are posed with no other clothes at all on them but tights from neck to foot. Stage costumes have been dwindling for some time, but in these tableaux, for the first time in a Christian country, our brothers, husbands, sisters, sons and wives are bidden to assist at an exhibition of unclothed women.” In Somerset’s understanding, women wearing “tights from neck to foot” are “unclothed;” to her, nude stockings aren’t clothing at all. Kirwin’s impassioned response, on the other hand, notably side-steps any reference to tights or clothing at all: her argument conceives of performers’ bodies as a pure artistic medium. She reasons that living pictures aren’t salacious and sensual, because within these performances, the performer’s bodies become something else: “The human model, to the audience...is an inanimate thing, no more than so much paint, or canvas, or marble.” In Kirwin’s understanding of her “animate art exhibitions,” the female performers in fact *become* objects—a reverse transubstantiation—the body frozen still rather than sprung to life. To reference the garment would be to sully her art in a discussion of lewd stage mechanics; it would drag the unimpeachable classical nude down off its pedestal and into the messy human

world of clothing and nakedness. It would also, meanwhile, ruin the spectacle of her act by revealing the material reality behind the nude illusion.

The exchange between Kirwin and Somerset very prominently situated living pictures as a point of debate within the sphere of women's rights. It also enacted a class divide between women's rights advocates that haunts feminism to this day. Somerset spoke from a place of idealist, abstract thought about women's rightful dignity in the world—a place afforded to her by privilege and extreme wealth—while Kirwin spoke from within the fray of being an actor and a self-supporting woman within an archly sexist world. Caught between class-based perceptions of decency and independence, living pictures were more than simply a matter of popular entertainment: they tapped deep into issues of women's bodily objectification and bodily freedom. The press saw that these acts of nudity could be framed as a point of tension between powerful women, and they eagerly stoked the flames. On either side of the argument, something big was at stake in these faux-nude performances.

War on Tights, 1896

In February of 1896, newspapers around the country carried coverage of a new front in Anthony Comstock's crusade against the obscene. "TO BANISH FLESHLINGS," ran one headline in the *San Francisco Examiner*; "*Anthony Comstock's War on One of the Stage's Chief 'Drawbacks.'*"⁶² The column ran down the center of page twenty-seven of the paper, decorated on each side by a string of small illustrations showing performers wearing various forms of stage tights. Notably

⁶² *San Francisco Examiner*, February 23, 1896, 27.

absent among these little drawings is any figure shown wearing a full-body suit of fleshlings; all of the figures wear tights in conjunction with other stage garments. Although the news story receives a long treatment and is called out on the page by its illustrated borders, it is telling that the article only makes page twenty-seven of the day's news. By this point—a quarter-century into Comstock's anti-pornography career—the press and the public had begun to roll their eyes at many Comstockian pursuits of censorship.

In Albany, New York State Senator Mullin had recently introduced a bill in close collaboration with Comstock. If passed, the bill would prohibit, according to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “the appearance in public of any person, male or female, in tights,” and it would also “suppress the cigarette pictures of women in tights, window lithographs of burlesque shows and even living pictures and the ballet.”⁶³ Most public commentators found the thought of banning fleshlings absurd. During the bill's initial hearing, Comstock had been publicly called “the biggest blackmailer in all of New York City” and had been described as a man who had “never earned an honest dollar in his life.” (He had promptly sued this name-caller in retaliation.)⁶⁴ Like Seyfert's attempt five years earlier, Comstock's Anti-Tights Bill was doomed to ignominy and failure.

This latest legislative effort had marked a new development in the history of fleshlings: even under attack by the country's leading anti-nudity activist, they could not be censored. *The San Francisco Examiner's* assessment of Comstock's latest

⁶³ *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 4, 1896, 2.

⁶⁴ “Hot Words at a Hearing: Anthony Comstock and Dr. Levenson Indulge in Personalities,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 1896, 3.

legislative effort framed it as a blatant (and embarrassing) attack on the dress of forward-thinking women:

Mr. Comstock says he is very much scandalized at the way the tight habit is spreading, and as chief overseer of the people's morals he feels it is his bounded duty to check this pernicious failing...What has wounded Mr. Comstock's sensibilities particularly is the fact that a number of young ladies have dashes across his vision in Central Park and elsewhere astride of flying bicycles and attired in what they call bloomers, but which he declares are nothing more nor less than a form of tights, and a scandalous form at that. So he has gone to the very root of the evil, and has determined to cut the tight, be it called a bloomer or anything else, entirely out of the lives of wicked and depraved New Yorkers.

The connection between the garments of the stage and the garments of the bicycle-riding New Woman was central to Comstock's censorship of tights. As we will see in the next chapter, both were iterations on a boundary-pushing new theme in the world of dress: women in garments that promoted movement—women in *pants*. Comstock's attempt at censoring fleshlings had helped to codify their relationship to new womanhood and to turn-of-the-century women's rights activities.

The Notorious Princesse de Chimay

One of the grandest moments in the history of fleshlings happened right at the close of the nineteenth century. In late July of 1899, a brief article appeared in a small-town Massachusetts newspaper:

A man named Logan, who has registered at the leading hotels as a New Yorker, is taking steps to get permission from the French government for the Princess of Chimay to return to France. The princess gave such offense to the French moral code [that] she was virtually exiled from

Paris and the country. She allowed herself to be photographed, while dressed only in “fleshings.”⁶⁵

American readers would have known exactly who the Princess of Chimay was. A decade earlier, a sixteen-year-old Michigan girl named Clara Ward, the daughter of Detroit multi-millionaire Eber Ward, had become one of the most famous socialites in America when she was wooed by a royal prince of Belgium, Prince Joseph de Caraman-Chimay. Ward married the Belgian prince in 1890, becoming a real live American princess and demonstrating to the world that nouveau-riche midwestern Americans were worthy of European royalty (fig. 72). Ward’s fairytale was gossip-column candy, and articles about her glamorous life sprinkled the pages of newspapers and magazines across the world.⁶⁶

By the time Ward was in her late-twenties, though, her sugary teenage celebrity had turned into something decidedly more piquant. In 1896, she left the Prince and their two young children and ran away with a Hungarian violinist named Rigo Jancsi. The American press exploded in delighted fury at this remarkable scandal. Articles reveled in every detail of the affair, and for years gossip columnists provided American readers with updates on the Princess of Chimay’s moral, financial and physical decadence as she and “the Gypsy fiddler,” as the press often referred to Rigo, travelled across Europe.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *North Adams Transcript* (North Adams, MA), July 27, 1899, 1.

⁶⁶ For one description of Ward’s celebrated appearance at her wedding, see *The Daily News* (London), May 21, 1890, 5, and for a description of her glamorous life as Princess of Belgium, see “A Beautiful American Who is a Princess,” *Abbeville Press and Banner* (Abbeville, SC), September 25, 1895, 7.

⁶⁷ See, for example, *Salina Herald* (Salina Kansas), February 7, 1897, 2.



Figure 72 Prinzess Chimay. Germany, ca. 1900. Photomechanical print on postcard.



Figure 73 Rigo Jancsi and Clara Ward, Berlin, ca. 1900. Photomechanical print on postcard.

Ward seemed to court the notoriety. In Paris, she began performing at the Folies Bergères. Not yet having obtained a divorce, the Prince de Chimay reportedly ordered her to cease using her royal title; in response, she was reported to have had her arm tattooed with the Belgian royal crest and Rigo's name beneath it.⁶⁸ She then posed in several series of photographs taken by prominent Parisian studios, including Reutlinger, which were quickly becoming internationally famous for producing risqué images and postcards. In one scandalous image, she posed embracing Rigo (fig. 73). In many others, she wore nothing more than fleshlings (figs. 74 & 75). In 1897, the Boston Globe reported the shocking new phenomenon: "The Princess de Chimay is pictorially represented all over Paris in poses plastiques in every variety of dress and undress. Crowds gather around the pictures." In many of these images, Ward's tattoo is clearly discernable, although it appears to be in the form of an arm band rather than the reported royal crest.

