



Jacques Gels TAYLOR AND HAYLE AT MUSE, CARI AND SASHA AT EMPIRE, DIANA AT MC2MM; Hair and MakeUp KOUTA AND YUKI

**If public nudity was perceived as the abyss, then the ever-shrinking swimsuit was its gateway.**

The swimsuit, through its radical, stylistic transitions, has paralleled women's evolving societal roles and changing ideals. In the early 1900s, Coco Chanel led the departure from the corseted Victorian ideal to a new female form. Poaching fabric from her lover's wardrobe and inspiration for a more practical and shorter bathing costume for women, her knee-skimming, short-sleeved wrap dress – over bloomers and stockings – was a radical departure from the constricting capes, floor-dusting skirts and heavy wool petticoats women had to hike and drag into the water before.

From then on, the battle lines between fabric and flesh began to advance closer and closer, clashing with public morality until that, too, found the courage to give way. The race to liberate the skin was only a matter of time, it seemed. If public nudity was perceived as the abyss, then the ever-shrinking swimsuit was its gateway.

So let's just fast-forward and drop the top. In 1937, men won the right to go shirt-free. Even after regulations were rescinded from beaches and pools, men's trunks had to cover the navel. Still, the newly bared chests elicited little negative reaction.

But when German designer Rudi Gernreich issued the first topless bathing suit for women in 1964, it was met with mixed reviews of shock and disappointment. Against a backdrop of expanding sexual freedoms, he presented an austere, black wool knit maillot that stopped just beneath the breasts and was held up by thin suspenders that split the middle of the chest.

The suit was a bust with the media, who had anticipated a more innovative, futuristic design than what was, in fact, a dead ringer of the "Sunnette" model (issued by Jantzen for young boys in the early 30s.)

The Vatican press, of course, denounced the offending outfit as the by-product of the "industrial-erotic-adventure" which "negates moral sense." Some department stores that had placed orders ceased shipments and ordered they be given to the poor.

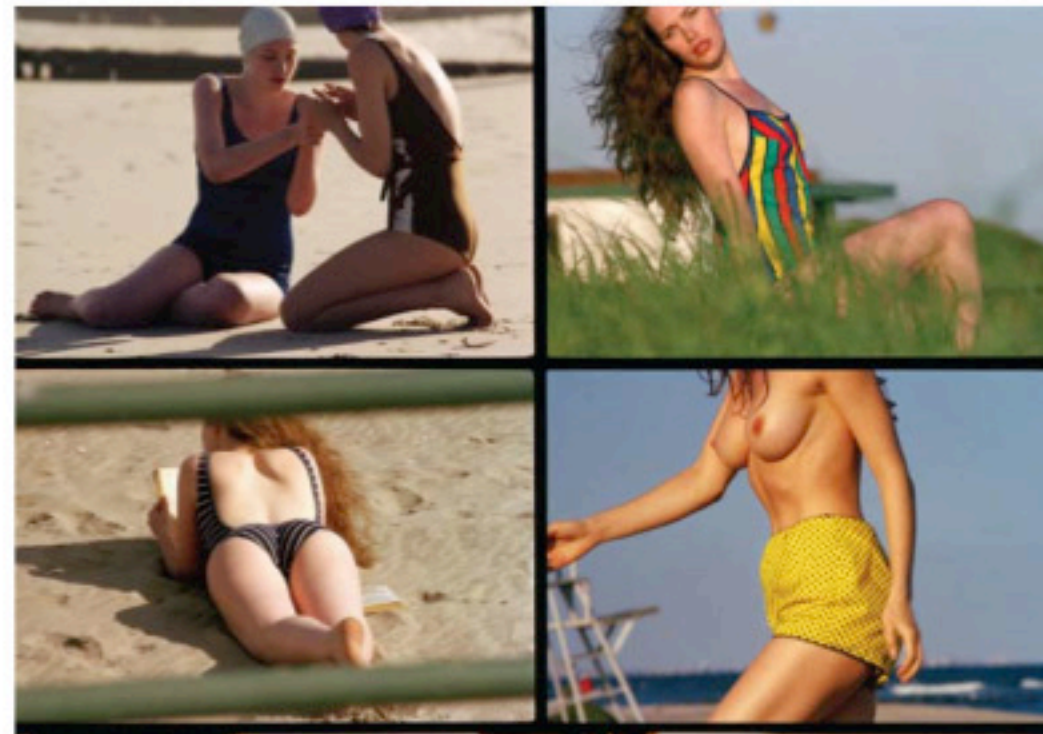
But what women wanted told a different story: While the suit had been intended only as a prototype, it was rushed into production when orders around the world poured in. In the end, some 3000 were sold, though the press stunt ultimately did little to further Gernreich's 'call of the wild.' The topless movement the moral police feared was undone by the same American contradictions that make Janet Jackson a lascivious symbol, but fined her for a nationally televised nipple...

