

Confounding Fashion Trends

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Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

So this topic was not a runaway victory in the discord. There were two topics that were kind of battling it out, and I was excited about both of them, but after a couple days this one was ahead by like two votes, and at some point I just have to start researching, so I did, and then a couple days after that I randomly

went to the vote channel and the topics were tied, and I immediately freaked out. So I had to actually vote to break the tie, so that I wouldn't have wasted all this research. So if anyone thinks I was trying to game the system, my vote wasn't so much for a topic so much as it was for self-preservation. I believe that's the first time I ever voted. So the point is, going forward I'm gonna lock the voting 48 hours after posting the poll just for my own sanity

And by the way, a couple people have messaged me asking how to get to the discord and I realize we haven't mentioned in a while. You can just scroll down in the show notes of any app you're using to listen to this

podcast. You can also get through there from our Instagram.

So this topic is crazy, weird, bizarre fashion trends through the ages.

Hobble skirts

women's fashion in particular through the years has been absolute lunacy. Fashion trendsetters are either sadists, or at the very least Uber misogynistic. They clearly hate women. These male fashion designers are all sitting around some giant board room table like, "what are we gonna do this year? We've bleached their scalps, bound their feet, made them balance on tiny stilts, tore out their body hair with hot wax, and shoved bags of saltwater under their

tittyflesh. I feel like our work here is done. How do you top that? Next year's top fashion trend: setting your vagina on fire. Spontaneous combustion is so hot right now'."

All of the trends we're going to discuss were at the very least silly and impractical, but a select few were downright murderous. The hobble skirt is one.

The hobble skirt took the fashion world by storm between 1908 and 1914, and it accomplished exactly what you might expect based on the name: it was a skirt that was so tight around the knees and calves that it impaired the wearer's ability to walk. Women were essentially hobbled; they had to shuffle forward with tiny little

mincing microsteps. It was also known as a "speed limit skirt." I think we should name all clothing based on descriptions of the consequences of wearing that clothing. "These are Calvin Klein 'swampy-balls' briefs. This is a pair of 'circulation-stopper' tight jeans. Want to amputate both feet without surgery? Wear these jeans for a week. Your toes will turn purple, and after seven days you can stick your thumb in your mouth and blow and your feet will pop right off.

There's no clear agreement as to who invented the hobble skirt, but the commonly proposed theory is that it was related to the invention of the airplane. At Le Mans France in

1908, American actress Edith Berg—wife of aviation enthusiast Hart O Berg—requested a ride during a flight demonstration by the Wright brothers.

In order to secure her dress from pulling a Marilyn and hiking up due to the wind, she tied a rope around her calves, and shuffled around like a moron. French Designer Paul Poiret, who is often credited with creating the design, apparently witnessed this sad spectacle and instead of shaking his head sadly and averting his eyes like a decent human, he instead rubbed his hands together gleefully like a Gallic mr burns and vowed to subject the women of the world to similar humiliation.

The ridiculousness of the

design did not escape popular notice—the trend was mocked relentlessly in comic strips and cartoons, and shuffling “hobble skirt races” became a popular and humorous diversion. But it wasn’t all fun and games. Hobble skirts resulted in numerous deaths, such as 18 year old Ida Goyette, who in 1911 stumbled off of New York’s Erie Canal bridge and drowned. But the silliness of the design and seriousness of the design’s repercussions didn’t stop hobble skirts from becoming a massive hit.

And the Hobble skirt hasn’t fully disappeared. You’ll still see women today shuffling like mummies on red carpets in long, tight, so-called pencil-style skirts.

It's amazing to me that these trends take root, even when the designers were clearly not hiding the awfulness. I mean I don't want to harp on this too much, but it's called a goddamn hobble skirt. Here, try on these guillotine boxer shorts. I think I'll pass.

Paper dress

Moving from the dangerous to the impractical and potentially embarrassing, we can't skip the short-lived "paper-clothing" fad of the 1960s. It's exactly what it sounds like: A disposable, typically singly-use paper dress or vest that would immediately dissolve into mush in the event of inclement weather. There was even paper underwear, which I guess

makes a little more sense because underwear is not exposed to the elements, but it seems way more uncomfortable than wearing paper as an *outer* layer, and also isn't going to be any help if you wet yourself. Now you just have a crotch full of pulp. That's how I judge all potential underwear, by the way. "How is this going to react when I inevitably wet myself?"