More than any other performer in stage tights, Clara Ward became known for the garment itself. Whereas earlier in the 1890s, other American performers had gone personally unscathed in the press for revealing their bodies in fleshlings, Ward garnered ridicule. Her appearances marked a turning point in the garment: while once fleshlings had been garments of the stage, the American press now recognized them with new prurient shock as garments that could be worn in erotic photographs. By posing for the camera, she had turned the transient faux-nude performance into something that could be caught on film and made into limitless reproductions. Packaged in flesh-colored tights and frozen into printed image, her body could be

⁶⁸ See, for example, "Rigo: Dead or Alive: Princess Chimay Still Sticks to her Gypsy Lover," *The Inter Ocean* (Chicago), June 11, 1899, 37.



Figure 74 *Clara Ward*. France, ca. 1900. Photographic print on postcard.

purchased and owned by anyone. At the same time, Clara Ward had refused society's rules for her, had abandoned her royal husband, and had taken radical ownership over her own life.

But her offense was also greater than simply allowing herself to be photographed in fleshlings. Clara Ward pushed the boundaries of decency by displaying her body so openly in what the arbiters of social rules deemed a less-than-desirable state. The boundaries of bodily acceptability were not amorphous moral codes, but often in fact amounted to legal censorship: one syndicated report from Berlin, titled simply "Too Fat for True Art," demonstrated how clearly defined the rules of bodily transgression were:

The Berlin civil courts and the Leipsic Court of Appeals differ in the matter of the Princess de Chimay's photographs. The Berlin courts say that the photographs of the princess in fleshlings are not more objectionable than nude or semi-nude statuary. The Leipsic court regards the form of the Princess as not at all artistic "as the form is too fat." The Berlin authorities, however, prefer to suppress the pictures.⁶⁹

Although the German authorities of Berlin and Leipsig differed on what constituted an objectionable body, the case demonstrates how both cities claimed legal power to assess the physical state of Ward's body and censor its representation in photographs. Her full figure was seen as inherently linked to the sexual transgression of her poses.

Upon her early death in 1917, newspapers reported Ward's life story as a kind of parable about those who flout society's rules. One feature, titled "Notorious Princess de Chimay's Last Punishment," showed pictures of Ward at three different points in her life: before, during, and after marriage. Like many women, Ward had

⁶⁹ *Wilkes-Barre Times* (Wilkes-Barre PA), October 3, 1898, 6.



Figure 75 Clara Ward posing in a fleshling. France, ca. 1900. Hand-tinted and embellished silver gelatin print on postcard.

gained weight between her teenage years and her post-childbirth adulthood, but the gossip columns took special delight in critiquing her changed appearance. Columnists suggested that her evolving looks were a sign of the Princess's self-indulgence and depravity.⁷⁰ One feature had the subtitle, "*How the Shocking Career of Beautiful, Wealthy, Fashionable Clara Ward Again Teaches the Lesson that Defiance of Recognized Conventions of Society Can End Only in Utter Unhappiness and Ruin.*"⁷¹ The Princess of Chimay had been tried by the press and found guilty of defying society's rules for her; her demise was deemed a fitting punishment.

Clara Ward had given fleshlings a celebrity American identity—and had tinged them permanently with her own unique brand of social defiance.

So-Called Beauty Contest, 1905

In the early years of the twentieth-century, a new application of fleshlings began to make the news. A report in *The New York Times* from 1905, titled "So-Called Beauty Contest," describes a "Physical Culture Show" that took place at Madison Square Garden:

There was a preliminary examination of men and women last night in the concert room of Madison Square Garden for a coming physical culture contest. Representatives of both sexes were there in fleshlings or union underwear to exhibit their proportions before a committee of 'artists, sculptors, physicians, and athletes.'⁷²

⁷⁰ *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, June 20, 1915.

⁷¹ *South Bend News-Times* (Southbend, IN), January 20, 1917, 5.

⁷² *The New York Times*, October 2, 1905, 5.

Physical culture was an international health movement of the late-nineteenth-century that attempted to reform the perceived physical degeneracy of an increasingly industrialized society. Around the turn of the century, several figures offered competing physical culture “systems,” or programs of diet and exercise, that promised to cure humanity’s sins through bodily health. One of the most prominent figures of the movement was Eugen Sandow, a German weight-lifter, who published a magazine called “Physical Culture” and first coined the term “bodybuilding.” In 1901, Sandow held the world’s first major bodybuilding competition in London, and thus began a fad for physical culture exhibitions. The “so-called beauty contest” at Madison Square Garden participated in this new form of bodily display.⁷³

In this application, fleshlings very clearly serve a role of packaging the body for display. Referring to the garments as “fleshlings or union underwear,” the article demonstrates a broadening of the public conception of these garments: once garments of the stage, body tights were increasingly seen in new applications, and were even synonymous, in this reference, to suits of long-underwear. *The New York Times* write-up additionally noted that the contest had brought together different types of female performers, all wearing form-revealing fleshlings:

At the close of the examination... the women were brought in. They did not seem abashed as they stood in a row to be examined. Some of them tied their sashes a little tighter: others arranged their hair. There was a Swedish woman, a well-known artists’ model: a black-eyed sylph with muscles of steel, a fighting eye and a brogue; a chunk of a woman

⁷³ For a thorough treatment of physical culture during this period, see Michael Anton Budd, *The Sculpture Machine: Physical Culture and Body Politics in the Age of Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

with muscles like those of a man, and many others: also an actress, fully dressed, who on the entrance of the female contestants arose in her wrath to tell the press agent of the exhibition that the invitation to her to compete was an outrage. 'I am a lady even if I do wear fleshlings in comic opera,' she cried. 'I am physically the superior of the whole bunch, and so is every girl in our show. I would not have hesitated to appear in opera costume, but not in this way. For shame!'

To an actor who had worn fleshlings on stage, this public assessment of women's athletic physiques was a completely new and unacceptable use of a garment that had been part of her professional identity. To her, fleshlings belonged in a theatrical context; worn in this new, up-close and personal public inspection, they took on completely different implications that, she felt, pushed the boundaries of respectable femininity. The garment was nonetheless shifting roles and becoming more widely used in new contexts.

She Drew the Line at Wearing Tights, 1910

Two decades after the "anti-tights bill" had had its moment in the spotlight, fleshlings were still finding their way into the headlines. In 1910, an article in *The New York Times* ran with the headline, "*She Drew the Line at Wearing Tights.*" "Ordered Her, She Says, To Don Fleshlings and Sit on an Elephant," the subheadline explained. A performer in the Ziegfeld Follies, Nora Bayes, had refused to wear fleshlings on stage, and the show's producer, Florenz Ziegfeld, had decided to maim her career in retaliation. The Ziegfeld Follies were a new Broadway theatrical revue modelled after the Follies Bergères; founded in 1907, the company was quickly becoming famous for its wildly elaborate costumes and productions. When Bayes refused to wear fleshlings, Ziegfeld had refused her work and had sought a legal injunction against her right to find employment elsewhere. The case had risen to the New York Supreme Court:

“Mr. Ziegfeld wanted me to wear tights and to sit perched on the back of an elephant,” said Miss Bayes on the stand, in explaining the trouble. “I told him I had never worn tights and did not purpose doing so, while on the elephant’s back or anywhere else.”⁷⁴

Bayes’s experience demonstrates how high the stakes still were for fleshlings. The article refers to her as a “prima donna,” a leading lady; she was an established actress and was also a married woman (her husband figured prominently in her case.) To Bayes, the idea of wearing tights on stage was morally offensive and degrading. She prided herself on never having had to display her body so blatantly during her career. To Ziegfeld, meanwhile, fleshlings were a matter of control. If his employee refused them, then he would destroy her career.

