

Bra Support Comes of Age

The history of the bra, 1920-1930 *

BY CAROL WOOD

“The history of the chest is as much about its suppression as it is about its augmentation”
 Harold Koda *Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed*



Silhouettes of the 1920s
 (Source Le Jardin des
 Modes (1920), No. 104.

Underwear and outerwear tag team change and for the brassiere this is no exception. Women’s under-fashion evolved from the constraining corset to the flapper’s bandeau and then the starlet’s bullet bra. Innovations, however, are not sudden events, but the result of layers of experiments over time that, if persistent and widespread, result in permanent change. The history of the bra in the 1920s and 1930s is just such an example. Beginning as early as the start of the 19th century, the bra’s development is exemplified by false starts, dead-end patents, and a lot of sore mammaries. And then there were the successes; the materials that didn’t reek, and the items that didn’t end up around one’s neck while dancing ‘til dawn. Somewhere in between, there is a hugely complex story full of intrigue, competition, and some very satisfied customers.

The 1920s Ideal: La Garçonne

The ideal of the decade was a wisp of a girl with tiny, if not invisible, breasts under a sheath garment. This narrow silhouette was a natural progression from the narrowing skirt and blouse of the teens with one big surprise for this decade: Legs! Within months, skirts rose from ankles to knees for the first time in memorable history and they were THE sensation. Focus was diverted from a buxom torso, down the body and to shapely legs adorned with fine silk stockings and fabulous

footwear. Clearly, not every woman had the legs or the torso to pull off 1920s fashion successfully. So, how did the aspiring garçonne, or flapper, achieve “it”?

Heading into the 1920s, the bra was not a garment of much support. Its sole purpose was to contain and restrict breast movement. “For a long stretch, from the 1860s to the 1930s, dozens and dozens of inventors struggled with the same momentous design challenge: how to free up the waist to give women the ability to move easily while also supporting and shaping their busts” (Riordan, 69.) For those who wanted it, there was at last a liberating



Jazz age couple dancing ‘til dawn.

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*Excerpted from the author’s original article in *Virtual Costumer*, vol. 8, no.3: 14-23 (2010).

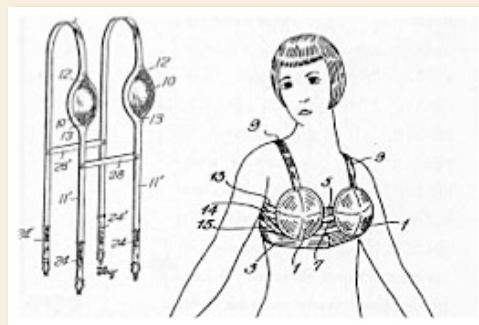
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undergarment for the torso that could be worn on its own, and a woman could still feel respectable. Not only did the fashions of the time cry out for this freedom of movement at the waist, women's activities did, too.

Nearly 200 patents for bras and corselettes were registered between 1918 and 1929. The biggest advances in the business were the beginning of sizing and selling to a wider clientele. Bras were manufactured in soft tones, such as peach, tea rose, and pale green, since most clothes were still laundered by hand and white was not as easy to keep clean as colored undies. Rayon virtually democratized lingerie in the 1920s: the "appearance of luxury was for the first time available to women of modest means" (Fontaine, 104.) Innovative wash-resistant dyes resulted in easy and more frequent laundering, but also allowed women to be more active in their colorful new underthings



Louise Antoinette Sherry's 1922 bra relied on tension between the shoulders and the stockings to hold up the breasts." This design also used in the 1930s.

(Right) Very simple; just enough to cover. (Source: Pictorial Review Fashion Book, Winter 1925.)



(Bottom) Pale green, 1920s bandeau-style bra. From the author's collection.



(Right) The Spring/Summer 1925 Altman catalog offered lovely bandeaus, even strapless.



without fear of colors running when they did.

Postal service delivery got a boost in 1914, which meant fashion magazines (on the rise themselves) could bring images of fashionability along with mail ordered bras. Retailer expansion and an increase in automobile sales facilitated bra purchases; however, mail order was the cheapest option: a bra sold for well under \$1. An office clerk could afford a bra or two that she could launder more often than the stodgy old corset, especially with the proliferation of wash-resistant dyes. Or, there were women like my grandmother and great aunts who expended no cash on bras, but bound their breasts in strips of old sheets!

And that OTHER reason to switch to a bra? "The New Woman could smoke, drink, vote, and even hold down a job. Moreover, she was sexually independent as never before. . . . And what did the bra provide for the veriest schoolgirl that a corset did not? Easier access during the 'petting parties in the purple dawn.'" (Riordan, 91) The 1920s was the decade of decadence: an era of sex, drugs, and more social freedom than women had ever



The author's grandmother with bound bust in her fancy 1920s frock.