The paperwear craze was officially kicked off in 1966 by the Scott paper company, sadly unrelated to Michael Scott, though their strategy seems eerily similar to something he might have devised. As a cheap marketing stunt, they advertised "paper caper" dresses for \$1.25 each. When the dresses

became a fun, silly fad, department stores capitalized by developing designer versions of paper clothing and charging the modern equivalent of \$60 for a one-time-use garment. Designs were often bold, colorful, and influenced by the pop art movement of the era. Andy Warhol's soup cans were a popular design choice. Because who hasn't fantasized about wearing canned goods. You could even personalize your own paper dress by coloring it with crayons. Or hey, let your kid do it. People with children, has your kid ever brought home a crayon drawing from school and you thought to yourself, "instead of putting this surreal five-legged dog-smudge up on the refrigerator, I

really wish I could wrap it around my body parts and then be seen in public by other adult humans. "One of the most unusual paper dresses was implanted with seeds; upon watering the garment, the fabric sprouted tiny blossoms." "I don't know about you, but I would like to have some clothing that is also soil." Why did it take so long for humans to invent a wearable garden? You don't have to spend money to get a dress that grows stuff. Just leave it on your back porch during rainy season. This is my mushroom dress. I'll be the Portabell of the ball. I'm going to see how long I can keep this streak of terrible fungus puns going. **The Scott paper company hadn't anticipated the massive demand for their**

product and the trend it would create, but maybe they should have, because paper clothing appeared at the exact moment that a cascade of forces converged to produce the perfect market conditions for a disposable clothing item. The 1960s produced the first "plastic generation," a new breed of American unfamiliar with the economic turbulence of the 1930s, accustomed to abundance and less inclined toward their parent's frugality mentality. This is the generation that would eventually make a store like IKEA possible: similar to the Americans of today, the young professionals of the 1960s cared less about craftsmanship and durability than they did

about convenience and trendiness. Fashions were changing from week to week, and a dress that was designed to be tossed into the garbage before it went out of style simply made sense. "One marketing slogan for paper dresses even boasted, 'Won't last forever... who cares? Wear it for kicks – then give it the air.'" I think that means throw it away, like toss it into the air, but I don't know. I'm not that old. Give it the air sounds like fart on it. I'd you don't move from my seat I'll be forced to give you the air." "Paper fashion was America's shortcut to style. In December of 1967, the Saturday Evening Post wrote, "Internationally, paper has given us a rare chance to pull ahead of the French.

We may have lagged behind for years in haute couture, but our new crew of throwaway designers has been able to start from scratch." That's the most American statement ever. "You may have pioneered and dominated the fashion world with your cutting edge trends, French sophisticates, but you didn't anticipate American ingenuity. You've created enduring fashion trends, but we shall counter with literal garbage. We'll see your high fashion and raise you actual trash."

Interestingly, some department stores also produced paper bridal gowns, which is the one part of the story I don't have a problem with. A wedding dress is a huge investment of money and time, all of that expensive fabric, all the work that

goes into it and then you wear it once. A paper wedding dress makes total sense. And at the end of the night everyone should hose down the bride with champagne, this could be a really fun tradition. Like a wedding/rap-video hybrid. I'm getting married in October, I'm going to broach this idea. Wish me luck.

Many prominent fashion historians have theorized that the reason the paper-clothing craze didn't last very long is that it was fucking stupid. For many reasons, not the least of which being that you were intentionally draping yourself in fabric that was highly combustible. Notable downsides of paper clothing: "they were

generally ill-fitting and uncomfortable, their garish colors could rub off, they were often flammable, and eventually ended as waste." That flammability thing would be a big factor for me. I love that it was like third on the list of complaints. When "might burst into flames" is just one of the many downsides to a trend, that's all you need to know. Although to be fair, the original paper dresses were actually created to promote the Scott paper company's new blend of paper called Dura-Weve, which was 7% rayon, and that is slightly more durable and fire resistant than normal paper. Key word being slightly. It's still paper. "This grenade is slightly less explodey than a

normal one. Still gonna explode, but this one will feel bad about it." So sure, a Dura-Weve paper dress was less likely to burst into flames than your average gas soaked piece of notebook paper, but in an era during which almost half the country smoked cigarettes, maybe the writing was on the wall for this particular fad. It's not the best choice if you're headed to a beach bonfire.

