

RE-WORKING MODERN WORKWEAR: AN EXPLORATION OF
POCKETS, GARMENT CONSTRUCTION AND HISTORICAL
WOMEN'S FASHION

by

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Pre-industrial fashion is a treasure trove of design inspiration. Working class women's fashion is seldom referenced, but their clothing was highly functional and intended to last— both of which are sought-after qualities in modern day clothing. I developed a pair of overalls intended for manual labor, referencing ingenious solutions from working class historical fashion. In a culture that continues to produce lower quality clothing every year, it is incredibly important that people working manual and technical jobs have long-lasting, durable clothing. I designed, prototyped, user tested, prototyped again, and created a garment that is meant to fit well, make the user feel confident and stylish, and support them on the go—whether they're a homemaker, ceramicist, or woodworker.

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Introduction

The world of fashion has changed drastically in the past 300 years. A journey through time reveals that every change in fashion reflects cultural shifts occurring in the population wearing this fashion. Whether these changes are towards slimmer silhouettes to conserve fabric during wartime (Haight, 2014), an emphasis on opulence because of a certain ruler (Tierney, 2002), or a change in fiber use due to weather patterns (Godin, 2021), clothing tells a fascinating story of the people wearing it. On an individual level, one's clothing can reflect their occupation, gender identity, music taste, or a dozen other pieces of information to the people around them.

Since I was a child, I have always loved historical fashion- more specifically, pre-industrial-revolution historical fashion. The variety of silhouettes, the beautiful fabrics, and my own romantic notions of being a princess with a beautiful ballgown—these interests have seeped into my clothing designs, my personal style, and have led to a deep appreciation for historical fashion as inspiration.

Historical garment construction is more than just exaggerated silhouettes. The processes to make them were so time intensive and so involved, that the culture around owning clothing was completely different. One didn't walk down the street and purchase a premade garment, especially if you were working class. You spun the thousands of yards of fibers into yarn, which would then be hand woven into fabric, and then hand-sewn into garments of varying complexity. This process—for a single garment—would take hundreds of hours.

Working class adults in pre-industrial Europe owned 2-3 outfits in total, and for the most part made, repaired, and altered these garments from home (Haight, 2014). You owned 1-2 outfits for working, whether that was farming, fishing, blacksmithing, housework, or other

manual labor. Your other outfit was your Sunday best, for church. Thus, there were two categories of clothing: your “work” clothing, and your “church” clothing (Historic Geneva, 2023).

As the industrial revolution swept Western Europe and America, the culture behind clothing slowly began to change. Over the next few hundred years, it slowly became more and more affordable to purchase one’s clothing pre-made, and people began buying and owning more than just a few outfits (Haight, 2014). In the past 50 years, a combination of improved machinery and globalization led to more and more affordable clothing, and people began purchasing and owning more and more clothing. With this affordability, however, came a marked decrease in quality (Castro, 2021). As it becomes more and more normal to own dozens of garments, quality becomes less and less of a priority.

I have found myself pulled towards the use of historical garment influences in modern fashion, beyond just the aesthetics. Pre-industrial historical fashion has so much to teach us, particularly in how they are made to fit the body and made to last. As I’ve explored historical fashion within my own life and style, I’ve found it particularly interesting to use it in functional areas in my life. Pre-industrial fashion for the working class was nearly all functional fashion, and though their styles reflected the trends of the aristocracy, their clothing was made to be worn for manual labor.

We often think of historical clothing to be impractical for modern day manual jobs, but are we framing it wrong? While the tightlaced corsets and unmanageable skirts of the aristocracy are certainly not ideal clothing for wheel-throwing or using the band saw, historical fashion among the working class has much to teach us about how to create truly durable, personalized, and trustworthy garments.

For labor like carpentry, ceramics, or kitchen work—where the work by nature necessitates functional and trustworthy clothing—these lessons are particularly valuable. I plan to design a garment intended for manual labor, with the inspiration of historical women’s fashion to guide my direction.

A Background in Historical Fashion

Pre-industrial revolution, garments were made entirely by hand - an incredibly time intensive process. It was essential that those garments be able to change and endure with the wearers of those garments, because the process to make an entirely new garment required so much time and energy. Creating a garment involved not only cutting and sewing it, but spinning the fibers into yarns and weaving the textiles themselves. One simple men's shirt in the 1400's- from beginning to end—would likely take close to 600 hours (Fisher, 2013). Thus, users needed to prolong the lifespan of their garments as much as possible. There were 3 main ways that garments were able to endure alongside their users.

