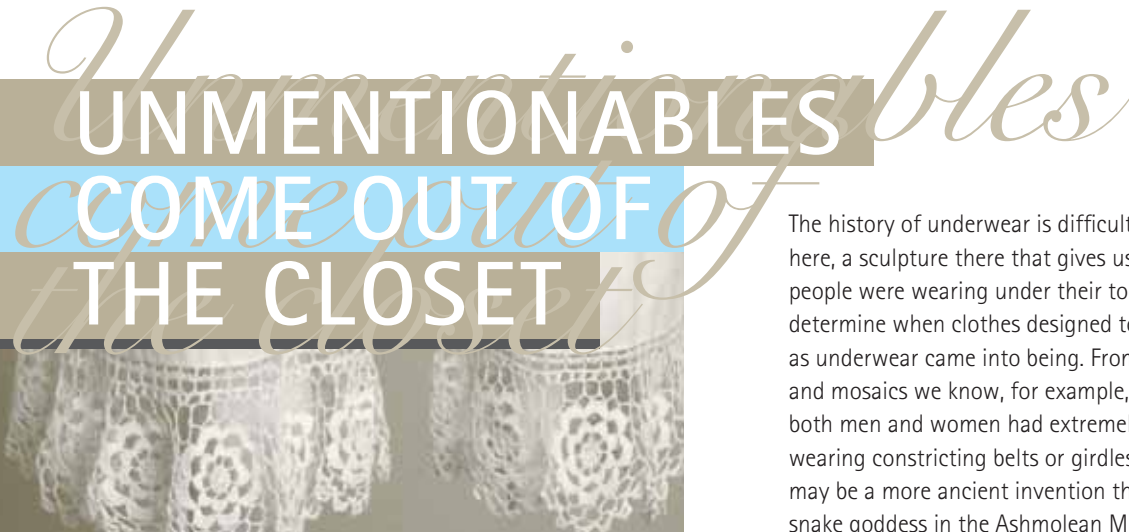


out of the STORES

UNMENTIONABLES

COME OUT OF THE CLOSET



The National Museum of Australia has a wide and interesting textile collection but some items don't get an opportunity to come out so often on public display. On a recent Friends tour in honour of Women's History Month, I was lucky enough to spend some time showing visitors items from our underwear collection and waxing lyrically on one of my favourite subjects – unmentionables...

*Here's to the girl
With painted lips
Peroxide hair
And padded hips
Wasp-like waist
And a nerve sublime
Art beats nature
Every time!*



This amusing quote from a 1905 postcard raises a chuckle, and indeed the subject of underwear still gives rise to smirks and titters, but there is a serious side to the study of underwear – especially women's underwear. It sheds light on women's long battle for freedom and social equality. Throughout history women's clothing, especially their foundation garments, have had a huge impact on their lives and how they were perceived and treated by other people. Even the English language has been influenced by undergarments. Several popular expressions make reference to underwear: the term 'loose woman' comes from the connotations associated with uncorseted or loosely corseted women. A similar example is the expression 'shiftless': a shift was an 18th-century support-providing undergarment and the term was meant to characterise someone 'without support'.

The history of underwear is difficult to trace – we have a painting here, a sculpture there that gives us a tantalising glimpse of what people were wearing under their togas or robes, but it is difficult to determine when clothes designed to be worn under other clothes as underwear came into being. From ancient paintings, sculptures and mosaics we know, for example, that in 2000 BC in Minoan Crete both men and women had extremely small waists, presumably from wearing constricting belts or girdles from childhood. Even the corset may be a more ancient invention that we imagine. A statue of a snake goddess in the Ashmolean Museum Collection shows what appears to be an early version of a corset. Although the bra as we know it was not invented until the 20th century, women in ancient Greece strapped or bound their breasts with lengths of cloth or leather and young female dancers and athletes are shown wearing what can best be described as a bikini!

Of all the various forms of female underwear, the corset in its various guises has probably played the largest role in keeping women immobilised over the centuries. Corsets restrict movement and make breathing shallow and difficult (reducing lung capacity by almost 60 per cent) thus giving women the reputation of being 'delicate flowers' who could not exert themselves without fainting. Corsets were also used as a metaphor for virtue, despite the fact that courtesans were as tightly laced as any other woman. It was thought that an ungirdled woman might be wanton or 'loose'.