The case outlines the mechanics of objectification at play for women who worked in performative professions. Costumes may have been a matter of choice for some actors, but for others they weren’t. Across the twenty-five-year turn-of-the-century fleshling era, many women were no doubt forced, by economic or other pressures, to wear these revealing garments against their sense of self-respect. Fleshlings embody the reality that female actors’ value was inherently tied to their bodies.

Judge James O’Gorman ruled in Ziegfeld’s favor, requiring that Bayes wait out the remainder of her contract with Ziegfeld before obtaining work elsewhere. By the time the case was decided, this was only a matter of months away. Bayes went on to have a prominent acting and singing career, and she was a regular figure in gossip columns into the twenties.

⁷⁴ *The New York Times*, April 28, 1910, 9.

European Immorality, 1912

In 1912, a paper in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania ran a short editorial piece critiquing “popular songs” for their “increasing indecency and vulgarity.” The piece mentioned fleshlings as part of its argument about this new trend in pop songs:

They were written because the American stage has lost much of the morality that kept it above the European stage so many years. There are actresses today whose only claim to prominence is their immorality. Most of these, let us hasten to say, are European importations. The tendency toward nudity has been growing stronger with the passing years, and there are women who wear as little covering as the law will allow. Formerly they wore tights, or “fleshlings,” when they discarded skirts on the stage; now they go in for nudity, and the exhibition is defended in the name of “art.”⁷⁵

In the two years since Nora Bayes had made New York headlines for refusing to wear tights, something had changed. Fleshlings had so recently been the center of the controversy around nudity, but now they represented the past: where once stage performers had clothed themselves in flesh-colored garments, now they had begun revealing real flesh. The garment had seamlessly morphed from an object that implied exposure to one that implied coverage. The fleshlings zeitgeist had shifted.

The commentator also implies that fleshlings had represented a peculiarly American ethos of propriety. The new trend in nudity, the editorial observes, was arriving on American stages fresh from Europe, performed by actors who were themselves mostly “European importations.” Looking back from 1912, the Harrisburg Daily Independent observed that fleshlings, now a vestige of the past, had allowed American stages to remain morally superior to their European counterparts.

⁷⁵ *Harrisburg Daily Independent* (Harrisburg, PA), December 30, 1912, 6.

Fleshlings Vanish

By World War I, after a quarter-century in the news, the term fleshlings had begun to fade in American papers. War has a way of sweeping away the confetti of peacetime cultural trends. In the coming decade, hemlines would steadily rise, inuring Americans to the appearance of women's legs on everyday streets and ushering in a taste for silk stockings. Fleshlings were no longer as poignant and provocative as they had been at the turn of the century.

The garment's decline coincided not only with the beginning of war but also with the official end of the Comstock Era: in 1915, Anthony Comstock died. His life had defined the American dialogue around sexuality and nudity in the period between the Civil War and World War I—and so had fleshlings. Comstock's efforts had attempted to establish a clear legal divide between obscenity and decency, and yet between these two poles, female performers of the 1890s and 1900s had managed to create a complex, ambiguous middle ground of faux-nudity and bodily expression. Their garments thus serve as unique and critical documents within a period of American sexual history that is defined by its censorship—by its excision—of sexual material. They are the product of a culture that spent four decades grappling with the meanings of obscenity, nudity and decency, and they marked the dawning of a new era in struggles for women's rights. Fleshlings both covered bodies and revealed them; they contain the entangled stories of both the censor and the censored.

Chapter 5

A TRANSGRESSIVE GARMENT: FLESHLINGS, DRESS REFORM AND THE TENSION BETWEEN OBJECTIFICATION AND BODILY FREEDOM

As Susie Kirwin and Isabella Somerset demonstrated in their exchange over living pictures, performing as a nude woman in the 1890s evoked the political. For Somerset, it symbolized the very worst of society's treatment of women. For Kirwin, it represented artistic and economic freedom. Neither Kirwin nor Somerset mentioned Anthony Comstock—this was an issue that had to do with something bigger and more personal than the broad prudism of anti-obscenity efforts. Censorship aside, the garment represented a tension between women's *own* understandings of their needs for liberation. Fleshlings had become participants in the breathless turn-of-the-century struggle for women's rights.

A History of Transgression

The stage celebrities of the 1890s—Clara Ward, Susie Kirwin—had not been the first American women to become famous for posing publicly in nude tights. In the early 1860s, the poet and actor Adah Isaacs Menken had become sensationally famous for her Broadway performance in the melodrama *Mazeppa*, in which she had played the role of a man. In the play's climactic scene, the title character is chained naked to a horse and sent to his death. Instead of allowing a stage dummy to perform the scene for her, Menken dressed in flesh-colored tights and rode a real horse onto the stage, appearing as though naked.⁷⁶ The performance was wildly scandalous and became

⁷⁶ Michael Foster and Barbara Foster, *A Dangerous Woman: The Life, Loves, and Scandals of Adah Isaacs Menken, 1835-1868, America's Original Superstar* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2011), 114-120.

legendary. Menken took her performance to London and Paris, where it was also deemed both completely shocking and highly worth seeing. Menken's daring act of faux-nudity won her transnational notoriety and surrounded her with a coterie of free-thinking artists and intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic. She had an affair with Alexandre Dumas, and George Sand was the godmother of her illegitimate child.⁷⁷ For Menken, wearing tights had been an act of revelation—of nudity—but it had also been an act of gender transgression. Playing a male part, a “breeches role,” she participated fully in the male theatrical tradition of wearing tights on stage, and she had gone on to wear mens pantsuits offstage, in her regular life (as George Sand had already done for years.)⁷⁸ Like pants, tights highlighted the existence of a human's legs, a body part that women had hidden under skirts for millennia. Menken's nude stage tights anticipated the garment that would flourish a few decades later, but the garments she wore in the 1860s were significantly different from those that would proliferate at the turn of the century. Menken's nude outfit consisted of a skin-tight top with short sleeves and matching leg coverings, but she also wore a blousy pair of white cotton shorts swathed around her mid-section, blurring the lines of her lower torso and crotch (fig. 76). Menken's singular act of nudity no doubt paved the way for future stage stars to perform their own shocking displays of flesh in decades to come, but her particular brand of transgression, couched as it was in the issues of 1860s America, had a unique cast to it. Menken's nude tights delineated her legs and allowed her to become a man on stage; they were an act of transgender

⁷⁷ Foster and Foster, *A Dangerous Woman*, 250-253; 266-276.

⁷⁸ *A Dangerous Woman*, 251.



Figure 76 Napoleon Sarony. *Menken*. New York, 1863. Photographic print on cabinet card. (Sarony & Co. / Museum of the City of New York 41.132.161.)

performance. They also represented racial ambiguity. Menken's ethnicity was often questioned, and she publically played with its perception. For a period, she claimed Judaism as her heritage, but it was rumored that she had been born into a mixed-racial New Orleans family.⁷⁹ Performing in flesh-colored tights, Menken wasn't necessarily assuming a particular racial identity. Her act threw open the boundaries of both race and gender, but few other women were ready to follow her lead into a radically defiant social existence.