The first important aspect was modularity. Whether you were an aristocratic woman at a ball or a working class woman in a kitchen, you didn't just have "tops" and "bottoms," your clothing was a combination of layers from corsets to petticoats to pinnafores to undergarments. (Historic Geneva, 2023) It was much easier to make, clean, and repair one item at a time. This way, too, you could switch out a light cotton skirt for a heavy woolen one depending on the time of year, or throw an apron over your outfit to protect it. Skirts were often made from rectangular swathes of fabric, minimizing the amount of fabric that needed to be cut after being woven (Haight, 2014). Because of these layers, undergarments could absorb more sweat and oils from the body without affecting the outer layers as much, and outer garments could absorb moisture or dirt from the environment without affecting the underlayers.

A second core aspect of pre-industrial fashion was repairability (Berthon, 2017). It was essential that garments be repaired, because the time and cost of making a new one was outrageous. This task would fall on the women of the house, who were already occupied with

other domestic tasks or jobs outside of the home. Tears were mended, holes were patched, and buttons were replaced.

A third pillar was adjustability. This didn't just have to do with the ability to lace a corset up to your preferred tightness or tie an apron the way you wanted it to fit, though that was important too. The adjustability was literally sewn into the makeup of the garment; garments were made with extra ease to be let out or taken in as the user's body changed (Miazaki, 2023). Thus, one did not have to buy an entirely new garment every time they gained or lost weight. Instead, the nature of the garments were such that the user could adjust the garment to their changing body.

Between the time it took to create garments, the drastically different attitude towards fixing them, and the built-in adjustability for the user's changing body, the culture of owning a garment looked completely different pre-industrial revolution. Many today are encouraging a move back towards "slow fashion"—the opposite of our current state of hyper-consumption. As I continue to learn from all three of the aforementioned pillars of pre-industrial fashion, I choose to contribute to this cultural change in design & consumption.

Why Workwear?

While many people associate historical fashion with playing dress-up, or attending fancy events, I've loved incorporating historical fashion into my everyday wear. I began wearing long skirts and dresses to the woodshop or ceramic studio, and found that though they weren't *always* the most practical, there were aspects of these garments that were actually quite useful for me. Oversize pockets and extra fabric meant that I had plenty of room to store my tools and objects while working, and I felt protected by long thick skirts from the clay or dust.

The intersection of workwear and historical fashion began bubbling up into my life in other ways; a friend of mine—a carpenter—would come to me every few months to repair his favorite pair of German carpenter pants. I patched up the cuffs, then the knees, then the crotch, then the zippers, then the cuffs again (I called them the Theseus's ship of pants).

I found myself fascinated by the idea of exploring the definition of workwear. The current definition of workwear according to the Cambridge dictionary is “clothes that people wear for work, usually heavy work that is done with the hands.” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023)

Workwear today is generally associated with work done by men- carpentry, construction, plumbing, mining, and more. It displays a simple, functional style, with relatively little variation in silhouette or even color from brand to brand.

What interested me in all of this was that even though we have a narrow definition of workwear in the modern day, many different articles of clothing could be considered workwear. Historically speaking, anything that was not “churchwear” was workwear for working class individuals. An apron, a pinafore, a heavy woolen skirt- whether you were cooking, cleaning, farming, or fishing, whatever was worn daily to do manual labor was effectively workwear.

Why not incorporate some of these styles into modern workwear? What is stopping workwear from referencing historical garments and silhouettes? Must it be the same brown canvas, square pocket, straight leg pant, or could it be something...more?

The Design Process

My ultimate goal within this project was to create an article of clothing that was reliable and effective for modern manual labor, but that referenced women's historical fashion in its construction and fit.

As I spoke with my friends who rely heavily on workwear in their daily lives, I heard many complaints about the steady decrease in quality over time of workwear, and how much more likely it was that their clothing purchased recently would tear, rip, or wear out—especially American-made garments. Older garments or pieces purchased in Europe, they said, were more reliable and durable. This is consistent with the sharp downward trend in clothing quality observed over recent decades, coupled with the lack of attention on the repair and refurbishment of existing garments (Berthon, 2019).

Users reported another complaint, too: most workwear options on the market are boring. For users who are women and gender-non-conforming, they reported that they feel particularly trapped by the aesthetics of workwear. Figure 2 shows the most prevalent options on the market, which lack variation in not just color and fit, but also personal style.