Corsets have been worn for several hundred years and were considered a practical necessity if you wanted a fashionable figure. Queen Elizabeth I of England reputedly had corsets made of both oak and iron – the iron one was nicknamed the 'iron maiden'. Over the years corsets have been made from various materials including oak, iron, leather, satin and silk. The stays inside the corset which create the rigid containment of the body have been made from whalebone, steel, reed or double-stitched cording. The first elastic inserts to ease the pain did not appear until around 1885. We have seen short corsets, long corsets and the infamous 'S' bend corset which threw the wearer's chest forward and bottom out to create the 'S' shaped silhouette so favoured by the Edwardians.

Over the years, women have worn crinoline cages, farthingales, panniers, bustles, hobbles and numerous other devices that changed the shape of their bodies and restricted movement. During the 19th century girls as young as four years old were laced into corsets on the theory that it improved posture and modified behaviour. This is not quite as severe as it first sounds as the girls would have worn a non-boned version of the corset known as a liberty bodice, but it certainly would have reduced childish high spirits!

By the First World War women started to reject corsets. With so many men away fighting women needed to perform a variety of jobs, from working in factories to driving buses. This new liberation led to a desire and a need for less constricting undergarments and a new image for women emerged. This was reflected in the raised hemlines, dropped waists and boyish silhouette we associate with the 1920s. Unfortunately for the curvy women this meant wearing another form of corset which flattened the breasts and hips. Shorter skirts and easy-to-iron fabrics coupled with a stronger awareness and participation in sport and exercise, increased the demand for more comfortable underwear which allowed great freedom of movement. Pastel colours for underwear put in their first appearance at this time and the first patented bra was invented by American debutant Mary Phelps Jacobs in 1914. She eventually turned over the rights to her invention to the Warner Corset Company for \$1500.

The 1930s saw the return of femininity, but at the same time promoted the notorious image of the child-bearing, homely, motherly woman. The ideal female figure was once again well-proportioned, but slimmer around the hips. Essential components of an underwear set were the new, rounded and bust-emphasising brassiere, the elastic suspender belt and the figure-moulding corset. The 1930s fashion of figure-emphasising, calf-length dresses required underwear of minimum bulk, which fitted like a second skin. Since it had become possible in the 1930s to produce long threads of elastic, the corset experienced a renaissance: it did not constrict, but was nevertheless skin-tight. The girdle, which also functioned as a suspender belt, was essential until the invention of tights.

The Second World War brought with it shortages and a corresponding spirit of resourcefulness. Home-knitted underwear, though not very attractive, overcame the shortages and kept people warm. Garments were made out of any material people could get their hands on, from made-over garments of previous generations to parachute silk. You could only get underwear, and very little of it at that, on ration cards.

In 1947, Dior created his 'New Look' which echoed the nipped-in waists and full skirts of the Victorian period. After the privations of the war women embraced this return to femininity with gusto. Special bras to lift the breasts, and elasticised or lightly boned corselets called 'waspies' were worn to hold in the waist. Some of Dior's skirts contained 25 yards of material which required petticoats and hip and stomach pads to fill them out to form the fashionable silhouette.



The 1960s saw the invention of the wonder-fibre Lycra which led to the creation of tights, followed closely by the miniskirt. It was also the time of student revolts and the rise of the Women's Movement of which public bra-burnings were a well publicised part. Sales of brassieres decreased worldwide as they were seen as an overt symbol of women's suppression. The manufacturers were certainly inventive and produced more lightweight brassieres and knickers in comfortable fabrics and interesting colours to entice young women to return to the fold.

Underwear historians of the future will be able to cast more light in retrospect on the question of whether women in the first decade of the 21st century wanted to appear more or less feminine. At the moment we have a range available of sexy alluring undergarments and sporty, fairly masculine, garments – the choice is yours. In the past, undergarments were often designed for their 'body-shaping' features, but these days, thanks to the increase in exercise and athleticism among women the body has become its own 'foundation' and women no longer need to rely on cloth and whalebone for this purpose. On the downside the agonies of the gym have replaced the agonies of the corset.

To end this peek into the underwear closet I thought I would mention one documented case of 'death by bra'. In 1994, 23-year-old Berbel Zumner was killed while walking through a park in Vienna during a thunderstorm. Berbel was rather 'well endowed' and wore a bra with metal underwire to support her ample frame. As we all know, metal and lightning just don't mix and poor Berbel was zapped and killed. We might have progressed a long way from the constricting underwear of our ancestors but our underwear can still be the death of us!

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References

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Brash, Nicholas. *Grace Bros: The Model Store 1885-1985*. NSW: Kevin Weldon, 1988.

Judy McPhee recently donated an exquisite trousseau to the Museum's collection. It was handmade by one of her relatives during the First World War. She is pictured here with Carmela Mollica (right), a Museum conservator.

All photos: George Serras

