

Feature



Steampunk Circus Strongwoman's Crinoline

Jessica Frantal

Image: Don Searle

The crinoline for a steampunk circus strongwoman has its roots in a style of metallic cloche from the 1920s

With the ever increasing popularity of Steampunk, the challenge has become how to execute new and interesting takes on the genre. For Costume-Con 31 in Denver, Colorado, I was invited by a group of friends to participate in a very different spin on Steampunk – a Steampunk Circus.



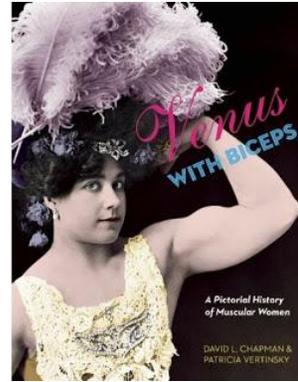
Josephine Blatt ("Minerva"), 1895. Image from [Wikipedia](#).

As a late joiner to the group, I had to dig a little deeper into circus lore to find character inspiration. After much Googling and an ever expanding Pinterest board, I came upon the idea of doing a Strongwoman.

There was a

surprising amount of information on Victorian strongwomen, including the excellent [book](#), *Venus With Biceps: A Pictorial History of Muscular Women*, by David Chapman and Patricia Vertinsky (ISBN 9781551523705). Now that I had found my character, I had to face the hardest part – how to make it Steampunk?

Being a bit of a gearhead myself, I always approach my Steampunk costumes with an eye for believability and function. If I'm going to slap a gear on a costume, that gear had better darn well do something! In brainstorming ways to add a steamy flair to my costume, I settled on the idea of robotic enhancements, specifically a brass and copper piston-powered robotic arm. At that point the one area I



had yet to decide on was my hair. With very short, often unnaturally colored hair, I almost always employ wigs with my costumes. For this particular piece, I wanted something special. Something that would emphasize the robotic nature of my character.

Fortunately, my partner-in-crime stumbled on images of some amazing cloches from the 1920's, designed to reflect the

hairstyles of the period and executed in gold bullion.

It was love at first sight!

However, I knew I wanted a more voluminous Victorian style and that bullion would be both heavy and

extremely expensive. So, what material could I use to give the same metallic tube effect, without the weight or the cost? The answer is tubular crinoline!

1920s [cloche](#) made of gold bullion. (above) Jessica Frantal as steampunk strongwoman with cyberlox crinoline (left), image by [Don Searle](#).



Often called tubular crin or cyberlox, I first became familiar with this material in my post-college cyber goth days when it had just become a very popular material for hairfalls and wigs. As such, it can still be found on many artificial hair sites, such as [Doctored Locks](#) and [I Kick Shins](#). The other option is sites that specialize in materials for unique gift wrapping and bow-making. I found an excellent selection on [Etsy](#).



Tubular crinoline (left) is an open-weave tube constructed of flat lame strips. In construction, it is much like a Chinese finger trap. It is extremely light weight and is available in a myriad of colors, both metallic and matte. It also comes in several widths, most commonly between 3/16" - 3/4".

To build the wig, I started with a standard weave cap (right). It's essentially a mesh wig base, but without the flaps that go in front of your ears. These are nice to use if you don't want to get into making your own wig cap. I began by cutting my tubular crin into approximate lengths to avoid everything becoming a jumbled mess and to evaluate how much I had of each color, as I had a limited supply of each. I then began hand sewing each of the tubes around the edges of the weave cap, using a curved needle and weave thread (although any strong, thick thread would do).

I knew I wanted the final wig to be in an "updo," (left) so I attached the tubes on the underside of the wig cap. This would give me a seamless hairline

when I pulled the wig back and away from my face. I first sewed in the large tubes, then filled in the gaps with smaller tubes. I made sure to individually sew the tubes, breaking my thread between each, to maintain the stretch of the weave cap.



Once I had completed the outside edge, I did a test fitting. I was happy to find that due to the volume of the tubes, just the edges were enough! After the test fitting, I did run into the one

major issue with tubular crin – the fraying. The second you cut this stuff, it starts unraveling like mad. (below) And if you don't sew it far enough back from the edge, it will slip right out of your stitches; a fact I discovered when I took the wig off and several tubes fell to the floor. I also found in my brief wearing that the cut edges are very itchy and uncomfortable.



After reattaching the fallen tubes, I assessed the situation and decided that my best option was to line the weave cap. I dug through my stash and found a beige cotton knit. I cut a piece and stretched it over my wig head, pinning it in firmly with t-pins. I then placed the wig over the top and started carefully hot gluing it around the edges, insuring that the frayed edges of each tube were sandwiched between the wig cap and the knit fabric.