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experienced. With the right to vote for women enacted in 1920, more U.S. women worked outside the home, and life moved fast. Thanks to the introduction of the diaphragm in 1916, women had greater access to contraception information. And, to add to the breakdown of any remaining inhibitions, Prohibition made alcohol an attractive forbidden fruit. Combine this with the use of automobiles to access bootleggers and retailers, women had a “bedroom on wheels.” (Riordan, 91)

Support in the 1930s: And Then There Were Two



Frills, flounces, and collars in

“A number of technical innovations in materials took place in the 1930s and 1940s, including man-made fibers and durable elastics. These new possibilities coincided with the fashion world’s impulse to shape the bust. The rapid shift from the bust suppression of the 1920s to the unencumbered and pendant bosom of the 1930s was immediately followed by a dramatic introduction of brassieres with structured support.” (Koda, 59)

If freeing the waist and flattening the bust was the ideal of the 1920s, uplift and separation of the breasts characterized the 1930s bra. Designers had begun to focus attention on the upper torso by way of collars, drapery, pleating and tucking at the neck. (Farrell-Beck, 61) At the beginning of the decade, hems had dropped significantly, drawing attention away from legs and making way for a renewed interest in raising up the bust.



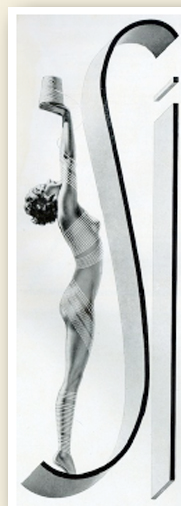
Swing dancers of 1936.

Despite high unemployment, bra sales soared. The 1935 Sears, Roebuck sold bras mail order for as low as \$.14 compared to a \$4 to \$6 corset (in context: day dresses sold for \$1 to \$5.) In trying economic times, it was even more important to look well groomed which a bra could do for comparatively little.

Physical activity increased with the heyday of dance halls in the 1930s promising the Lindy Hop and the Quick Step. Clothing had to keep up with these activities and that meant garments had to move with the body.

Interesting innovations took the stage as both day and evening wear required soft, yet strong support. Manufactured knits were used to create both outer and underwear. Circular knitting machines were able to create girdles without bulky fasteners. However, the improvements in rubber production begun a century earlier with Charles Goodrich’s vulcanization process turned rubber into a “wonder product” that revolutionized the clothing industry. Although rubber is found in shape wear as early as the teens, it wasn’t until the 1930s when bras and girdles were manufactured with Lastex. This new rubber was extruded into tiny filaments wrapped in cotton, silk, or rayon, which meant the wearer would not sweat quite so much and the product was comfortable with

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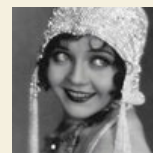


Lastex ad as it appeared in the French underwear trade magazine, 'LeCorset.' 1930s.

Upcoming Events

Prohibition Pub Crawl

Nov. 16, 2013



Let’s jump the trolley for the speakeasies! On two private trolleys provided by Classic Cable Car Charter, we’ll ride through San Francisco’s

prohibition era bars to have a belt (drink) and show off our get-ups. Our short visits at different establishments will allow us to enjoy the evening ride. Costume: 1920s evening wear, vintage or historically-inspired. Coats and hats will be highly desirable on the trolley!

GBACG Goes to Dickens

Dec. 8, 2013

Visit with friends and make merry in Dickens’ London with our annual GBACG meet-up. Over the course of the day, we’ll



gather at two different locations to admire each others costumes, meet old friends, and absorb the general splendor. Costume: Victorian era to 1870. Location: SoSF

New York Society Tea

Dec. 28, 2013



Mrs. Astor and Mrs. Vanderbilt invite the cream of New York society to their holiday tea. We’ll enjoy a sumptuous tea, sparkling wine, holiday cheer, and the very best possible company in the incomparable Garden Court of the Palace Hotel, San Francisco. Costume: Fashionable daytime attire from 1870-1889 is required. Location: SF

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Kestos had a very strong advertising look in 1938.

successful elastic recovery. Then came nylon. It was first used commercially in 1938 as the bristles in toothbrushes and then, most famously, as stockings in 1940. Nylon was used for bras and other underclothing, as well. In 1932, cup sizing began: A, B, C, D cups and bands 34", 36", 38" etc.; and, in 1934, "Whirlpool stitching" stabilized the cups with concentric rings of topstitching. (Farrell-Beck, 66) The elimination of the seam under the cup and the use of bias fabric allowed the tension of the bust in the cup to do the work thereby producing a "comfortable brassiere that adapted to the size and shape of each breast,"



(Right) Formfit corselette from the author's collection. (Above) Detail of bust reveals the "Whirlpool stitching" used to stabilize cups.



and optimizing the decade's lift-and-separate theme. (Farrell-Beck, 79)

Bra-Cabulary

Bandeau: a type of brassiere that hooks at the back and minimizes shaping

Bosom Friends: padding worn to increase the size of the chest or to add warmth

Brasselette: a strapless, garterless bustier

Bust Bodice: a late 19th century term used to describe a covering for the bust that had straps and was slightly boned in the front and on the sides to give the breasts a mono-bosom effect