Perhaps Menken's most significant nineteenth-century predecessor in flesh-colored tights was a South African woman, Sara Baartman, whose experience as a performer is one of the most prominent and ghastly exhibitions of gendered-racial oppression in the nineteenth century. In the 1820s, Baartman was kidnapped from her home and made to appear as performer in European freak shows. Called the "Hottentot Venus," she was displayed for the shape of her breasts, buttocks, genitals and thighs and was toured around Europe. She is often said to have worn a skin-colored body stocking or "fleshings" to give the appearance of nudity.⁸⁰ One period account of a show in France recounted that she appeared in "tight, skin-color clothes."⁸¹ Baartman's case is a rare—if not singular—documented instance of a black woman publicly wearing a flesh-colored bodystocking in the nineteenth century, and her story serves as a stark counterpoint to the history of white (or pink) fleshlings.

⁷⁹ *A Dangerous Woman*, 9-19.

⁸⁰ Many histories of Baartman mention this bodystocking. Rachel Holmes discusses the garments in detail in *African Queen*, although she does not cite her sources for this information.

⁸¹ Hobson, *Venus in the Dark*, 44.

Baartman's complete lack of consent and freedom make her experience incomparable to that of any white woman who wore fleshlings at the end of the century, and her story demonstrates the stark racial differences between the objectification of white and black female bodies in the nineteenth-century. In contrast to Baartman's experience, white women in the late nineteenth-century were able to perform in skin-colored suits without having to confront or to suffer the implications of slavery.

Although much of the fleshling imagery works within the racial idiom of classicism and whiteness, some of the poses also evoke the exoticist racial imagery of harems, making use the heavily-trodden trope of the imagined Orient as a safe space for erotic play and fetish. Nearly all of the women who appear in turn-of-the-century bodystocking images might be broadly classified as "white," but they in fact represented a wide range of nationalities, skin tones, hair colors and body shapes. While the images capitalize on the idea of whiteness, they simultaneously demonstrate the amorphousness of racial categorization. Although the turn-of-the-century fleshling phenomenon is in many ways distinct from Baartman's horrific experience, it also participates in the same coarse system in which bodily value is codified by arbitrary racial distinctions. Baartman's garment is therefore an essential and poignant precursor to the pink and white fleshlings of the late nineteenth century.

Several decades before Sara Baartman, in late eighteenth-century Naples, Emma Hamilton—a famed British beauty who had risen to social prominence as a mistress and muse of several important men—inaugurated a new trend of scantily-clad classical poses when she began performing reenactments of scenes from Greek myth. For these performances, which she called "attitudes," Hamilton developed a costume of tunics and drapes that became legendary and is often credited as having



Figure 77 Raphael Morgen. *Lady Hamilton as the Comic Muse Thalia*. Italy, 1791. Engraving. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.)

inspired the coming trend in Grecian dress across Europe and America (fig. 77).⁸² Her tunics were widely caricatured for their revealing, form-clinging display of Hamilton's figure, but they also garnered her wide admiration and fame.

Aside from these three exceptional cases, the single largest precedent for the wearing of flesh-colored garments was set, of course, by the ballet. Over the course of the eighteenth century, as the French courtly tradition of dance became increasingly naturalistic and both male and female performers pushed for more expressive choreography, costumes gradually shifted to accommodate a greater range of movement. In the 1720s, the French dancer Marie-Anne Cupis de Camargo ("La Camargo") was known for her "virtuosic footwork," which she displayed beneath shortened skirts.⁸³ For modesty, La Camargo wore "close-fitting knickers" beneath her skirts to shield her legs from view as she moved in her new, shorter stage dress; these garments were "a necessary addition," as Mary Collins and Joanna Jarvis explain, "because at this time women generally never wore such items of underwear." In the 1730s, Marie Salle, one of the first female choreographers, appeared on the London stage "without a panier, without a skirt [...] no ornament on her head: dressed neither in a corset nor a petticoat, but in a simple muslin robe [...] in the manner of a Greek statue."⁸⁴ Towards the end of the century, in the 1780s and 1790s, female dancers began to perform on Paris and London stages wearing flesh-

⁸² Betsey Bolton, "Sensibility and Speculation," in *Lewd and Notorious: Female Transgression in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Katharine Kittredge (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 133-164.

⁸³ Collins and Jarvis, *The Great Leap from Earth to Heaven*, 180.

⁸⁴ *Mercure de France*, April 1764, 770-72, quoted in Collins and Jarvis, 180.

colored tights, garments which combined briefs with stockings in order to shield the lower half of the body from view. In French, they were called *maillots*, named for a costumier of the Opéra, Maillot, who is often credited with originating the use of tights in the ballet, although they appear to have already existed at the time that he introduced them. These flesh-colored modesty garments were quickly recognized to be scandalously flesh-evoking, and the Paris Opera administration soon switched to white tights, although the precedent of provocative pink hose had been set and would become a mainstay of nineteenth-century (and later) ballet and stage performance.⁸⁵ These female dancers all pushed the boundaries of respectable dress through costume innovations that were required by the physical parameters of their performances—by the demands of their bodies in motion.

By the late nineteenth-century, nude tights had made several notable appearances in history. Adah Menken, Sara Baartman and countless female ballet dancers had all presented the world with startling new visions of the female form clad in form-fitting nude hosiery and yet, throughout most of the nineteenth century, tights remained the purview of the stage. It was not until the last years of the century that the scandal of flesh-colored stockings would become a locus of broad cultural debates about women's bodily freedoms.

Fleshlings & Dress Reform

In the 1890s, the public debate over fleshlings unfolded alongside another debate at the center of women's rights: the ongoing struggle for dress reform. On the same front page that the *San Francisco Examiner* ran an update on the

⁸⁵ Chazin-Bennahum, *The Lure of Perfection*, 116.

Kirwin/Somerset argument, it also featured an article on the opinions of Miss Kate Field, a prominent American intellectual, journalist and lecturer: “*KATE FIELD ON DRESS REFORM: She Strongly Advocates a Radical Change in the Costumes Now Worn By Women - Not a Supporter of Bloomers - Nothing to Say about Crusade on Living Pictures,*” ran the headline. Although Field opposed temperance, hated the term “reformer” and found the idea of women wearing pants ridiculous, she felt strongly that women’s garments should not compress their internal organs:

The heavy skirt and tight binding of the bodice about the waist are the two great evils of our present system of dress. They work untold ruin to the sex. It stands to reason that the vital organs should be absolutely free from compression, and until dress is arranged so as to make this freedom possible, the majority of American women will be invalids, as they are to-day.⁸⁶

Though she scoffed at bloomers, Field contended that mainstream fashions were physically destroying American women. In place of the de-rigueur hourglass silhouette, she proposed a return to the Empire-style of dress—the gauzy, free-flowing, Greek-inspired gowns worn nearly a century earlier by women of the infant American republic. Although Field had nothing to say on the Somerset living picture controversy—the issue was presumably beneath her—her commentary on dress offers a fascinating juxtaposition with the fleshling fad. In both cases, American women looked to a classical vision for inspiration for a new way to treat the female body. Field suggested Grecian-inspired gowns; fleshlings allowed women to show off their natural forms in imitation of classical nudes. Enmeshed in these gauzy classical idioms was the unavoidable symbolism of democracy: the implications of freedom, of

⁸⁶ *San Francisco Examiner*, December 10, 1894, 1.

citizenship, of full participation in society. Neither of these costumes was recognized by the prevailing women's reform movements.

By the 1890s, dress reformers had already spent decades offering possible solutions to the problem of dressing women's bodies without injuring them. Corsets made for shallow breaths, cracked ribs and displaced organs; layers of voluminous skirts prevented women from moving safely and unencumbered through the world. Many nineteenth-century activists worked to re-envision the fundamentals of clothing a woman's body. While some reformers, beginning as early as the 1820s, believed that women should adopt their own forms of pants, such as bloomers, others suggested more moderate reforms by attempting to redesign the clothing worn *under* dresses and skirts. They suggested new foundational garments—new shapes and structures upon which to build a new vision of female experience and female appearance.