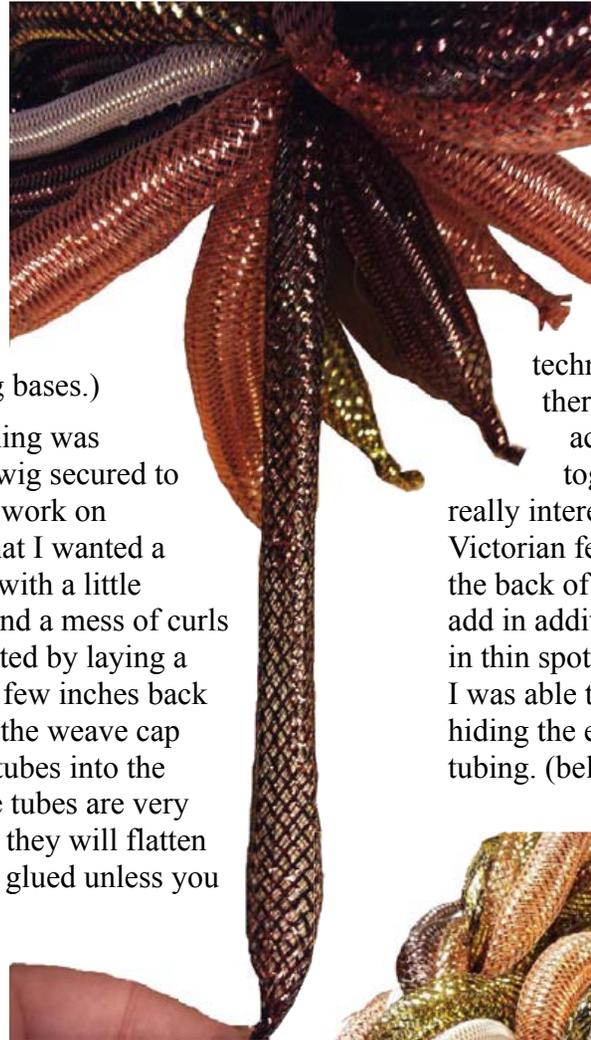
(Note: if you need to attach a lining to a wig, make sure that you use a stretch material and that the wig cap is stretched to approximately the size of your head before gluing anything together. If your wig head is too small, this can significantly reduce the



circumference of your wig. I purchased a men's foam wig base, which I found to be much closer to the size of an average head than the usual tiny women's wig bases.)

Once the lining was attached and the wig secured to the base, I began work on styling. I knew that I wanted a swept-back look with a little volume in front and a mess of curls in the back. I started by laying a line of hot glue a few inches back from the front of the weave cap and pressing the tubes into the glue. Because the tubes are very porous and open, they will flatten completely when glued unless you are careful. (left)

The other thing I found that I needed to be careful of was stretching the tubular crin as I worked with it. Since it is constructed just like a finger trap, it acts in the exact same way; namely, when you stretch it, it narrows. If you pull it enough, the 3/4" tubing can easily slim down to 1/4". (above) If you want to maintain the size of the tubing, as I did,



you need to be careful when you're tacking it in place to make sure you aren't stretching it out too much.

With the front tubing glued down, I started to style the remainder of the wig. I would love to tell you that I used some complex styling technique here, but I really just got in there and started playing around. I actually found that tying the tubes together into "nests" created a really interesting curl texture that gave the Victorian feel I was looking for. As I built the back of the style, I would occasionally add in additional pieces of tubular crin to fill in thin spots. Since the weave cap was lined, I was able to just hot glue these in place, hiding the edges under the other pieces of tubing. (below)





When I was happy with the volume of curls, I took the remaining tubes and plaited them into a simple long braid,

tying it in place with an extra piece of 1/4" tubing.

(top right) Once I was finished styling, I carefully trimmed the lining fabric to just under the edge of the wig.

The only issue that remained was the ends. As I said earlier, tubular crin frays very badly when cut. Many people will either melt or apply clear glue to the ends to maintain the tubular shape. I'm not

especially fond of that look and wanted something more natural-looking. I found that simply tying a small knot at the end of each tube creates a clean taper, which were reminiscent of dreadlocks. (left)

The final wig is extremely lightweight compared to every other wig I've ever worn. The

only drawback I have found is that the weave cap does not fully cover my natural hairline. I was able to work around this by adding some tubing in front of my ears and doing some pretty fierce work with hairpins. In the future, I'd like to add some extra tubing in order to move the hairline forward more.

Tubular crinoline is a fun and unique material that can marry extremely well with the Steampunk aesthetic. I hope this encourages you to try it out on your next costume.



Jessica Frantal was introduced to the world of costuming at the age of 5, when her mother made her an epic Smurfette costume for Halloween, and there's been no looking back since. Her costume pursuits have been a mix of replicas and originals, spanning the genres from 1950's Christmas movies to modern video games and including categories such as Cyberpunk and Steampunk. Her company, [Mad Scientist Designs](#), provides bespoke costume and prop-making services. When not making costumes, Jessica's work still revolves around garments. She is currently an MFA candidate in Textile and Apparel Design at the University of Wisconsin – Madison and is an adjunct professor in Apparel Product Development at Mt. Mary University.

Jessica Frantal as the Steampunk Circus Strong-woman with cyberlox crinoline. Image by [Don Searle](#).