Bustier: a bra that extends to the upper waist and often has detachable garters

Cambria: a bra in which the area between the cups is joined by a piece of fabric that makes the bra look like the top of a camisole

Camisette: a bustier designed to hug the figure rather than shape it

Cookies: removable pads placed in the lower portion of cups in padded bras

Corselette: a one-piece garment combining brassiere and girdle

Cuties: a 1950s term for false breasts

Demi-bra: a bra which does not cover the upper part of the breasts; intended for use with low necklines

Falsies: removable bust pads

Long-line bra: a bra that extends to the waist and is often used for figure shaping

Minimizer: a bra that reduces breast size by one cup size

Push-Up Bra: a bra with a low-cut front, removable pads, and underwire support

Singlettes: a bra-chemise combination garment

Soutien-Gorge: French word for "bra"

Wings: material that runs along back and sides of torso for extra support for large breasts

Recreating the Look: Resources and Suggestions

Wearing period undergarments can enhance the actor's and re-enactor's experience. For some silhouettes, it's absolutely necessary to don appropriate underwear, such as corsets for the Renaissance, bustles for the 1870s, and a bullet bra for the 1950s. Even the 1920s flat-chested flapper silhouette requires some work, since today's bust position – high and enhanced – ruins that look.

If you would like to try your hand at recreating a period bra from the 1920s or 1930s, there are a few reference resources and patterns. Countryman and Weiss Hopper¹ include pattern drafts of period bras and corresponding drawers and slips. Modify a commercial pattern for a bra / bikini top based on the Countryman and Weiss Hopper patterns; or recreate a favorite bra using the Burgess² technique and modify the look of that bra based on period patterns or images. You can buy period sewing patterns, but know that most 1920s and 1930s sewing patterns are available in one size per envelope and have minimal instructions.

Easiest for the 1920s is to don a sports bra that will achieve the bound bust appearance. The 1930s look is somewhat easier, since separation and uplift are still the order of the day. Today's brassiere technology enables bras that can pass as period '30s bras and still feel comfortable and secure. *F*



Simplicity pattern 1517, size 20.

¹ Countryman, Ruth S., and Elizabeth Weiss Hopper. 1998. *Women's Wear of the 1920's with complete patterns*. Players Press: 178-190, ISBN 0887346545; and *Women's Wear of the 1930's with Complete patterns*. 2001. Players Press: 191-193, ISBN: 0887346758.

² Burgess, Lee-Ann. 2000. *Making Beautiful Bras*. R.O. Burgess Pty Ltd, ISBN 0958610967

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President's Column

BY DEBORAH BORLASE

Fall is in the air, with the winter soon approaching. We still have more events coming up, including the GBACG Goes to Dickens on Sunday, December 8, and our now (almost) annual Holliday Tea, scheduled for Saturday, December 28. We hope to see you at both events!

Our 2014 calendar is looking to be a fascinating year for our costume enthusiasts! Thank you everyone for contributing your great ideas, energy and enthusiasm! We will be finalizing the events in the next couple of weeks, and will be posting them soon.

Our annual Open House meeting will be Saturday, January 18, be sure to mark your calendars for it. This is a great place to meet your fellow costumers and your Board members, and find out all of the happenings. Costumes are optional for the Open House, but *always* admired!

References, continued from page 4

Fontanel, Béatrice. 1997. *Support and Seduction: A History of Corsets and Bras*. Abradale Press, ISBN: 0810982080.

Koda, Harold. 2004. *Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, ISBN: 1588390144.

Riordan, Teresa. 2004. *Inventing Beauty: A history of innovations that have made us beautiful!* Broadway Books, ISBN: 0767914511.

Events, continued

GBACG Open House

Jan. 18, 2014

Members, Non-members, and Sister Organization Members are invited to our annual meeting where we highlight upcoming events, costume items raffle, present a fashion show, and other fun stuff! Location: Albany



Bal di Carnevale

Dec. 28, 2013



Enjoy an evening of appetizers, desserts and dazzling feats of skill in the glittering atmosphere of the Venetian Carnivale.

Costume: 18th Century, all classes, or 18th Century Fancy Dress. Masks required! Location: SJ

Sister Organization Events

Discount ticket information: <http://www.gbacg.org/about-gbacg/member-benefits.html>

PEERS: Victorian 12th Night Ball

Jan. 4, 2014: <http://www.peersdance.org/12th2014.html>

PEERS: Middle Earth Ball

Feb. 1, 2014: <http://www.peersdance.org/MiddleEarth.html>

Interested in joining the GBACG or renewing your membership? Want to purchase tickets to events or workshops? You can do all of this on the GBACG website:

- Join/renew your membership: <http://www.gbacg.org/about-gbacg/join-gbacg.html>
- Purchase event tickets: <http://www.gbacg.org/gbacg-calendar.html> - see individual event webpages to order online (via PayPal), or to print out a form that you can mail in with a check.
- Purchase workshop tickets: <http://www.gbacg.org/gbacg.org/gbacg-calendar.html> - see individual workshop webpages to order online (via PayPal), or to print out a form that you can mail in with a check.
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