The environmental movement of the 1970s would prove to be the death knell for paper clothing, thankfully. The first Earth Day debuted in 1970. However, paper clothing is still with us today in the form of awkward, uncomfortable, ass-revealing hospital gowns. Hospital gowns are like assless chaps for

sick people. Literal insult to injury. Also, don't feel too bad the entire disposable clothing industry. In many ways, disposable clothing is still with us. Every year Americans toss out some 14 million tons of clothes, which adds up to about 80 pounds per person. I don't personally toss out anything close to 80 pounds, which means someone else is picking up all the slack. Someone is tossing out five people's allotment of 80 pounds each. We need to find those people. And string them up. Kill the rich. I'm suddenly a communist.

Powdered wigs

Much like today, in the 16th and 17th centuries, male pattern baldness was a conman and commonly bemoaned

condition, made even worse by the proliferation of syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease that afflicted more Europeans than the Black Plague. Common symptoms of syphilis include sores and patchy hair loss, so going bald was even more embarrassing back then considering it potentially indicated that the guy not only had a shiny dome but also a spotty wang. So bald guys had an even tougher time getting laid in postiquity. 17th century hookup culture, rough for the Duncans of the world. So wigs known as perukes became all the rage; Perukes varied in style from tight, short curls to flowing wavy locks that cascaded to the shoulders and beyond, elaborate

hairdos rivaling any 80s glam band. The wigs were heavy, hot, and bug-infested. However, lice in your wig was preferable to lice in your actual hair, as a wig could be sent off to the wig shop for boiling. It's a little tougher to boil your actual hair. That's a sensitive operation.

Peasant wigs would often be powdered with flour, but royal wigs were anointed with scented wig powder and oils which came with the added benefit of masking the smell of rotting syphilis sores and generally poor hygiene. There was a time when perfume was vital, it wasn't just to make you smell good, it was to cover up the epic funk of life before showers. We think of Cologne and

perfume as enhancements, but they started as a diversionary tactics. "Nothing to smell here, just a rose petal covering up a turd log." the wig trend began with peasants but truly caught on when it was adopted by the syphilis-infested nobility, royals like Louis the XIV, many of whom would spend the equivalent of \$10,000 for an extra awesome and elaborate hairpiece, which directly led to the term "bigwig." Wigs were slightly less popular in America...many of the paintings and portraits of white-haired Americans after the revolutionary war depict men who were not actually wearing wigs, Hairpieces having become less fashionable in America as revolutionaries

attempted to distance themselves from the European nobility, while still maintaining the tight cropped, curly hairstyle of the era. For instance, George Washington never wore a wig. He was a ginger, and anointed his hair with white powder to conform to the day's fashion, and also to avoid judgment, because even in postiquity, it was common knowledge that gingers don't have souls. There have been as many as 7 soulless presidents, depending on the source. According to CBS News, Thomas Jefferson, Ulysses S Grant, Calvin Coolidge, Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, Dwight Eisenhower, and of course numero uno, GW. There have been 46 American presidents in

the White House...39
souls. So even though
white hair is now a sign of
frailty and advancing age,
it was super chic in the
days when we didn't fear
and despise old people,
and as a result many of
George Washington's
immediate successors as
President, including
James Madison and John
Adams and Jefferson,
would rock a powdered
white wig.

Codpieces

Once again we have
syphilis to thank for a
bizarre clothing trend.
Sexually transmitted
diseases, real trailblazers
in world of high fashion.
"We proudly present this
year's fall collection,
courtesy of gonorrhea.
Everyone clap for the
clap."

To understand codpieces, you first have to understand that they hail from an era without pants. Not that pants didn't exist, Trousers have been around since antiquity, but the version of lower-body coverings for European men available in the 1300s typically involved two separate leggings, like tights, one for each leg, and then a kind of skirt at the top, leaving the junk free and vulnerable. So the first cod pieces were made of cloth and were classic banana hammocks intended to cover and support the junk. Also, as the aforementioned syphilis outbreak intensified, men slathered various ointments and pungent elixirs on their afflicted

body parts, and thus codpieces provided a method for insulating and isolating the sensitive organ while also protecting the surrounding clothing and fabric from being besmirched with oils or presumably blood or pus. So initially the function of cod pieces was modesty and support, but because men are men, and become obsessed with anything that enhances or draws attention to their dicks, codpiece quickly grew both in popularity and also in a very literal sense. Eventually they morphed into large protuberances that mimicked a permanent erection, and were proudly displayed in public as well as in portraits of the era. Henry the eighth

famously rocked prominent cod pieces that weighed up to a couple pounds each, he was very proud of the size of this thing under his skirt that was not his penis. That's so weird to me. Look at this amazing device inside my manly skirt that is huge and is obviously not in anyway related to the size of my actual organ. In fact, there's probably an inverse proportionality. I'm Overcompensating for something. You may be a better man than i, but how big is your penis-covering? I have the biggest penis-covering of all." Codpieces became so large that they were utilized as pockets.

