


HISTORY
of the female
SWIMSUIT

R&R Pools
...everyone deserves a little R&R



Fashion is a fickle thing, constantly changing: hemlines rise and fall, fabrics gain and lose favor, colors and patterns cycle through popularity. Each era has its own definitive style which encompasses not only the aesthetic, but is also reflective of the cultural norms, moral attitudes, and even available technologies of the time. The corsets and crinolines of Victorian times are a far cry from the miniskirts and platform shoes of the 1960s. Most don't think of the swimsuit as a culturally significant fashion item, but it has a long and colorful history going back thousands of years with an evolution that might surprise you. And though we can't be certain, one thing (probably) hasn't changed at all—the agony and ecstasy of finding the perfect swimsuit.

IN THE BEGINNING...

Public bathing was very popular in ancient Greece and Rome. Scholars believe that men and women of the upper class wore swimsuits in the bath houses. The earliest known image of women wearing swimsuits is from the early 4th century. "The Bikini Girls" mosaic decorated the floor of a Roman bath at the Villa Roma de Casale near Piazza Armerina, Sicily. The women are shown exercising and competing in various athletic events clad in what looks much like a modern bikini. The only exercise that didn't require a swimsuit at the time was swimming. Romans chose to do that in the nude.



MODESTY OVER FASHION

It wasn't until the mid-1800s that swimming in the ocean returned as a popular leisure activity. The development of new rail systems made it easier for families to travel to the coast. Modesty was a key feature of the Victorian swim attire. Long-sleeved wool bathing dresses were often paired with dark stockings and knickers or bloomers. As an added precaution against such immodesty, many ladies would sew weights into the hem of the gown to keep the skirt from floating up and exposing their legs. Although spending time in the sun and sea was fashionable, having a sun tan was most definitely not. Proper ladies protected their alabaster skin with bonnets, shawls, and gloves.



BATHING MACHINES

Once properly attired for a dip in the water, Victorian ladies would board a bathing machine which was essentially a cabana on wheels. Horses pulled these cabinets into the ocean so the ladies could enter the water directly without being on display in their swimming gowns. Actually swimming in these gowns proved quite difficult because of the many layers and the fact that wool becomes incredibly heavy when wet. But the ladies ankles remained hidden and their modesty intact.



SCANDAL!

Probably not the first and certainly not the last, but this scandalous swimsuit led to the arrest of Australian swimmer Annette Kellerman in 1907. Kellerman was an outspoken advocate for the rights of women to wear a one-piece swimsuit that was less cumbersome than the traditional swimwear of the time. As the first woman to attempt to swim the English Channel and world record holder for all of women's swimming, she knew what she was talking about. During a visit to Boston for a promotional coast swim, she was arrested for indecent exposure. Her form-fitting swimsuit had no skirt and it revealed her arms, legs, and neck. Upon her arrest, Kellerman countered "I can't swim wearing more stuff than you hang on a clothesline." The judge agreed that she needed a suit offering "unrestricted movement when swimming."



THE KELLERMAN

Annette modified her scandalous suit, making compromises for the sake of modesty. It still retained the form-fitting shape of the original, but with the addition of long arms and legs, and a collar. She successfully marketed a line of swimsuits and her original creation became known as the “Kellerman.”



BRAVE NEW WORLD

By the 1920s, swimwear was approaching what is recognizable as the modern swimsuit. The “maillot” style was introduced and suits became more and more revealing. The typical swimsuit still featured stockings and a long top covering shorts, but left bare the arms and shoulders and portion of leg. American knitter Jantzen made the first rib-knit elasticized one piece suit and their suit gained popularity among the beauty pageant circuit, including the first Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

The 1930s introduced glamour when California swimsuit maker Mabs of Hollywood began construction swimwear of Lastex, a material similar to that used in girdles. It had the stretch of elastic and the sheen of silk. Mabs designed suits for screen stars like Joan Crawford and Jean Harlow. Marlene Dietrich is rumored to have ordered a dozen in every color.



VIVA LA BIKINI

The bikini officially made its worldwide debut in a 1947 fashion show in St. Tropez. Designed by the French fashion designer Louis Reard, the revealing two-piece suit was named after the Bikini Atoll, the site of many nuclear tests. He believed the new style would be just as explosive – and he wasn't wrong. Italy and Spain outright banned women from wearing bikinis in public. It took awhile for the craze to catch on, but by the time Brigitte Bardot starred in the 1952 production *The Girl in the Bikini*, the suit's popularity was practically guaranteed. The fact that she was fond of frolicking about the French Riviera in her own bikinis certainly didn't hurt.

Foundation garments also proved to be a common inspiration for swimwear of the time. DuPont had been developing stretch nylon fabrics that provided the support and control of corseted undergarments without the constriction of laces and boning. Elastic midriff panels for tummy control and use of bra cups for bust support were popular.



ITSY BITSY TEENIE WEENIE

By the 1960s the bikini was mainstream – America’s sweetheart Annette Funicello wore a two-piece on the silver screen and the hit song with “Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polkadot Bikini” topped the Billboard charts. Modesty was out and fashion was in. In 1964, Sports Illustrated published the first issue of the Swimsuit Edition and teenage boys across the country developed a sudden interest in swimsuit fashion.



The development of new fabrics contributed to the continuing evolution of the swimsuit. Lycra provided improved elasticity and comfort. Tan-through panels allowed sunbathers a bronze glow free of tanlines. Lingerie features like adjustable bra straps provided a customized fit for women of all sizes. Perhaps the greatest feature of the modern-day swimsuit was freedom. If you wanted a modest look, you could find a suit with a flared skirt and a higher neckline. Feeling bold, string bikinis with triangle tops fit the bill. Even one-piece suits were as naughty or nice as you wanted them to be.

FASHION AND BEYOND

From Princess Leia's gold bikini in Return of the Jedi to the high cut red one-pieces of Baywatch, swimsuits have made a big splash on the big (and small) screens. Farrah Fawcett, Demi Moore, Kate Upton, and countless Bond girls have their place in swimsuit history along with their iconic swimsuits.

All the advances in fabric technology and aerodynamics haven't just been in service of fashion. Specialized swimsuits are a critical tool for today's athletes. Competitive swimmers and divers wear suits specially designed to reduce friction and drag in the water and protect the skin from abrasions. Some of the newly-engineered suits are so effective that non-textile suits were formally banned from competitive events in 2010. The policy was implemented because officials believed certain suits had crossed the line from performance assisting to performance enhancing.