Figure 2: Current Market Options

The users I interviewed reported the following stylistic concerns about current workwear:

“I feel limited by what I have to wear to work.”

- Ashley V, ceramic production assistant

“I want to express myself through my workwear, and I feel like a square when I go to work.”

- Kevin W, carpenter

“I want to feel like a professional but also express myself, and I can’t do that with what’s on the market today”

- Connor S, ceramic studio assistant

I wanted to inject color, pattern, and texture into the aesthetic, using pre-industrial techniques for the construction.

Thus, I created an initial moodboard for the stylistic direction I wanted my design to go (figure 3).

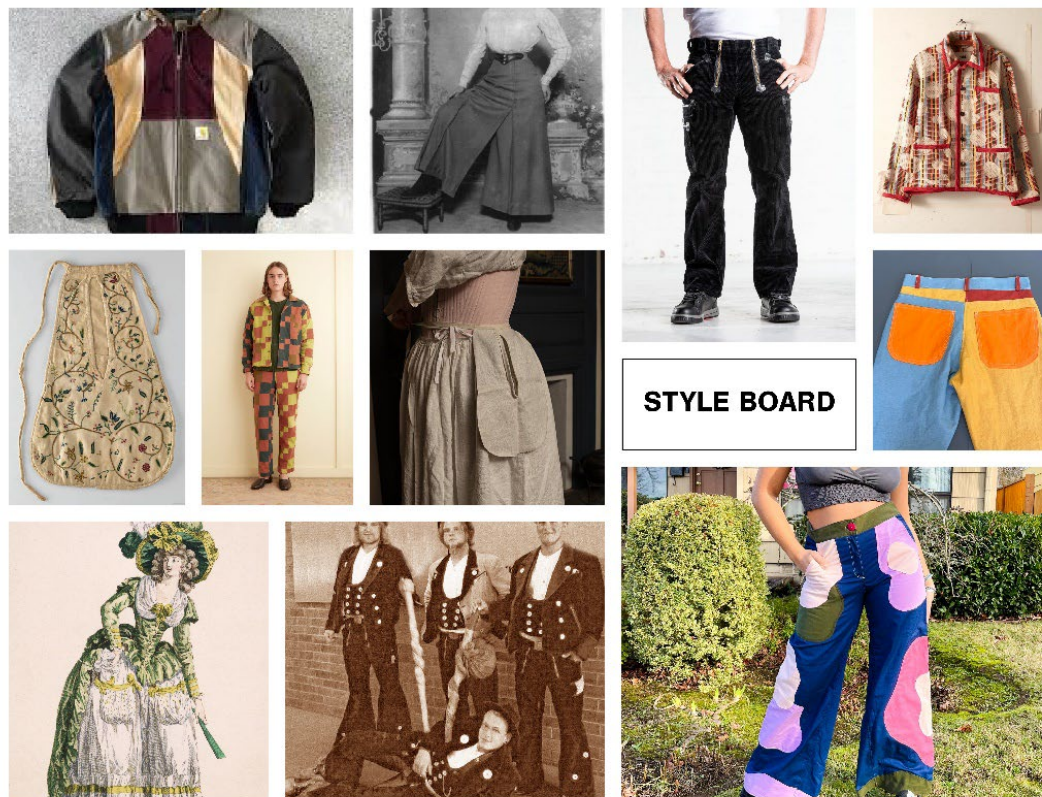


Figure 3: Initial Moodboard for Design Direction

The direction I initially began in was the creation of a novel way of constructing pockets, with historical references. I sketched and created initial techpacks (figure 4). References include tie on pockets (figure 5) and a Victorian split skirt (figure 6)