According to scholar Will Fisher, codpieces provided "convenient storage for one's hankie or

a stray orange, in addition to "bottles, napkins, pistols, hair, and even a looking glass." Not sure why you would store some extra hair next to your pubes but it was a weird time. Maybe that was where you kept your Merkin.

Over time Codpieces became increasingly ornate, festooned with jewels, tassels and tinsel, it was very festive. And age was no barrier... Boys as young as seven were rocking codpieces in Renaissance Europe. Which isn't creepy at all. "Son, I've told you 1000 times, remove your giant fake erection before hugging your mother." Large, protruding Codpieces also became standard additions to suits of armor. Can you imagine meeting a knight

on the battlefield and suddenly he's charging at you across a steamy, bloodsoaked clearing sporting a giant gleaming battle-axe and massive metal boner. Terrifying. That could backfire, though. Like, my instinct was to surrender but now I'm worried you're going to fuck me, so we're fighting to the death.

The codpiece lives on in the form of the slightly less prominent modern jockstrap, a piece of sporting equipment designed to confine, support, and protect a man's twig and berries. jockstraps themselves became fashion staples of gay "leather culture" and then moved into the heavy metal music scene via artists like Rob Halford of Judas

Priest and eventually crossed over into mainstream rock fashion when Axl Rose of Guns N' Roses fame wore one for the bulk of a GNR tour.

Jockstraps and codpieces are still very common in the Uber-theatrical black metal scene. Oderus Urungus of the band GWAR wears a giant jockstrap/codpiece he refers to as Cthulhu's cuttlefish, it is truly horrifying.

Speaking of fish: the Cod in "codpiece", BTW, is Middle English for scrotum. No word how the fish feels about that fact.

Foot Binding

The barbaric practice of foot binding persisted for over 1000 years in China,

most likely beginning with the Song Dynasty and only gradually phased out in the 1900s. If you want to be horrified, search for pictures of foot binding on Google. It's shocking. The feet of young girls were crushed, broken, and then bound so tightly that the toes curled underneath and embedded into the flesh of the sole of the foot. The goal of foot binding was for the woman to fit into "Lotus shoes" probably the nicest-sounding name ever for a diabolical torture device. "Beware the 'adorable fuzzy-bunny slippers of death,' they're full of razor blades but are also very fuzzy...on the outside." The ideal length of a woman's foot during this

period in China was considered to be 11cm or 4 inches, referred to as the "Golden Lotus"...Thus the shoes. 4 inches. If you take a look at the Golden Lotus shoes, they look like tiny little doll shoes, it's unthinkable that a standard-sized adult human could fit their feet into these things. If a woman's foot was 1 inch larger, that was somewhat acceptable, referred to as a Silver Lotus. Anything beyond that, your feet were iron lotuses, and you were probably not marriage material.

"You're telling me your feet aren't broken and crushed and folded? Disgusting. I will never settle for a woman with normal, human-sized feet. I want them intentionally mutilated

and malformed, the way God intended."

We can joke about it, but this is fucking horrific.

a 2015 Smithsonian magazine article by Amanda Foreman

explains the process in depth. "First, [the young girl's] feet were plunged into hot water and her toenails clipped short.

Then the feet were massaged and oiled before all the toes, except the big toes, were broken and bound flat against the sole, making a triangle shape. Next, her arch was strained as the foot was bent double. Finally, the feet were bound in place using a silk strip measuring ten feet long and two inches wide.

These wrappings were briefly removed every two days to prevent blood and pus from infecting the

foot. Sometimes "excess" flesh was cut away or encouraged to rot. The girls were forced to walk long distances in order to hasten the breaking of their arches. Over time the wrappings became tighter and the shoes smaller as the heel and sole were crushed together. After two years the process was complete, creating a deep cleft that could hold a coin in place. Once a foot had been crushed and bound, the shape could not be reversed without a woman undergoing the same pain all over again."

Foot binding was so widespread that by the time the 1800s rolled around, it is estimated almost half of Chinese women had endured it to some degree, and among the wealthy and elite that number climbed to

around 100%. More money, more problems. I've said it before. More money, horrible disfigurement. Is that a saying?

