

The Bathing Suit, THEN & NOW

WRITTEN BY SAM SCHUNK-PLATENIK

Look back at artifacts from civilizations existing over 2,000 years ago, and you may be intrigued by what you see. While you may think the bikini is a more modern invention, the historical record shows otherwise. Surprisingly, a statue of the goddess Venus in a gold bikini dating back to 79 A.D. was found when the city of Pompeii was excavated. On the island of Sicily, a mosaic at the Villa Romana del Casale from 300 A.D. depicts women exercising while wearing garments with bandeau tops and bottoms.

Living in the modern day, we may be forgiven for assuming the bikini is a more recent innovation because, after all, just a century ago, women's bathing wear looked very different. As the 20th century began, ladies were still wading into the water in long tunics and knickers made of heavy wool, a material unfit for aquatic activity. In fact, the first woman to swim the English Channel, Australian competitive swimmer Annette Kellerman made headlines when she was arrested for public indecency in 1907 on Boston's Revere Beach for wearing a one-piece that ended in shorts above her knee. This incident was later featured in the biopic about this famous swimmer, 1952's *Million Dollar Mermaid*, which starred Esther Williams.



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In 1907, Australian swimmer Annette Kellerman was arrested in Boston, for wearing a swimsuit that ended above her knee. The solution (pictured) was to sew tights to the legs.

Swimming was acknowledged as an excellent source of exercise, as an ad from The Oklahoman newspaper in June 1910 touted, "Bathing is a Healthful Sport." By that year, thanks to female athletes like Annette Kellerman and Adeline Trapp, the first woman to swim New York's East River, women interested in swimming were not arrested for wearing a practical suit if they treated it as a piece of athletic equipment and used discretion, such as by donning a cover-up until they reached the water's edge. Many young ladies took to the more comfortable Kellerman style, although one-pieces with attached modesty skirts, or aprons, tended to be the choice for more conservative women.

Continuing on that trend, women's swimming debuted at the 1912 Summer Olympics. Inspired by another water sport, the Portland Knitting Company began to produce wool apparel for a rowing team that were offered as "bathing suits" in the manufacturer's catalog. Stitched together on sweater cuff machines, the garments, which became popular with swimmers, were called "Jantzens" after one of the company's founders, Carl Jantzen. In response to the high demand for these suits, which were advertised for their famous rib-stitch that "gives that wonderful fit," the company name changed to Jantzen Knitting Mills in 1918. By the end of the decade, the fitted apron that had become a women's swimwear staple finally went out of vogue, which left only a tunic to cover the shorts. This new style meant that it was finally acceptable for ladies to allow their bare legs to be seen at the beach.



The swimsuit also made a splash in popular culture. Moviegoers delighted in *The Water Nymph* (1912), in which actress Mabel Normand performed her own diving stunts, and the comedy short subject films featuring the Sennett Bathing Beauties (pictured below) that were popular from 1915 to 1928. Proving that swimwear was established in the fashion world, the first annual "Bathing Suit Day" was held in 1916 at Madison Square Garden in New York City as models showcased the newest styles of men and women's swimwear.

The swimwear industry took off during the 1920s, with a number of manufacturers making their mark on the West Coast, including Fred Cole's West Coast Knitting Mills (later Cole of California) in 1923 and Pacific Knitting Mills, which became Catalina in 1928. Since this also put these companies in close proximity to Hollywood, they developed relationships with the studios; as a result, the newest bathing apparel began appearing both in films and publicity photos.





One of these apparel manufacturers, Jantzen, made some smart marketing moves in the 1920s. Its tagline changed from “The Nation’s Swimming Suit” to “The Suit that Changed Bathing into Swimming” in 1927. The red Diving Girl icon was introduced through cutouts and decals that appeared on windshields of automobiles across the country, and soon became an internationally recognized symbol. Also, the company sought out celebrity endorsements from 1924 Olympic Games champions Johnny Weismuller and Duke Kahanamoku of Hawaii.

“The newest thing for the sea is a jersey bathing suit as near a maillot as the unwritten law will permit.”

—Vogue Magazine

Given the trend toward slimmer, more athletic figures for women, ladies’ one-pieces were sleeveless, form-fitting, covering the torso and shorter in style, similar to men’s swimwear. A popular style was the ‘maillot’ (pronounced “my-oh”), a knitted one-piece manufactured from a stretchable jersey fabric. The style caught on so well that this definition entered the dictionary in 1928. By the mid-1920s *Vogue* was telling its readers that “the newest thing for the sea is a jersey bathing suit as near a maillot as the unwritten law will permit.” Modesty still was a concern in a number of cities, so some municipalities set strict guidelines requiring that these garments could not be higher than six inches above the knee. Along with the changes in fit, swimwear became more colorful. Rather than the black or dark navy suits of previous years, vibrant colors and designs began to be manufactured. Influenced by the Art Deco style, novelty pieces with sleekly modern animal adornments became popular.