Many of these visionary new undergarments shared a basic form: they were “combinations”—single, full-body garments consisting of coverings for both the top and bottom of the body. They had individual legs; they were pantsuits. In 1868, A New York knitting company patented the union suit, a one-piece undergarment which many other companies also produced.⁸⁷ In 1870s, Mary Walker, a medical doctor who had served in Civil War hospitals and had become well-known for wearing pants, designed a new version of the union suit called the “dress reform undersuit,” which consisted of loose trousers attached to a button-down top. She argued that this

⁸⁷ Patricia Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2015), 78.

garment would prevent “seduction and rape.”⁸⁸ By connecting top and bottom garments, combinations covered the genitals and made it hard for anyone but the wearer to access them. Another reformer named Susan Taylor Converse designed a version called “the Emancipation Suit,” patented in 1875.⁸⁹ “The suit consists of the waist and drawers,” the patent read, “Either in one continuous garment, or made separate and buttoned together at the hips.” Other garment manufacturers quickly picked up on the design and began advertising their own renditions of the emancipation suit (fig. 78). All of these new undersuits for women envisioned clothing as a means of safety and liberation rather than pain and constriction, and they offered this new freedom—emancipation—in the form of full-body pantsuits.

Garments such as the anti-rape suit and the Emancipation Suit struggled to reach wide usage. In general, pant-like garments for women were often critiqued as laughably masculine and therefore asexual or unnatural (fig. 79). Nineteenth-century women who appeared publicly in pants tended to be notorious and exceptional; social commentators often framed them as mannish intellectuals, harlots or kooks. Any garment that divided a woman’s lower half into two distinct parts—legs—implied a gender transgression that remained deeply strange within American culture throughout the nineteenth century.


Despite the fact that dress reformers in America and England had maintained groups of committed followers through decades of coalitions and expositions, it wasn’t until the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth that combination

⁸⁸ Cunningham, *Reforming Women’s Fashion*, 79.

⁸⁹ Cunningham, 80.

THE UNION UNDER-FLANNEL.

Patented October 27, 1863. Reissued February 5, 1878.




The ever-increasing popularity of this most sensible hygienic garment fully warrants us in making an earnest request to all ladies who have never worn the Union Under-Flannels, that they will not allow another season to pass without purchasing a set of these suits and giving them a fair trial. Ladies who have tried them say that nothing would induce them to return to wearing the old-fashioned vests and drawers, and furthermore that it is difficult to express in words the feeling of ease and comfort derived from wearing these suits. Their universal verdict is, "Try them once, and you will never want to wear the others."

By reference to the drawing it will be seen that the vest and drawers are in one, being knitted together in process of manufacture, forming a continuous garment from the neck to the wrists and ankles, clothing the whole body evenly and fitting it closely. These flannels are manufactured expressly for us from the finest white cashmere, merino, and all-wool, and also in cheaper grades.

In ordering ready-made, send waist and bust measure, and length from neck to ankle, and be careful to name style of garment desired.

On next page will be found prices. Those living at a distance can be supplied by mail.

The Union Under-Flannel Suit for Children.




The superiority of these suits over all other forms of flannels for children is a point now settled beyond question. Every mother will study the welfare of her little ones by providing them with these comfortable garments, for they serve a two-fold purpose.

1st. They are the warmest undergarments that can be worn with other clothing during the day; and

2d. As a night-gown they are without comparison, being at once economical, warm and complete. They are sold at prices which bring them within the reach of all. See opposite page.

The Emancipation Suit.

Protected by Patents Aug. 3 and Sept. 7, 1872.



The Suit consists of the waist and drawers, either in one continuous garment, or made separate and buttoned together at the hips.

The Emancipation Waists, Drawers and Suits are made in sizes 22 to 35 inclusive.

Orders for any of these garments will be filled and sent by mail, postage prepaid, on receipt of price.

The Emancipation Waist.

Style 201.	Plain, short sleeves, laced at side, per waist	New Prices, June 1, 77, \$1 75
202.	" long sleeves, " "	2 00
210.	Trimmed, short sleeves, " "	3 00
211.	" long sleeves, " "	3 25

The number indicating the size is the waist measure in inches.

The Emancipation Drawers.

Style 201.	Plain, open or closed, each	\$1 00
210.	Trimmed, open or closed, each	1 50

The number indicating the size is the waist measure in inches of the Emancipation Waist with which they are to be worn.

The Emancipation Suit.

Style 401.	Plain, short sleeves, open or closed drawers, per suit	\$3 00
402.	" long " " " "	3 00
410.	Trim'd, short " " " "	4 50
411.	" long " " " "	4 50

The number indicating the size is the waist measure in inches.

Patterns are not For Sale.

TESTIMONIALS.

I consider the Emancipation Waist preferable to any other one garment of its kind that I have seen, being suitable both for lean and stout, in summer and in winter. By means of the puffing in front, when full and starched, the necessity of corsetry, bending joints is obviated. It is a waist to which any and all sorts of undergarments may be attached at pleasure, and to the comfort and satisfaction with which it can be worn, I can testify from my own experience.

Mrs. C. M. SEVERANCE, formerly of the Boston Dress Reform Committee.

After several months of experience in and out of the Dress Reform Committee Rooms with many "reform" garments, I am compelled to admit that the Emancipation Waist for women and children is a perfect hygienic garment, well adapted for all figures and conditions of women. Knowing many who have worn it, I have yet to find the person who would do without it after a few days' trial.

Mrs. R. H. HORTON.

Messrs. GEO. FROST & Co. Dear Sirs:— Please send as soon as possible another "Emancipation Waist," 22 inches, for which find enclosed \$2.00. I have had two of them already, and find they give entire satisfaction. Address,

ST. JOHN'S, (Prov. Quebec, Canada), June 15, 1876.
Mrs. JAMES MACGIBSON,
St. John's, Prov. Quebec, Canada.

Figure 78 The Union Under-Flannel (left) and the Emancipation waist (right). Mrs. A. Fletcher, *Illustrated Catalogue of Ladies' and Children's Underwear* (New York: ca. 1884) 4,7. (Courtesy, the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)



Figure 79 Comic valentine showing a female figure whose form-fitting skirt has turned into pants, rendering her masculine. Ca. 1880-1890. (Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.)

suits entered the mainstream. Over the course of the 1870s and 1880s, as manufacturers worked to improve their knitting technologies, more and more versions of single-piece undergarments had appeared on the market. In the 1880s and 1890s, an explosion of combination suits became available in the form of “sanitary garments,” pieces of underwear made not only to clothe but also to cure the body of various problems. These garments were often designed and promoted by doctors as offering a wide range of health benefits to both sexes, but particularly to women and girls. One of the most famous of these promoters was a German physician, Dr. Jaeger, whose “sanitary system” of cotton-wool-blend garments became a success in Europe and in the States. The company’s top seller was “Dr. Jaeger’s Ladies’ Normal Sanatory Combination Suits” (fig. 80), which were advertised as being “constructed in all parts as to fit the skin like a glove, while the elasticity of the Stockinet and its fine texture prevent any perceptible increase of size, at the same time imparting grace and elegance to the form.” They were available in two tones, white and “natural,” of a material the company referred to as “gauze.” Dr. Jaeger’s catalogs included lengthy introductory statements on the health benefits of his garments—the particular blend and knit of the wool was devised to wick away moisture and keep particular parts of the body warmer than others—but the company also recognized the aesthetic importance of these garments. These thin, elastic new combination suits represented a technological advance in textile production. Fine-gauge knits allowed women to dress their bodies comfortably, without strict corsetry and without extra bulk to interfere with a sleek, fashionable silhouette.