It would be another ten years before Gernreich, once again, agitated the public and press by pushing the two-piece to its vanishing point with the thong.

A slow striptease in every sense, the evolution of swimwear in America has simply repositioned the erotic focal point until the curtain was fully raised.

Remember your first nude sunbathing experience? In the privacy of your backyard or on some distant shore? The unfettered swimming, or the breeze sweetly grazing the nipples while the warmth of the sun cupped the relaxed breasts? Sensuality arrived not in something you wore, but what you chose not to.

But we are a country stuck in perpetual adolescence on matters of concealment. We still heep out curses on film and television, shielding our tender ears and eyes. To explore is to sin; and the same can be said of the tug of war between provocation and pretense that has produced the powerful swimwear industry.



"With the exception of a few brands, what we are left with today is less about form and fashion and more about exposure," says Wendy Hanson, senior patternmaker for Tibi and a freelance patternmaker for Daryl K and Donna Karen. "But truly sophisticated swimwear is more about accentuating the positives and leaving something to the imagination."

Suit design aside, the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue did more to bring nipples and endless hips into American consciousness than even Larry Flynt could have imagined. Since its debut in 1964, the issue's annual foray to exotic shores did as much to launch the careers of Elle MacPherson and Kathy Ireland as the bungled adolescence of teenage boys across the country. The pages made accessible the female form, neither holy, nor entirely verboten.

Through all this tactile devolution, certain truths emerge: we love our bodies and, like our Greco-Roman forbearers, especially love those that remind us of perfection.

Perhaps no other element of history illustrates this explosive point as well as the name 'bikini'.

Taken from an atoll among the islands of the South Pacific, where the atomic bomb was tested, the 'bikini' tore the lid off of sexuality for good; just as it sought to mollify the pious by allowing us to keep something on. As contradictions go, it doesn't get much more combustible than that.





Jacques Gels TAYLOR AND HAYLE AT MUSE, CARI AND SASHA AT EMPIRE, DIANA AT MC2MM; Hair and MakeUp KOUTA AND YUKI

**If public nudity was perceived as the abyss, then the ever-shrinking swimsuit was its gateway.**

The swimsuit, through its radical, stylistic transitions, has paralleled women's evolving societal roles and changing ideals. In the early 1900s, Coco Chanel led the departure from the corseted Victorian ideal to a new female form. Poaching fabric from her lover's wardrobe and inspiration for a more practical and shorter bathing costume for women, her knee-skimming, short-sleeved wrap dress – over bloomers and stockings – was a radical departure from the constricting capes, floor-dusting skirts and heavy wool petticoats women had to hike and drag into the water before.

From then on, the battle lines between fabric and flesh began to advance closer and closer, clashing with public morality until that, too, found the courage to give way. The race to liberate the skin was only a matter of time, it seemed. If public nudity was perceived as the abyss, then the ever-shrinking swimsuit was its gateway.

So let's just fast-forward and drop the top. In 1937, men won the right to go shirt-free. Even after regulations were rescinded from beaches and pools, men's trunks had to cover the navel. Still, the newly bared chests elicited little negative reaction.

But when German designer Rudi Gernreich issued the first topless bathing suit for women in 1964, it was met with mixed reviews of shock and disappointment. Against a backdrop of expanding sexual freedoms, he presented an austere, black wool knit maillot that stopped just beneath the breasts and was held up by thin suspenders that split the middle of the chest.

The suit was a bust with the media, who had anticipated a more innovative, futuristic design than what was, in fact, a dead ringer of the "Sunnette" model (issued by Jantzen for young boys in the early 30s.)

The Vatican press, of course, denounced the offending outfit as the by-product of the "industrial-erotic-adventure" which "negates moral sense." Some department stores that had placed orders ceased shipments and ordered they be given to the poor.