Through the 1930s, swimsuits became lighter, shorter and a bit more stylish. By 1934, the swimsuit hugged the body and boasted tanning-friendly features, such as Jantzen’s 1931 “Shouldaire,” which had an internal drawstring above the bustline that allowed the shoulder straps to be dropped. Technology allowed designers to move from wool to a variety of newly engineered materials like Lastex, an elastic rubber fiber that was invented in 1934 and soon

found applications in undergarment corsetry and swimsuit design. Synthetics, such as rayon, appeared with cotton or silk, and woven patterned fabrics in many color combinations made their debut by the end of the decade.

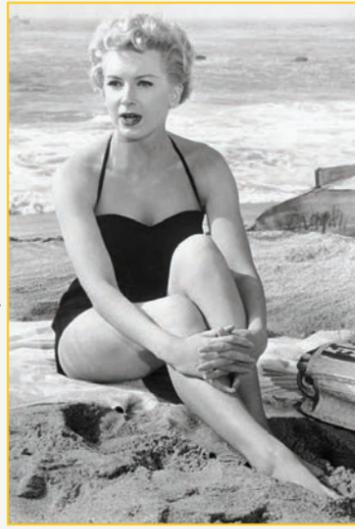
Swimsuits hit the big screen and the pages of celebrity magazines. By wearing the latest fashions in their publicity stills and features, stars helped promote the latest trends to a nation of filmgoers. A photo of platinum bombshell and 1930s “It Girl” Jean Harlow made quite a sensation in 1935. She wore high heels and a white bathing suit, a color that suggested nudity against her pale skin, and posed with the straps slipping off her shoulder. Jantzen took this opportunity to seek out up-and-coming talents such as Joan Blondell, Ginger Rogers and Loretta Young to model for their catalogs. If you flipped open a magazine of the period, such as *Colliers*, *Esquire*, *Life* or *The Saturday Evening Post*, you would find advertisements such as those illustrated by George Petty which featured air-brushed depictions of men and women having fun in the sun.

As America entered into World War II in the 1940s, U.S. factories focused on producing supplies for the war effort, which meant that fabric for swimwear at home was rationed. As a result, this apparel became even more streamlined. Since the U.S. government actually mandated that bathing suits were to be made with at least 10 percent less fabric, a portion of the front midsection was eliminated; however, designers still took care to cover the navel. During the war years and into the next decade, servicemen decorated their lockers with photos of pin-up girls wearing their form-accentuating garments. To up the glamour factor, stars such as Betty Grable paired their ensembles with glittering jewelry and high heels.

The Forties also saw the introduction of the two-piece. In May 1946, Jacques Heim debuted “The Atome,” which he described as “the world’s smallest bathing suit.” His fellow countryman, Louis Réard, an engineer-turned-swimsuit-designer, responded in July of that year with the bikini, constructed of four triangles made from only 30 inches of fabric that he said was, “smaller than the world’s smallest bathing suit.” His inspiration is reputed to come from observing as European women rolled up their suits for greater sun exposure. Story has it that when Louis could not find a model to debut the apparel, he turned to exotic dancer, Micheline Bernardini, to show off the garment. Photos of her wearing the bikini proved to be so



A mother-and-daughter bathing suit set ad for Catalina Swimwear



From Here to Eternity

"I don't think anyone knew I could act until I put on a bathing suit."

~ Deborah Kerr

popular that she received about 50,000 pieces of fan mail. The design was named for the Bikini Atoll, where post-war testing on the atomic bomb was happening; since Louis packed his first suits in matchboxes, it's fair to assume he felt the excitement they caused would be similarly incendiary. In America, bikinis were actually outlawed in some states, however, more modest versions of the top could be seen paired with shorts.

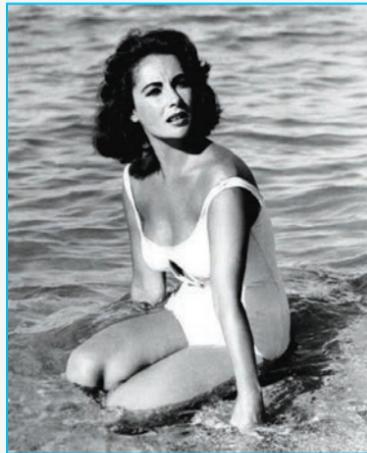
During this and the following decade, movie-goers delighted in the "aquamusicals" featuring Esther Williams such as *Bathing Beauty* and *Neptune's Daughter*. In these films, she would perform artfully arranged synchronized swimming routines while wearing a glamorous, one-of-a-kind bathing suit. These proved to be so popular, that Cole of California sought her out and signed her to a modeling contract in 1947 that included an annual design named for her.