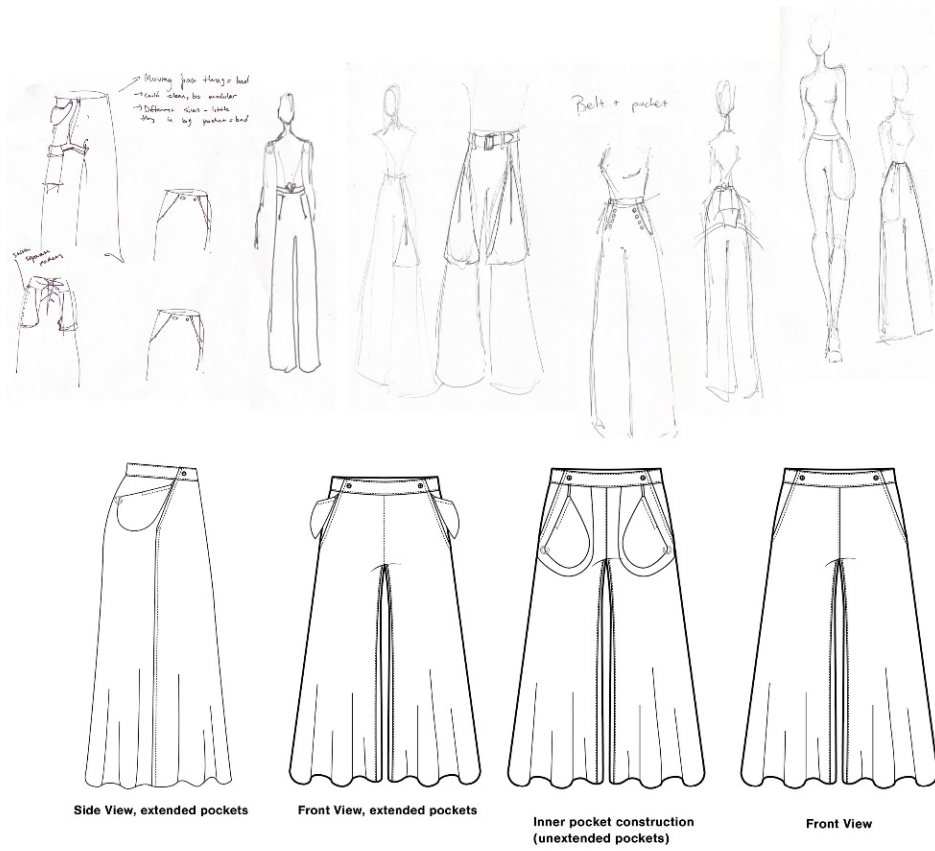


Figure 4: Initial Designs



Figure 5: Tie-On Pockets

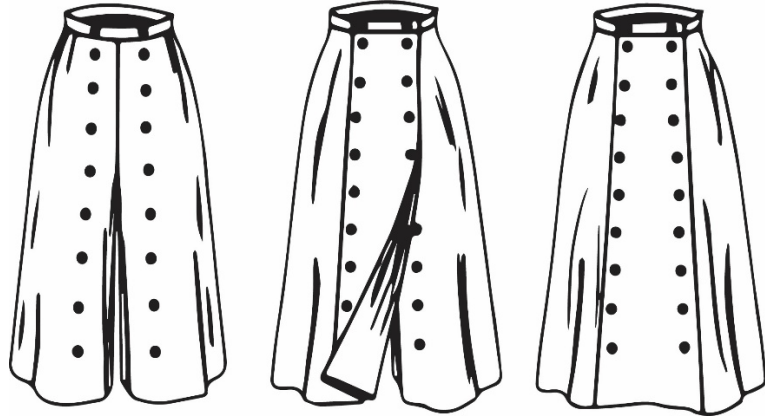


Figure 6: Split Skirt

The split skirt was a Victorian-era style garment for bike-riding while maintaining social acceptability.

The first design fell flat (figures 7, 8, and 9).



Figure 7: First prototype front



Figure 8: First Prototype details



Figure 9: Undeployed pocket

My initial excitement about using a tie on pocket in modern pants morphed into enthusiasm about using other references for a more full coverage garment, particularly a pinafore (figure 10)



Figure 10: Pinafore Circa 1900

More sketching ensued (figure 11)