Keep in mind we're not picking on China here, as noted previously there have been horrendous practices related to female fashion and its impact on women's bodies throughout the world...The extreme corsets of Victorian England come to mind, with European women "training" their waists to be so so tiny that their spines became misaligned and their internal organs were reorganized. so this type of extreme body modification in the name of fashion wasn't limited to China and in fact Over the years there were

numerous efforts in China to ban foot binding. The Kangxi Emperor of the mid 1600s in particular attempted to abolish the practice, but failed. He was like, "maybe we should stop torturing our women and young girls and dudes were like, "Meh. Kinda like this whole women-can't-run-away thing. Turns out it's pretty good for maintaining the patriarchy. Not quite ready to give that up. Sure, it's easy for an emperor to have women running around Willy Nilly, when he has soldiers to catch them, but I need to be the fastest member of my household. Otherwise 100% they'll run away, because I am clearly an awful person."

Foot binding finally began

to lose favor in the early 1900s, and finally disappeared completely, though it had proved remarkably resilient. The last shoe factory producing Lotus shoes didn't close until 1999.

Tudor ruff

The Tudor ruff of the Elizabethan era was a gigantic doily for your neck. It's the human equivalent of the cone of shame, except Europeans wore it voluntarily and weren't ashamed at all.

They were super proud to be wearing a necklace of what amounted to a stack of frilly radar dishes.

Actually, the plastic cone that animals wear to keep them from biting or licking themselves is often called an Elizabethan collar. Ruffs began as simple

gatherings of fabric at the neck—a ruffle—but like codpieces and so many other boneheaded fashion ideas, influencers of the time insisted on taking a reasonable trend to the illogical extreme.

As ruffs became more elaborate, starch was introduced to keep them erect, and to ensure that the wearer looked as idiotic and bizarre as humanly possible.

Starched ruffs would be referred to as millstone collars, because it appeared that the wearer had made the

unfortunate decision to hang an entire millstone around their neck. I love this quote from

Wikipedia: "the impracticality [of ruffs] led them to become a symbol of wealth and status." It's such a telling statement.

It's like Maslow's hierarchy of needs. If you're poor, you can't afford to waste money on impractical bullshit that has no utilitarian value. You have to be wealthy and bored to want to seek out expensive ways to make your life more difficult in order to demonstrate that you have the resources to overcome that difficulty. Like most ridiculous fashion trends, the size and impracticality of ruffs became more extreme as time passed. While a mid 1500s ruff might have involved some 10 yards of fabric, they would eventually become far more elaborate and heavy and massive. Later ruffs would be over a foot wide and supported by a wire frame. Eating while wearing one was quite an

ordeal.

Ruffs were in decline by the early 1600s, though to this day they remain part of the official uniform of the clergy in Denmark and Greenland. The modern ruffs are a bit more modest, maybe six inches wide and much thinner than in their heyday, but don't worry, they still look plenty goddam stupid.

Crakowes

The shoes that we discussed earlier in this episode were depressing to say the least, so let's explore a more lighthearted take on footwear fashion faux pas. So-called "Crakowes," named after their supposed origin in the city of Kraków Poland, were bizarre

pointed shoes that looked a lot like something you might see on a Christmas elf. I had no idea that these things were real, but in the late Middle Ages a short-lived queen of England known as Anne of Bohemia reportedly introduced the fashion from her native Prague, in modern-day Czech Republic, which is not the same as modern-day Krakow Poland but whatever, geography is hard. And as usual, the sight of rich people doing something stupid resulted in stupidity going viral. This is the problem with influencers. I typically hate the term "sheeple," but I'm really tempted to use it when it comes to fashion. Have you seen Kanye West's "Yeezy foam" shoes? So crakowe shoes were

typically just leather slippers with a long protuberance, as if someone's middle toe extended up to 6 inches or so from the foot. The point could be slightly curled at the end, like the classic elf shoe, or weirdly straight and spiky. The protuberances were known as poulaines, and were typically stuffed with a spongy substance like moss or horse hair. However, knights occasionally wore them with suits of armor, in which case they could be spiked metal, which was useful for kicking fools when on horseback but a massive impediment if the fight went to the ground. Knights who had dismounted would have to cut off their poulaines before engaging in

combat. Later versions were detachable, affixed to the sabatons, or armored shoes, via a hinge. I guess that works. Feels like it will be tough to lean over in a giant suit of armor and mess with your shoes in the middle of a battle, but what do I know. "Excuse me, please refrain from swinging that axe at my head until I have removed my poulaines from my sabatons."

Bombasting

Macaroni fashion

Hoop skirts

Chopines

Crinolines

Breast flatteners

Bustles

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