Athletic bathing suits made of nylon, a material that was invented by organic chemist Wallace Hume Carothers in 1935, were introduced during this period, although history is unclear regarding who to credit with the innovation. Since retired Olympian Adolph Kiefer developed the first nylon swim apparel for the U.S. Olympic Swim Team in 1948, some attribute him with this application for the material. Recreational garments made of this fabric debuted in the mid-1950s.

After the end of World War II, styles such as Dior's "New Look" emphasized a return to femininity, and the ideal body type of the 1950s was curvy, with Marilyn Monroe being a prime example. To aid women in attaining this shape, swimsuits of this era incorporate more structure and built-in support such as corsetry and boning. These features helped to flatten the tummy, cinch in the waist,

and make the bust appear larger, all providing security while in the water. They were also designed with some upper leg coverage, which may have looked less flattering on most women, but added some modesty protection when sunbathing in mixed company. Since factories no longer were contending with rationing, more color was employed into swimsuits and, by the close of the decade when DuPont launched Spandex, yet another material could be used.

In Europe, the bikini was gaining greater acceptance. Actress Brigitte Bardot drew attention to the design when she was photographed in a bikini on each beach in southern France during 1953's Cannes Film Festival. The silver screen offered a plethora of bathing suit options, such as Deborah Kerr's black, waist-cinching number worn during the beach scene of *From Here to Eternity* (1953), Jane Russell's showgirl-inspired, glitzy one-piece with belly-baring cutouts from *The French Line* (1954), Sandra Dee's more athletic ensemble from *Gidget*, and Elizabeth Taylor's pure white tank from *Suddenly, Last Summer* (pictured right).



Just after the 1960s were ushered in, a song hitting the airwaves celebrated a certain suit. Performed by Brian Hyland, "Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini," which caused sales of the garment to take off, is said to be one of the major forces contributing to its acceptance in society. A number of surf movies and TV shows such as the small-screen version of *Gidget* starring Sally Field built off the song's momentum.

One of those films, 1963's *Beach Party* was the first in a series of movies starring Annette Funicello, one of the original Mouseketeers, and Frankie Avalon. Wanting to distance herself slightly from her squeaky clean persona, she decided to wear a bikini in the film, though the garment selected more closely resembles a one-piece. It's reputed that Walt Disney did not want her to appear in a bikini out of concern that it would tarnish both her and Disney's image; however, the wholesome actress is credited with making the two-piece garment more acceptable and popular with women and girls. To substantiate that claim, figures show that from its introduction in 1946 to when Annette began donning bikinis in the beach party movies, sales of these suits in America actually rose an incredible 3,000 percent.

Helping to further establish the bikini, this style of apparel appeared on the cover of both *Playboy* and *Sports Illustrated* during the early 1960s. On the cover of the "A Toast to Bikinis" issue of *Playboy* published in June 1962, the image focuses on a model's bikini bottom as she rests on her beach towel. Debuting on January 20, 1964, *Sports Illustrated* made a splash with its first swimsuit edition which featured model Babette March in a simple white bikini.

In response to that two-piece, Rudi Gernreich introduced what he called the "monokini" in 1964. His version differs significantly from the style seen today, since the original was a topless piece more closely resembling bottoms fitted with two long straps. While about 3,000 of these suits were purchased, only two are known to have been worn publicly: one which was worn by a dancer showcased in *Playboy* and the other by a 19-year-old who was arrested for indecent exposure while wearing it in Chicago. In movie houses, bikinis dominated the screen. Among the highlights, viewers could see Sue Lyon lounging in her scandalous two-piece in *Lolita* (1962); Ursula Andress donning the iconic white belted bikini in *Dr. No* (1962), a look she referred to as the "secret of her success;" and Raquel Welch wearing her deer-skin bikini in *One Million Years B.C.* (1966).

