

Fashion flashback

“WITHOUT FOUNDATION, THERE can be no fashion,” Christian Dior once declared, crediting the role of lingerie in the creation of his shape-defining couture garments. Edwina Ehrman, curator of the Victoria & Albert Museum’s new exhibition *Undressed: A Brief History Of Underwear*, has an alternative view. She believes it was fashion that determined the undergarments, with corsets and now the bra playing a supporting role in the history of dress.

By the Victorian era, the corset had become convention and it was up to women to loosen the ties constricting them. New York socialite Mary Phelps Jacob set the wheels in motion in 1913 when, frustrated by the obtrusiveness and discomfort of corsetry, she tied handkerchiefs together with a ribbon to create her own backless form of brassiere; her social circle followed suit.

It was a Parisian, however, who could claim the title of creator. “The person credited with making the first commercial brassiere is Herminie Cadolle,” says Ehrman, the V&A’s Curator of Textiles and Fashion. “She showed her version of what we would call a bra in 1889 at the World Expo.” Cadolle had taken the traditional corset and separated it into two pieces for added comfort. “There are five generations of Cadolle women who still run this fantastic lingerie business in Paris,” Ehrman adds.

Women in the early 1900s, says Ehrman, were “not just sitting around”. They were much more active, many involved in sports, and therefore required greater flexibility in fashion. *Undressed* features one particular bra from around 1907 that linked to a girdle bottom. Women still wanted support around their lower torso and, in much the same way as Cadolle’s 1889 design, the division facilitated mobility.

These developments were long anticipated: throughout the Victorian period, much had been written about the detrimental effects of corsetry, linking it to deformities of the ribcage and breathing difficulties.

An innovation at the turn of the 20th century was the S-bend corset, so named because of its structure which caused women to arch their back as the straight front pushed into the pubic bone. The corset sat beneath the chest, so women in need of more support wore it in combination with a breast girdle, an early form of brassiere.

IN 1913, MARY PHELPS JACOB TIED HANDKERCHIEFS TOGETHER TO CREATE HER OWN BACKLESS BRA



Bra and suspender belt in nylon net and French lace, and corset and bra with cross-over front, Christian Dior, 1957

3. Supporting role: a short history of the bra

As London’s V&A Museum prepares to stage a revealing exhibition on the evolution of lingerie, JANINE LEAH BARTELS speaks to its curator, Edwina Ehrman, about the origins of an undergarment that helped to shape fashion

Even in the early days, women relied on enhancement. In 1913 came the bust extender, which had the appearance of a cropped bustier. Like an early precursor to the modern Wonderbra, this push-up garment created the desired effect of a plumped embonpoint.

By the '20s, big bosoms were no longer in vogue as masculine dress swept across Europe, popularised by Coco Chanel and her *garçonne* style as well the androgynous allure of silver-screen actresses such as

Marlene Dietrich. Women at this time were known to wear bust flatteners, which, over the following decade, evolved into a garment that resembled the bras of today.

Another breakthrough in the history of the bra was the production of long rubber threads, or elastic. The proliferation within the garment industry of this “miracle fibre” as World War II approached could not have been more timely; metal in corsetry was rationed for military purposes and lingerie businesses became reliant on this malleable material. Metal underwiring was reintroduced after the war, prompting manufacturers to fiercely

compete for patents on their designs. One standout innovation was the Hidden Treasures bra, patented by the American company Peter Pan in the 1950s, which promised a fuller bust line thanks to built-in contouring without ‘pads’ ‘puffs’ or ‘falsies’.

In 1959, elastic was superseded by Lycra, and when designers like Yves Saint Laurent played with transparency in dress, women ditched their bras altogether or opted for the light Lycra ‘No Bra’ bra. Pioneered by Rudi Gernreich, this softer ‘barely there’ bra was touted as the key to a “firm, young, braless bosom”. At the same time, pin-up models in the '50s helped to sexualise lingerie; conversely, this gave the bra potency as a symbol of political protest when it was adopted by the women’s rights movement as an emblem of repression in the latter part of the following decade.

By the '90s, the corset had come full circle, only now it was a couture piece in its own right thanks to Madonna and fashion designer Jean-Paul Gaultier, whose conical pink-satin creation, made for the singer’s *Blonde Ambition* tour, became one of the most iconic stage costumes of all time. Our love affair with the boned bodice didn’t last long, however, as daring new lingerie brands – including Agent Provocateur, a sponsor of the V&A’s exhibition – brought the risqué bra out of the bedroom and onto the high street. Today there are over 100 bra sizes available, pin-ups have been upgraded to Angels thanks to US lingerie giant Victoria’s Secret, and *Playboy*’s recently instigated no-nudes policy means goodbye to the topless Playmate, hello to lingerie.

And with new developments in wearable technology, we can expect to see the first ‘smart bra’ very soon; a prototype sports bra that records the body’s biometric data was revealed at the renowned Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in January.

While science may be changing the shape of lingerie to come, Ehrman believes our motivations for wearing it have remained firm throughout the decades. “Broadly speaking, we wear underwear for exactly the same reasons that our ancestors did,” she says. “They wore it as a barrier between their skin and their outer clothes, as do we. But for us today it also creates a fashionable silhouette.” *Undressed: A Brief History Of Underwear is at the Victoria & Albert Museum from April 16, 2016 to March 12, 2017. The exhibition is sponsored by Agent Provocateur and Revlon. Special thanks to Edwina Ehrman*