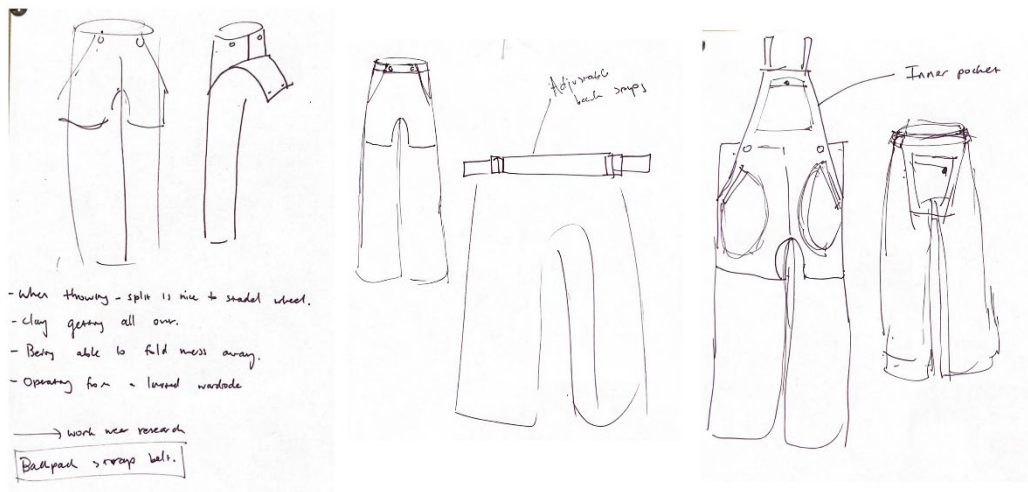


Figure 11: Second round of sketching

Prototypes 2 and 3 took shape.



Figure 12: Prototype 2



Figure 13: Prototype 2 Apron Detail

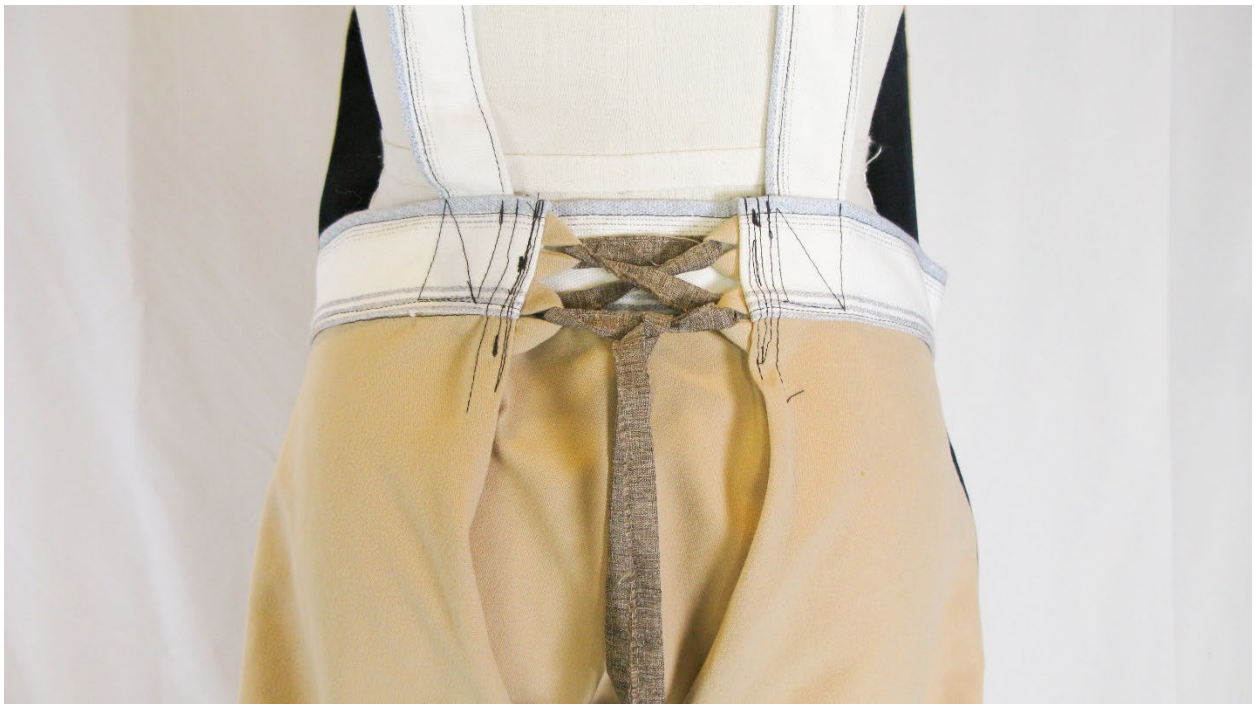


Figure 14: Prototype 2 Back cinch



Figure 15: Prototype 3



Figure 16: Prototype 3 Apron Detail



Figure 17: Prototype 3 Fly & apron detail

User Testing

The design of these first two prototypes includes a convertible bib-to-apron mechanism, extra large pockets, and an adjustable back cinch.

