

Craze and Shame: Rubber Clothing during the Nineteenth Century in Paris, London, and New York City

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Abstract

In the early 1840s, the quality of rubber products became stable thanks to vulcanization technology, and rubber became utilized in many areas, including clothes production. Rubber was useful for clothes due to its elasticity and waterproofness. It was used to produce outer clothes for rainy or snowy weather, underwear to maintain hygiene, and special underwear to change the proportion of the body. From the end of the 1840s to mid-1850s, rubber was very popular among the bourgeoisie as a chic, precious material to produce expensive, brand-new clothes. However, after the end of the 1850s, rubber imports increased, production expanded, and the price of rubber dropped. Rubber material became the symbol of mass-produced products for ordinary people. When waterproof rubber clothes became used as work-clothes in chemical plants, slaughterhouses, and fish stores, they were linked to the working class. In the 1890s, rubber began to be used in the production of automobile and bicycle tires, dropping the status of rubber to the lowest level. While rubber was long established in the field of medical tools, it became used as a prophylactic in the 1880s. Rubber lost its status in public and social life, as its smell and tactile quality became linked to sexuality. Today, rubber is used only in functional wear and manual labor clothes.

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