Still, the sanitary suits of the turn of the century were sold within an undergarment market that remained dominated by corsets. Many sanitary garments



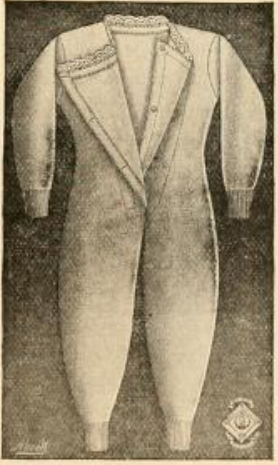
DR. JAEGER'S Ladies' Normal Sanatory Combination Suits.

No garment in the whole Sanitary System has given greater satisfaction than this Combination Suit. It is so constructed in all parts as to fit the skin like a glove, while the elasticity of the soft Stockinet and its fine texture prevent any perceptible increase of size, at the same time imparting grace and elegance to the form.

In addition to regular stock as per illustrations, we can also supply the following:

Gauze *natural*, knee length, short sleeves.
 " " ankle " " "
 Gauze *white*, " " " "
 K, short sleeves, natural only.

SIZES (Bust). Inches.	GAUZE	K.	KK.	KK.	B.
	(Very light). Single-Breasted. (Regular Summer). Single-Breasted.	Single-Breasted.	Double-Breasted.	Double-Breasted.	Double-Breasted.
30	\$3 50	\$3 50	\$4 30	\$4 65	\$4 75
32	3 75	3 75	4 55	4 90	5 00
34	4 00	4 00	4 80	5 15	5 25
36	4 25	4 25	5 05	5 40	5 50
38	4 50	4 50	5 30	5 65	5 75
40	4 75	4 75	5 55	5 90	6 00
42	5 00	5 00	5 80	6 15	6 25
44	5 25	5 25	6 05	6 40	6 50



Gauze, K and KK, kept in white at 40c. more than natural.



Figure 80 Woman Posing in combination suit. Dr. Jaeger's Co. *Illustrated Catalogue and Price List* (New York: ca. 1897), 27. RBR GT2073 D75 TC (Courtesy, the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)

and combinations were worn in conjunction with modified corsets, which were being marketed as healthful alternatives to the wasp-waist garments of 1880s vogue (fig. 81). In the U.S., an upstate New York knitting mill, Oneita, patented its “elastic ribbed union suit” in 1893 and advertised the garment widely in newspapers and women’s magazines. The “Oneita,” as it was dubbed, was said to “cover the entire body like an additional skin, Fitting like a glove but softly and without pressure” (fig. 82). The company touted with particular emphasis the garment’s stylish improvement over the union suits of the past: “*No buttons down the front.*” The garment was modelled in illustrations by the figure of a goddess-like Grecian statue, whose serene gesture suggested the comfort, fit and flexibility of the garment while strongly evoking the living picture fad. The image ran frequently in publications throughout the 1890s, and could often be found side by side with advertisements for corsets. As with Kate Field’s vision for a second coming of Grecian-inspired dress—the style which had been sparked a century earlier by Emma Hamilton—the Oneita figure beckoned to the future by reaching back to the imagery of the Greeks, those original visionaries of free society. Next to the models wearing the familiar old form of the corset, the graceful Oneita lady seemed to offer an incomparable poise, glamour and physical freedom. She was a statue, but her beauty seemed strikingly natural.

The Oneita advertisements demonstrate a direct correspondence between the garments worn in living pictures and the union suits that were increasingly worn by everyday women of the 1890s and early 1900s. Although they have not typically been recognized in the same category, fleshlings and reform suits are strikingly similar garments. Technologically, they were born out of the same advance in knitting machinery that allowed knitwear to become finer and finer throughout the last decades

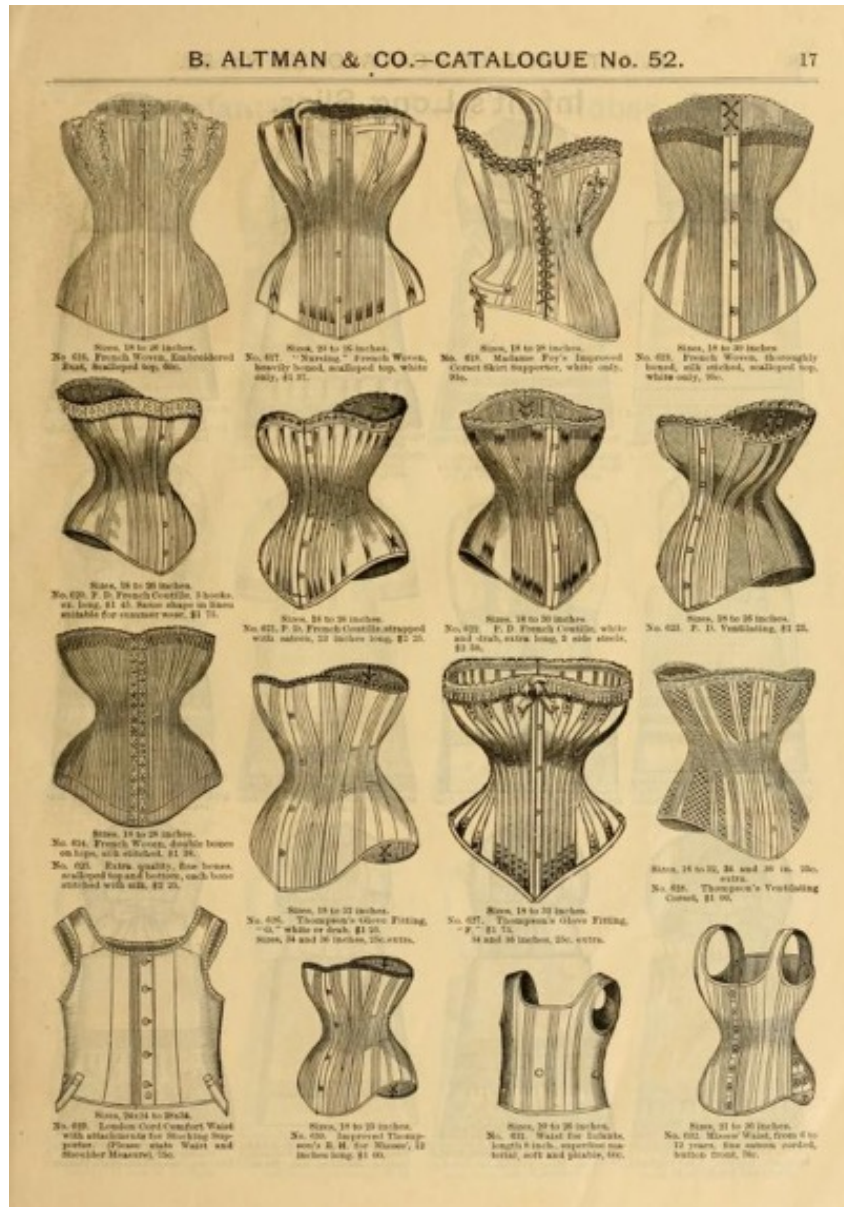


Figure 81 Corset offerings, B. Altman and Co., *Catalogue No. 52* (Boston: 1886), 17. (Courtesy, the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)

THE "ONEITA"

PAT. APR. 25, 1893

A black and white illustration of a woman in a long, ribbed, one-piece garment. She is standing, with her left leg raised and bent, and her hands are raised to her head, holding a flower. The garment has a decorative bow at the neckline and a small pocket on the upper left thigh. The background is dark.

Elastic Ribbed Union Suits

Are complete undergarments, covering the entire body. Perfectly elastic, fitting like a glove.

No Buttons Down the Front

Made especially for Women and Misses. Convenient to put on, being entered at top and drawn on like trousers. With no other kind of underwear can ladies obtain such perfect fit for dresses, or wear comfortably so small a corset.