The look of the 1970s tended toward less structure for apparel that conformed to the wearer's body and exposed much more leg. Typical apparel of the period was significantly higher cut than those of the Sixties, with waistlines that were lowered to the widest point of the hips instead of the thinnest part of the waist. As the Seventies continued, necklines plunged and the string bikini was the preferred style. Innovator of the monokini, Rudi Gernreich debuted the thong in 1974, which was worn in Rio de Janeiro and St. Tropez, but didn't catch on in other nations at that time. Swimsuit fabrics were often unlined, as can be seen in the famous 1976 poster of Farrah Fawcett in her simple red one-piece. Two more signature looks of the era were Pam Grier's macramé triangle-top bikini from *Coffy* (1973) and Bo Derek's unforgettable nude maillot from *10* (1979).

The bikini fell out of favor during the 1980s, but the more popular one-piece suits, with their high leg lines, low-cut necklines and scooped backs, still



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HISTORY

showed off plenty of skin. On the heels of *10*, the maillot enjoyed a resurgence, with variations that included the bandeau (strapless), the high-neck, V-plunge, and many other styles like Jantzen's Trikini, which combined a string bikini worn beneath a lacy, semi-transparent maillot. Bathing suits often featured strategic cutouts, giving them a more geometric look, and bold, eye-catching colors. To minimize tan lines, conventional women's tanks often incorporated see-through panels sewn into the upper half of the garment, and fabrics containing nylon and Spandex helped to ensure that swimwear retained its shape. The movies of the era featured Brooke Shields in primitive bathing garb in *The Blue Lagoon* (1980), Phoebe Cates wearing a tiny red bikini in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), and Carrie Fisher's bikini-inspired costume from *Return of the Jedi* (1983).

Due to further innovations, the designs of the 1990s helped either to minimize features such as prominent busts, thicker waistlines, and fuller tummy zones, or to draw attention to other assets. For example, the one-piece "pretzel suit," which was similar to the modern monokini, stunned with a cross front that emphasized a smaller bust, wide intersecting straps in the back, high-cut leg line and full rear coverage. The "sports bikini," which incorporated a halter top that made it more conducive to active pursuits, took off when beach volleyball became all the rage, especially after the two-piece was modeled by Gabrielle Reece. Late in the 1990s, Anne Cole introduced the tankini, which offered the freedom of the bikini combined with the more modest coverage of a one-piece. Adjustable straps similar to those found in brassieres helped to ensure a better fit. High-cut leg lines continued to be popular, especially after Pamela Anderson wore a red lifeguard-style one-piece on *Baywatch* beginning in 1995.

Moving from the small to the big screen, plenty of swimwear was showcased, including Salma Hayek's burgundy bikini in *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), Christina Ricci's dramatic black two-piece in *Opposite of Sex* (1998), and Denise Richards' bright blue, figure-hugging suit from *Wild Things* (1998). In *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Gwyneth Paltrow wore a colorfully patterned two-piece that harkened back to the 1950s.

Just as the current century began, the tankini was reinterpreted slightly as the camkini, which had a spaghetti-strapped top that more closely resembles a camisole that was paired with a bikini

bottom, at Ebony Fashion Fair's traveling show in 2000. Many of the decade's greatest innovations, however, centered around competitive swimwear. Invented in 2008, Speedo's LZR swimsuit is noted for its sleek, corset-like design and laser-produced seams that reduced so much water drag that the suits were banned from being used during the Olympics at the time.

At the movies, women's swimwear made quite a splash. Designed as an homage to first Bond Girl, Ursula Andress, Halle Berry's orange-and-red bikini from *Die Another Day* (2002) also featured the eye-catching knife belt. Both Demi Moore and Cameron Diaz stunned in bikinis in *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*. In *Blue Crush* (2002), Kate Bosworth wore a mismatched suit, sparking that trend off-screen. When the ladies of *Sex and the City* hit the big screen in 2008, Kim Cattrall wore a dazzling, sexy one-piece reminiscent of the styles from *Dynasty*. Inspired by earlier decades, Rachel McAdams donned a beautiful two-piece in *The Notebook* (2004) and Keira Knightley memorably paired a white bathing suit and swim cap in *Atonement* (2007).

A look at the current statistics reveals why swimsuits remain a fixture in fashion, film and other media. Today, the global swimwear industry produces annual revenues of \$13.25 billion, perhaps because most women own four suits. Significantly, 64 percent of buyers purchase theirs online and 70 percent of ladies over the age of 18 prefer a one-piece garment. As society has moved toward a greater acceptance of figures of all shapes and sizes, swimwear manufacturers have strived to create apparel options that flatter the full range of body types. The 2016 *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Issue included Swimsuits for All's #SwimSexy campaign showcasing four models, including 56-year-old model Nicola Griffin who may be the most mature woman to be featured in a swimsuit issue. Swimwear has come a long way over the last century and will only continue to evolve in the years to come.

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