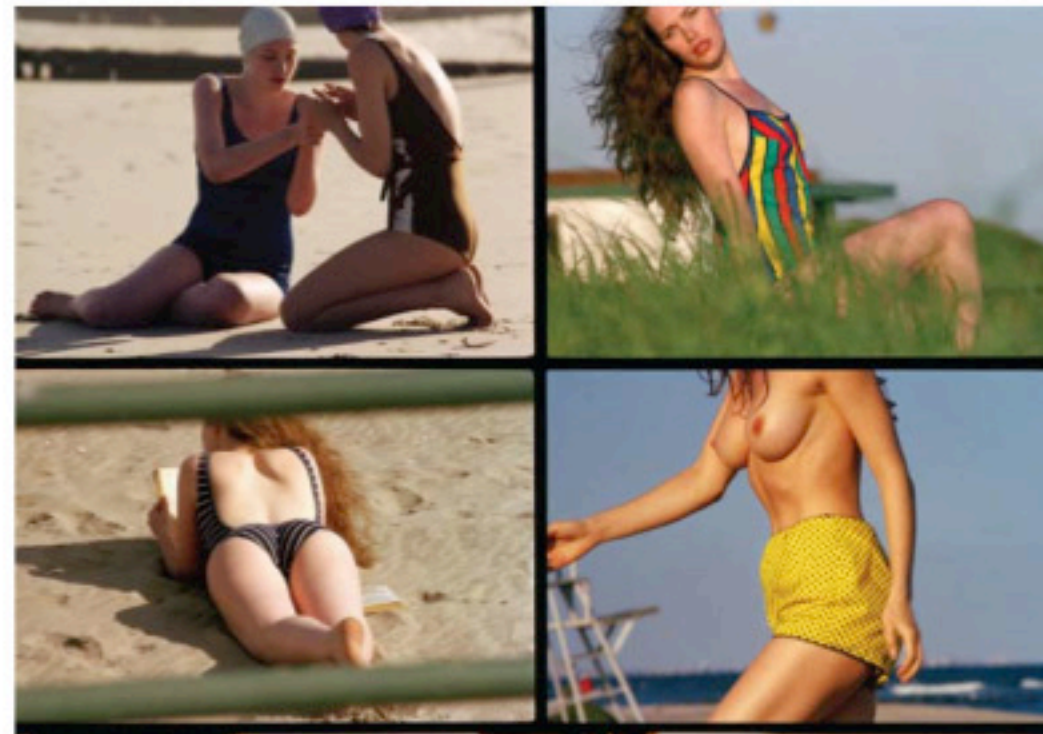
But what women wanted told a different story: While the suit had been intended only as a prototype, it was rushed into production when orders around the world poured in. In the end, some 3000 were sold, though the press stunt ultimately did little to further Gernreich's 'call of the wild.' The topless movement the moral police feared was undone by the same American contradictions that make Janet Jackson a lascivious symbol, but fined her for a nationally televised nipple...

It would be another ten years before Gernreich, once again, agitated the public and press by pushing the two-piece to its vanishing point with the thong.

A slow striptease in every sense, the evolution of swimwear in America has simply repositioned the erotic focal point until the curtain was fully raised.

Remember your first nude sunbathing experience? In the privacy of your backyard or on some distant shore? The unfettered swimming, or the breeze sweetly grazing the nipples while the warmth of the sun cupped the relaxed breasts? Sensuality arrived not in something you wore, but what you chose not to.

But we are a country stuck in perpetual adolescence on matters of concealment. We still heep out curses on film and television, shielding our tender ears and eyes. To explore is to sin; and the same can be said of the tug of war between provocation and pretense that has produced the powerful swimwear industry.



"With the exception of a few brands, what we are left with today is less about form and fashion and more about exposure," says Wendy Hanson, senior patternmaker for Tibi and a freelance patternmaker for Daryl K and Donna Karen. "But truly sophisticated swimwear is more about accentuating the positives and leaving something to the imagination."

Suit design aside, the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue did more to bring nipples and endless hips into American consciousness than even Larry Flynt could have imagined. Since its debut in 1964, the issue's annual foray to exotic shores did as much to launch the careers of Elle MacPherson and Kathy Ireland as the bungled adolescence of teenage boys across the country. The pages made accessible the female form, neither holy, nor entirely verboten.

Through all this tactile devolution, certain truths emerge: we love our bodies and, like our Greco-Roman forbearers, especially love those that remind us of perfection.

Perhaps no other element of history illustrates this explosive point as well as the name 'bikini'.

Taken from an atoll among the islands of the South Pacific, where the atomic bomb was tested, the 'bikini' tore the lid off of sexuality for good; just as it sought to mollify the pious by allowing us to keep something on. As contradictions go, it doesn't get much more combustible than that.