Prototypes 2 and 3 were put into circulation, one for casual wear around the house doing minor household tasks, and the other by a ceramic studio assistant. User photos can be found in Figure 18 below.



Testing Compilation: V1

Figure 18: Compilation of user testing photos

In-depth interviews with users and an analysis of user photos revealed the following information.

- Improvement was needed on the back cinch mechanism; there was too much extra fabric bunching up in the seat.
- Straps had nowhere to go when the bib was in apron mode
- Pocket bags were too close to the crotch
- Easier to use the bathroom and get in and out of than typical overalls
- Remove the double zipper on the apron- access only from apron side
- Users appreciated the wide leg style but cautioned on the size of the wide leg.

I then created the fourth version, which kept the straps on the body at all times acting as suspenders, and the apron would button up onto them. I altered the pattern to improve the fit and pocket situation, and made the bib/apron bag only accessible from the inside. See figure 19 for the updated sketch.

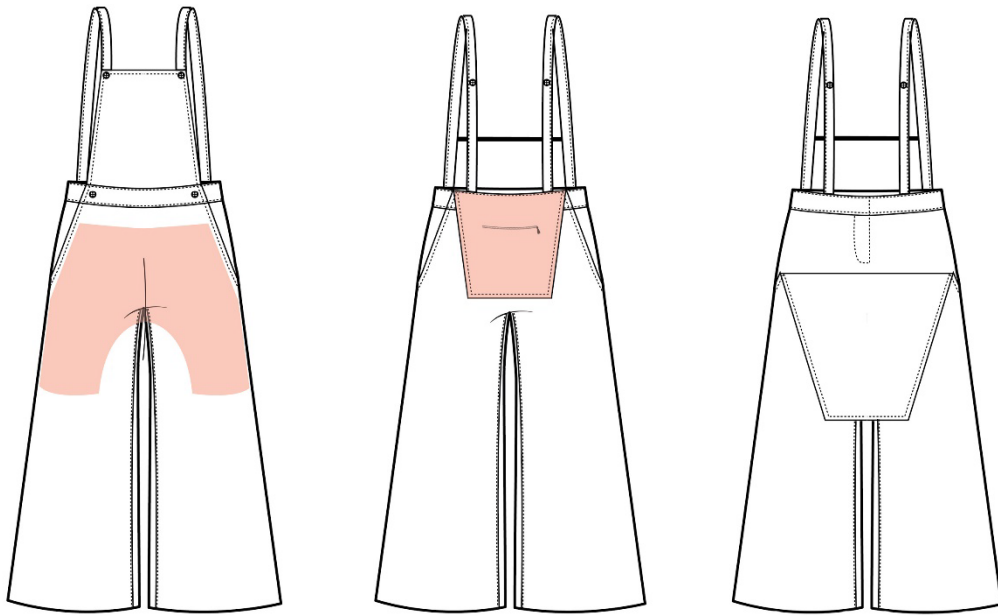


Figure 19: Updated sketches for Proto 4



Figure 20: Prototype 4 Testing

The tester shown in the photo compilation in figure 20 was particularly pleased about the overall's ability to protect them from dust and water. This user is a production assistant for a ceramic studio, and found that the layered fabric was highly useful in preventing substances to seep through to their clothing. Additionally, the fabric itself was a particular selling point for this user; they reported that the colorful aesthetic was distinct from most other options and garnered positive attention within their women-run studio.

Minor adjustments were necessary. I further altered the fit to help smooth over some of the areas with an excess of fabric. I wanted to improve some of the trims and hardware so the user felt more comfortable trusting them. Figure 21 details the updates for the final version.

