



Cutwork Ginseng: Translating the Novels of Gene Stratton-Porter into a Period Corset

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Contextual Review and Concept

Submission context. Gene Stratton-Porter (1863-1924) was a naturalist and novelist who successfully combined nature-writing with popular fiction to become one of the best-selling authors of the early 20th Century (Richards, 1980). This design interprets Stratton-Porter's work through two lenses: Ecocriticism and feminism. Ecocriticism is a literary criticism theory that focuses on "place, nature, and the physical world, attesting to the interconnectedness of humans (their culture) and nature" (Bressler, 2011, p. 231). When not directly advocating conservation (as she did in several of her nonfiction works), Stratton-Porter sought to engage public interest in birds, plants, and insects through her novels (Pyle, 2005). In her novels, Stratton-Porter noted that most designs derived from nature were overused and "stupid," (Stratton-Porter, 1911, p. 158). She noted acerbically, "There are actually birds beside fat robins and nondescript swallows. The crane and heron do not monopolize the water. Wild rose and golden-rod are not the only flowers" (Stratton-Porter, 1911, p. 183). To counter the perceived unoriginality of mainstream decorative art, Stratton-Porter strongly advocated the use of local plants and insects in design work in a wide variety of mediums, including woodworking, landscaping, fashion, and even the culinary arts (Stratton-Porter, 1909, 1911, 1921), a practice which she modeled in her own life with her cabin and garden near the Limberlost swamp in Indiana.

Stratton-Porter had a complex relationship with feminism. Although she depicted strong female characters in her novels, her characters operated largely within social norms of their time, albeit often in unconventional ways (Richards, 1980, p. 120). Stratton-Porter's own life seems to have depicted some ambivalence about gender roles, achieving her personal goals while maintaining a veneer of social acceptability. She claimed that her primary responsibility was "to keep a perfect household" and that she only engaged in her nature work once those responsibilities were completed; however, Stratton-Porter was viewed by her acquaintances as "highly unconventional," wore men's clothing outdoors, and carried a revolver (Richards, 1980, pp. 30-31, 120). Stratton-Porter had a dual sartorial personality dependent on situation; outdoors, she focused exclusively on practicality and defied gender norms, but in social situations, she "became the essence of femininity" and was particularly fond of fine clothes made of expensive fabrics (Richards, 1980, p. 120).

Design concept. For this project, I decided to combine Stratton-Porter's promotion of unusual plants in design with her love of fine clothes and fabrics, and to express her unconventionality that operated (mostly) within acceptable boundaries of femininity in her period. To represent the strictures of the social norms within which Stratton-Porter lived, I chose to create a corset set in the period of one of her novels. Integrating the materials and techniques with my design concept, I deliberately selected a silk taffeta woven with a trite rose design (a

fabric that Stratton-Porter would have found unoriginal) and overlaid it with an unconventional, bold interpretation of a ginseng plant that adorned the cover of one of Stratton-Porter's novels. This corset represents the streak of rebellion and unconventionality, expressed in her nature work, that was intertwined with Stratton-Porter's attempts to fit her societal expectations of a good wife and mother.

Process, Technique, and Execution

In creating this corset, I adhered as closely as possible to Edwardian corsetry techniques, referencing photographs of extant corsets, advertisements and other period images of corsetry, and books on historic corsetry. This corset is designed to be suitable for the publication year of one of Stratton-Porter's best-known works, *A Girl of the Limberlost*, published in 1909. All the materials, with the exception of synthetic whalebone, are suitable to the period. The corset is made of white cotton coutil (a stiff herringbone-weave fabric used in corsetry), overlaid with purple jacquard taffeta with a floral pattern. Prior to sewing together the panels of the corset, I roll-pinned the taffeta to the coutil (Pesendorfer, 2014), shaping the coutil panels over a curved surface and hand-basting the taffeta to the panels. Although the taffeta looks loose when laid flat, this process accounted for the curve of the body so that the two layers of the corset are smooth when worn. This corset contains 24 bones, made of German synthetic whalebone, currently the best alternative to real whalebone (as the latter is no longer available). To hold the bones in place, as well as providing a decorative accent found in high-end corsetry, each bone is flossed (Doyle, 1997; Salen, 2008; Waugh, 1954) by hand in heavy thread. The back of the corset laces with 36 metal grommets and eight yards of cotton lacing, dyed yellow to match the embroidery and tipped with metal aiglets.

Embroidery. The cutwork technique is documented to the period by an extant 1904-1906 example (Bon Marché, 1904). I developed the cutwork pattern by adapting a stylized illustration of the ginseng plant from the cover of a 1911 copy of Stratton-Porter's book *The Harvester*, from my personal collection (Figure 1). The decorative upper border of the corset contains over 230 inches of hand-stitched cutwork, composed of approximately 8200 buttonhole stitches.

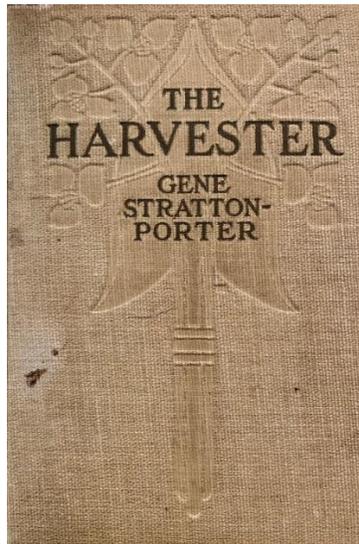


Figure 1. Cover of *The Harvester* by Gene Stratton-Porter, 1911.

Aesthetic Properties, Visual Impact and Cohesion

The color scheme for the corset – orchid purple and yellow – was derived from the coloration of the *Eacles Imperialis* moth, an insect that Stratton-Porter used as a key plot device in *A Girl of the Limberlost*. The body of the corset is purple, and the yellow is used as an accent color, repeated in the embroidery, the flossing, and the corset lacing. The sinuous design of the cutwork echoes the Art Nouveau silhouette of the corset itself.

Design Contribution and Innovation

Two examples were found of extant corsets with cutwork, one in the Victoria and Albert Museum, dating from the 1860s, and the other in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, dating from the early 1900s (Bon Marché, 1904; *Corset T.95-1949*, 1860s). Both used abstract designs in the cutwork. Pesendorfer (2015) has used laser cutting as embellishments for several of her corsets. Historic costumer Leimomi Oakes (2010) created an Edwardian gown inspired by a moth, referencing Stratton-Porter; however, Oakes cites Stratton-Porter as historic documentation for creating a moth gown rather than as direct inspiration. This garment is the first to incorporate both feminism and ecocriticism in a sartorial representation of Gene Stratton-Porter's life and nature writings.

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