Send for Illustrated Booklet 3.

ONEITA KNITTING MILLS,
OFFICE:
No. 1 Greene St., New York.

In answering this advertisement it is desirable that you mention MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE.

Figure 82 *The Oneita*. Advertisement from *Munsey's Magazine* (September, 1899).

of the nineteenth century. Like other reform undergarments, fleshlings provided a flexible full-body covering that delineated the lower half of the female form into two distinguishable legs; they sliced through conventions for clothing women's bodies and enabled a radically new freedom of movement. Whether made for theatrical, sanitary or reform purposes, all of these knit bodysuits offered a generation of American women their first opportunity, en masse, to wear pants (figs. 83 & 84).

Birth of Freedom

It is hard for us to imagine, today, the challenge that women faced in finding an alternative to the corset. By the time dress reformers achieved a critical mass, around the turn of the twentieth century, women of the Anglo-European world had spent centuries wearing undergarments that restricted their torsos. Generation after generation *after generation* of women had laced support garments around their midsections in the effort to clothe their demanding, hardworking bodies. Their physical realities were unparalleled by men's: breasts needed supporting, but they also needed to be readily accessible to feeding infants; figures needed to attract mates if their owners had a chance of surviving; waists dramatically expanded and contracted over a lifespan, but still they needed to fit into dresses; vaginas bled and birthed, were pleased and raped, needed constant care and protection. All of these physical contingencies remain in the twenty-first century, and yet for most of modern history, women experienced their bodies in a fundamentally different way than most do today. They confined their bodies in order to live their lives. From within a relentlessly patriarchal world, they imposed rigid structure and support as a means of caring for the wild bodily things that were not fully understood and could not be controlled. Stays and corsets; floor-length skirts. These were the daily, momentary,



Figure 83 Female models shown exercising in a catalog for union suits. Lewis Knitting Company, *Lewis Union Suits and Underwear* (Janesville, Wis: ca. 1900), 14. (Courtesy, the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)



Figure 84 Woman in a fleshling with a bicycle, ca. 1900. Photomechanical print on postcard.

breathe-in-breathe-out reality of women's lives. They physically shaped women's bodies for about half a millennium.

Freedom can mean different things to different people. By the dawn of the twentieth century, American women had started to come to the consensus that sharply restricting their waists and dressing themselves in long, heavy skirts was no longer a viable way to exist in the world. But what came next? How does society re-envision something as fundamental as the human body when it has spent so long being shaped into a particular form? While dress reformers pushed for a new physical experience—an experience of health and safety—performers on stage undertook their own radical new performance of bodies. For some, the performance of faux-nudity came at the cost of objectification. Some criticized the precedent set by fleshlings—the precedent of women baring their bodies before the public. Many women were entirely excluded from the phenomenon by the color of their skin. Others found an exhilarating new freedom in the experience of moving unencumbered by excess fabric. Fleshlings pulled taught between differing understandings of bodily objectification and bodily empowerment—a tension that remains and always will remain within women's rights.

Whether these garments defined an act of freedom or an act of sexualization, the women who wore them took a radical new position in the world. Standing bravely in only their fleshlings, they lifted back centuries upon centuries of bindings and drapery. *What does a woman's body look like?* Fleshlings helped Americans to see—literally see—women's bodies in a radically new way. They were a garment of transformation, a vector by which American society entered a new century and a revolutionary new era of modern dress. It was through fleshlings that the public first

began to confront the appearance of women's forms *as they were*—in full length—all parts present, delineated, on view.

Surveying the remains of this garment, we are left with an impression of skin. Of blossoming forms. Of bellies and thighs. Mounds of breasts. All wrapped up in a thin layer of flesh-colored cloth. There was censorship here, and objectification, but there was also sex and flesh and messiness to behold at the birth of modern American dress. Here was a first communal vision of women participating in the world as beings with whole, undeniable, bodies.

EPILOGUE

I stop somewhere waiting for you.

-Walt Whitman

Where did fleshlings go? These garments are widely documented in the print and visual culture of the turn of the twentieth century. They made headlines, were the subject of legislation, appeared on stages and postcards around the world, stirred heated controversy and received impassioned defenses. Celebrities wore them and so did countless unnamed women. They simultaneously concealed women's bodies and revealed them in provocative new ways. They allowed a radically new freedom of movement, and they were closely related to new developing forms of women's underwear. Fleshlings were primary documents at the intersection of an era's complex struggles around race, gender, sex, art and clothing. They were prominent, widely recognized objects. And very few remain. What became of Americans' nude bodystockings?

As the popularity of the nude illusion faded along with the Comstock Era's angst over nudity itself, some bodystockings entered the territory of fetish. No longer an invisible surface, they became recognized as second skins, erotic in and of themselves as garments that both touched and represented women's flesh. One image of the late-1910s/early-1920s displays this shift perfectly: a woman poses in a dark silk bodystocking whose tone clearly contrasts with the light color of her skin. She wears stiletto heels and her bare breasts protrude from two large holes cut into her stocking (fig. 85). The image completely undoes any prior illusion of nudity, slicing



Figure 85 Photographic print. European, c. 1920.

into the surface of a passé erotic idiom, exposing a newly sadomasochistic understanding of the garment in relation to its wearer's body.

Elsewhere, bodystockings took on less overtly erotic new roles. In 1918, a circus acrobat known as Dainty Marie made headlines for performing aerial living pictures: "*Beautiful art poses, taken from classic statuary, on a ribbon suspended from the roof of Madison Square Garden,*" ran one New York headline (fig. 86).⁹⁰ Dainty Marie was prominently pictured in newspapers across the country wearing a white suit of tights remarkably similar to fleshlings (fig. 87). She was praised for her athletic build, but her bodystocking went unmentioned in reports. The circus star presented the country with a new, post-war version of the living picture: rather than a body frozen still in scandalous simulation of nudity, Dainty Marie offered spectacular feats of movement. Reports referred to her "beautiful art poses" as though they were a new phenomenon. By the late-teens, then, fleshlings still existed, but they no longer went by the same name, and their once-scandalous display of nudity had been virtually forgotten.

By the 1920s, women's dress had been reformed—in certain ways. Although women still wore shapewear and hose, gone were the sartorial demands of the hourglass corset and long, heavy hems. In the place of these old restrictive garments rose new bodily ideals and new demands on women's bodies. The fashionable silhouettes of the twenties favored slim, androgynous and athletic figures. New undergarments, including silk stockings, bralets, step-ins and longline girdles, offered their own bodily demands but also permitted increased freedom of movement and ease

⁹⁰ *The Evening World* (New York, NY), April 9, 1918, 4.



Figure 86 “Dainty Marie, the Circus Sensation,” *The Evening World* (New York, NY), April 9, 1918, 4.



Figure 87 Strauss Peyton, *Dainty Marie*, silver gelatin print, ca. 1915-1920.

of wear. New forms of leisurewear emerged as did an entire genre of clothing, sportswear, that emphasized women's expanding physical opportunities in public spaces. Women's swimwear took on a new shape: that of a sleeveless, legless bodysuit—a garment that finally prioritized the physical act of swimming over the effort to maintain modesty. At the beach, at home and out and about, women began to wear stylish new suits of wide-legged, loose-fitting pajamas. They had begun to wear pants.