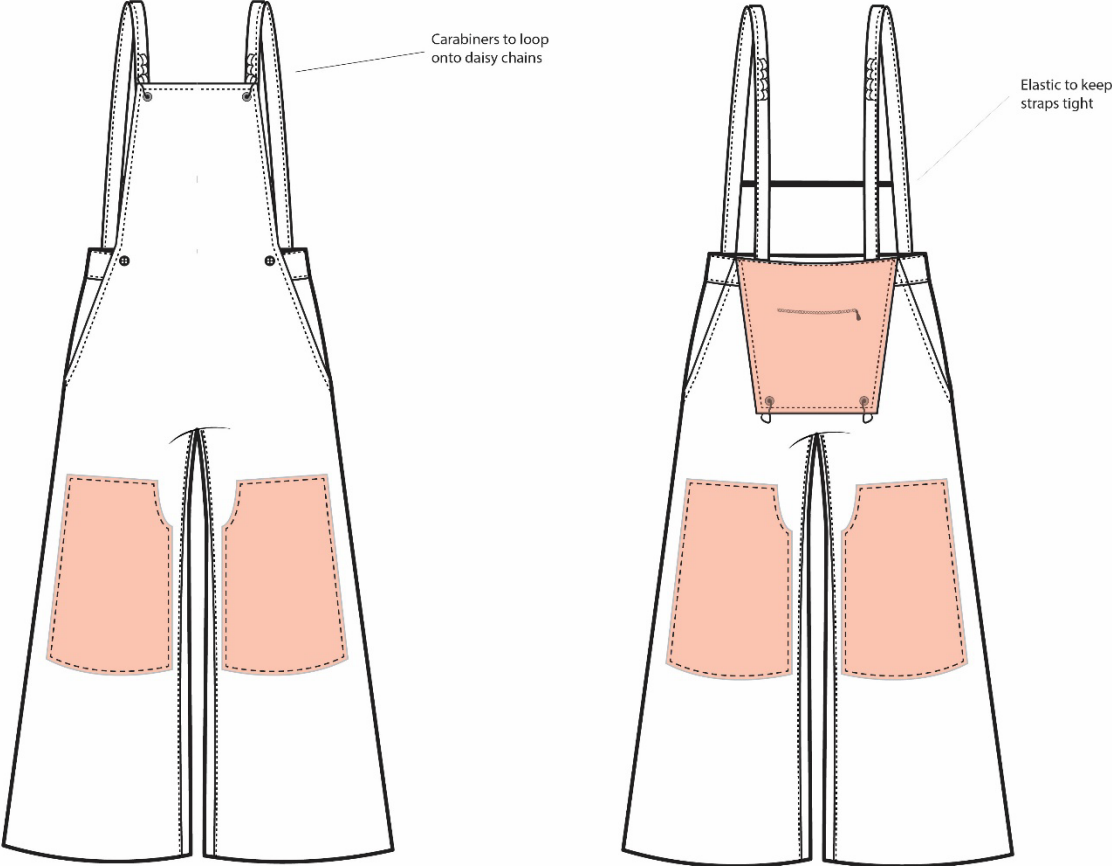


Figure 21: Proto 5

Conclusion

My final photos are as follows- I wanted to showcase their utility in different contexts and with different users. As each model tried on the overalls, the adjustability was extremely useful to make them feel as comfortable as possible.



Figure 22: Full body “hero shot”



Figure 23: Back cinches



Figure 24: Bib in “apron mode”



Figure 25: Showing interior construction

Throughout my foray into the world of design, I am privileged to have found many people who have shown me how valuable and interesting historical fashion is. However, there is still so much misconception about garments of the past and their various helps and hinderances. While the world focuses on the dazzling, impractical dress of the aristocracy, we forget to consider the hardworking, enduring garments of the working class.

As American culture marches towards overconsumption and planned obsolescence, we've lost connection with the items we come in contact with most. Instead of cherishing, celebrating, repairing, and caring for our clothes, they've become fleeting objects-- tools with which to engage in trends which disappear as soon as they arrive. Workwear remains of the few places where the care for one's clothing endures.

By incorporating historical fashion construction techniques into modern workwear, I aimed to show a new side of historical fashion- particularly women's historical fashion. The longevity of a garment will inevitably increase if the user feels comfortable and stylish in it, and if it fits them well. While it's unreasonable to expect that everyone get outfits tailored to their measurements, it's important that garment design makes room for the changes that occur in all of our bodies from year to year, or even morning until evening.

Functionality, adjustability, and style were the focuses of this version of these overalls. However, one of the pillars that this project did not touch on to the same degree was repairability, and design for repair. My future developments of this project aim to provide reinforcements to commonly worn areas on the overalls, and design for maintenance and maximum ease of repair. Ideas include:

- Creating patch patterns to be sold with the garment so the user can easily replace parts of the pants.
- Further improving the pattern of these pants to allow more ease for letting out.

I look forward to further engaging in a culture of design that focuses less on constant production, and more on caring for the things we own. Having made my own clothing for years now, I know just how important it is that our everyday clothes are not just well-made, but that they reflect who we are and make us feel comfortable in our bodies. This project exists not just to make something new, but as a tool for teaching what is possible in any realm of fashion- for any gender, for any job, for any person.

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