In the late-twenties, Dainty Marie was still making appearances in newspapers, although she had retired from the circus. Now hailed as a “Perfect Venus at Forty-Five,” she offered “beauty classes” in the form of lectures and group athletic sessions for women. “And thus the fat become thin and the thin become plump!” she reportedly proclaimed, democratically advertising her lessons to women of different offending body types. The *Des Moines Register* ran a feature showing off a row of her students on the floor, mid-exercise, unabashedly waving their legs and crotches in the air as Dainty Marie assisted, smiling up at the camera, still wearing her suit of white tights.⁹¹

Within a few decades of Clara Ward's international scandal, bodystockings had disappeared in plain sight. Form-fitting and leg-revealing garments were now everyday realities for American women. The public had become inured to the appearance of women's bodies. So completely had fleshlings done their job—packaging women's bodies for public consumption—that they had helped make themselves irrelevant; a once-provocative garment had lost its transgressive cultural

⁹¹ *Des Moines Register* (Des Moines, IA), June 19, 1927, 5.

meaning. New forms of bodystockings rose to serve a new mix of athletic and fetishistic roles—many of which are still in use today—leaving their faux nude ancestors of the turn of the century to become largely forgotten oddities.

Within the evolution of dress, fleshlings dissolved into other garments. But as objects from a particular moment in history, they have been lost. Some of what we know and see of the sexual culture of a century past has been shaped and edited by the censors of that time, but we also perform our own aesthetic and moral censorship of other eras. We still struggle to deal with the intimate, sexual and bodily material of the past. Many historic clothing collections contain large stores of uncatalogued or uninterpreted underthings—pantaloons, chemises, nightgowns, corset covers, briefs, petticoats—all in a muted palette of white and ecru, sweat-stain yellow and dried-blood brown. The vast majority of these objects are not, perhaps, aesthetically sexy, and their value isn't always obvious, but they are important. Between these piles of common, anonymous garments exists a vast archive of first-person documents of women's bodies. There are fascinating histories to be recovered here and, somewhere amongst the nameless undergarments, I am almost certain, more fleshlings wait to be found.

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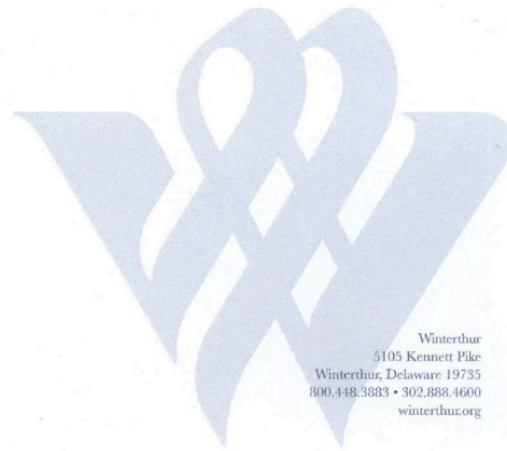


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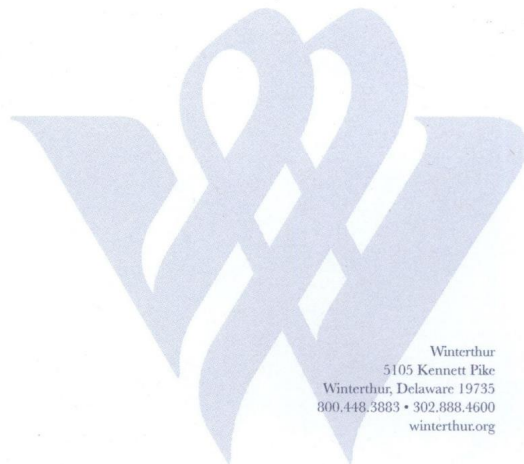
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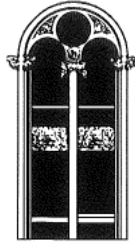
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Kathryn Budzyn

Fri 3/1/2019 12:50 PM

To: Tara Maginnis <tara@costumes.org>;

Wonderful! Many thanks!

From: Tara Maginnis <thecostumersmanifesto@yahoo.com>
Sent: Friday, March 1, 2019 12:48:24 PM
To: Kathryn Budzyn
Subject: Re: Permission to Reuse Images from Dazian's Catalog

You will be pleased to know that under US copyright case law, the mere fact that I made a scan of a copyright expired 2-D work does not give me any new copyrights. It purely remains in the public domain. Places that do this for profit don't like this generally known, but that is the ruling. It is nice for your readers to site the place the source can be found, but you are under no obligation to do so. The only unique thing I did was figure out the year of the catalog by checking up on who were the current political and pop culture party and Halloween face masks. So, have at it. That is why I shared it.

---Tara Maginnis, Ph.D., Costume Designer Diablo Valley College
Design Portfolio at <http://TaraMaginnis.com>
Class & Show Photos at <http://TaraMaginnisClasses.Shutterfly.com>
Buy my DVD-Rom Teaching series on Theatrical Makeup at <http://www.theatricaldesign.com/makeup/>

On Friday, March 1, 2019, 9:19:10 AM PST, Kathryn Budzyn <kbudzy@winterthur.org> wrote:

Dear Professor Maginnis,

I'm writing to request your permission to reuse several images from the 1880s "Dazian's Catalog of Theatrical Goods" that you have so generously shared on your website. The images would be for use in my Master's thesis at the Winterthur Program in American Material Culture; my thesis is on turn-of-the-century bodystockings.

The page scans I'm interested in reusing include: p.28/29; p.134/135; p.141; p.142/13; p.144/145; and p.159. These images would be used solely for the academic purposes of my thesis, which will be published online through the University of Delaware's thesis hub, UDSpace.

Your catalog has been incredible useful during my research, and I am very grateful to you for making it available! Please let me know your thoughts on reusing these images in my paper.

Thanks for your consideration,

Kate

—

Kate Burnett Budzyn
Lois F. McNeil Fellow, Class of 2019

<https://webmail.winterthur.org/owa/#viewmodel=ReadMessageItem&ItemID=AAMkAGEwNGYzYzY2LWNkZTMtNGQwOS04MjliLTExNTg1NjkzZjU3OABGA...> 1/2

4/21/2019

RE: Bodystocking Images - Kathryn Budzyn

RE: Bodystocking Images

Wim Mertens <WIM.MERTENS@momu.be>

Thu 4/4/2019 8:42 AM

To: Kathryn Budzyn <kbudzy@winterthur.org>;

Dear Kathryn,

So nice hearing from you, I hope you are well.

I am so sorry to hear that your package has not been delivered; such a shame. But consider it delivered it is much appreciated.

You are most welcome to use the pictures you took in your thesis. It would be great if you keep us informed on your research.

Have a nice Easter.

Best regards,
Wim

-----Oorspronkelijk bericht-----

Van: Kathryn Budzyn <kbudzy@winterthur.org>

Verzonden: dinsdag 26 maart 2019 16:53

Aan: Wim Mertens <WIM.MERTENS@momu.be>

Onderwerp: Bodystocking Images

Dear Wim,

Greetings from Winterthur! I hope this finds you enjoying a lovely early Spring in Antwerp. I have such fond memories of my visit there last September.

I'm writing to ask your permission to use images of MoMu's bodystocking in my Master's thesis. Is it alright for me to include several of the photographs that I took while I was there in order to illustrate construction and fabric details? Please let me know your thoughts.

Department of Rights
and Reproductions
1220 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10029
Email: rightsandrepo@mcny.org



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Kathryn Budzyn master's thesis for the Winterthur Program in American Material Culture at the University of Delaware

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Order/Invoice #: Budzyn_Permission

Signed: KHB

Date: 2/20/19

Full name, title, company name, address and telephone number:

Kathryn Budzyn
Lois E. McNeil Fellow
Winterthur Program in American
Material Culture, University of DE
Winterthur, Delaware 19735
Please send the signed copy and address 914-856-6098
inquiries to:

Lauren Robinson, Rights and Reproductions
Museum of the City of New York
1220 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10029

For and on behalf of the Museum of the City of New York:

Signed: Lauren Robinson

Date: February 26, 2019
(Official date of document)

Thank you for your interest in the Museum of the City of New York