

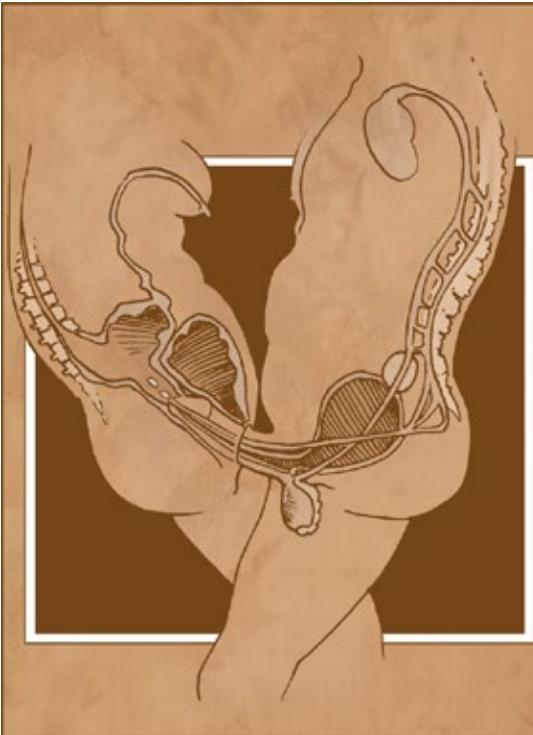


Breasts & Bras

There's hardly a woman in Western culture who doesn't have at least a couple of bras, including a favorite one or two for when she wants to feel extra sexy. She can also make a sexual statement by not wearing a bra. And what teenage boy doesn't equate success in dating with whether a girl let him put his hand under her bra?

Yet bras haven't been in existence for long. Before the 1920s, women were quite skeptical about them; they preferred to wear corsets. As for bras being thought of as cute or sexy, that wouldn't happen until World War II

This chapter looks at breasts and the bras that hold them up. It begins with a peek at breasts in different times and places. It then focuses on the fascinating evolution of the bra: from how it came to be in 1860, to how it eventually started to be thought of as sexy.



The Ups and Downs of the French Breast

In France, during the Renaissance, it was believed that breast milk was made from blood that flowed into the breasts from the vagina. This notion was handed down from the ancient Greeks, with Leonardo DiVinci making a diagram of it (as shown here by our own Daerick DiVinci).

Since it was assumed that breast milk rose up from the vagina, intercourse was thought to curdle the breast-milk supply.

So women who were nursing babies were not supposed to have intercourse. Perhaps the French believed that a penis going in and out of a vagina was like a paddle churning buttermilk.

Given that upper-class French women would rather have sex than nurse babies, the job of nursing babies was pawned off on the women of the lower class. This caused there to be different expectations about the breasts of the lower class women versus those of the upper class women. Breasts of the lower class were expected to be large and lactating, while upper-class breasts were expected to be small and perky. (The French must have assumed that poor women didn't like to have intercourse, so their supply of milk was safe.)

Before the French Revolution, women in France used the same kind of makeup on their breasts as they used on their faces. The goal was to make their breasts look exceptionally white. Older women would also paint blue veins on their breasts to make the skin look more transparent like that of younger women. Unfortunately, the makeup women used during that time contained lead. Not only did it corrode the skin on their faces and breasts, but it contributed to lead poisoning.

In time and with the coming of the French Revolution, the heads of many upper-class French women became separated from their breasts. Eventually it would not only become fashionable but a sign of patriotism for all French women to nurse their babies.

Saggy and Happy in Papua

In Papua, New Guinea, grown women used to parade their saggy breasts with pride. It was considered a sign of childishness or immaturity for a woman in Papua to have the kind of breasts that Americans tend to value. In fact, when women in Papua get catty, it's not unusual to accuse someone of having the taut round breasts of a younger woman. As for having cosmetic surgery to lift mature breasts, a traditional Papuan would think to herself, "Why would a woman want to do something crazy like that to her breasts when they were just starting to sag?"

In American culture, breasts have often been regarded as the crown jewels of feminine appeal, which probably has something to do with why we insist that women's breasts be covered in public. But in Africa and the South Pacific, women have walked around for centuries with their breasts bare. The men in those cultures don't get much of a

rise from women's breasts. Instead, it's the parts that are covered up, namely the buttocks, that the men tend to find erotic.

Imagine what a dent it would have put in the lingerie, porn and plastic-surgery businesses if women in America were always topless and breasts weren't considered sexy? Victoria's Secret would have started with thongs instead of bras.

War Bonds and Liberty's Breasts

The World War I "Liberty Bonds" posters featuring Lady Liberty provide an excellent example of how breasts were first starting to be sexualized in America.

In the first version of the poster, Liberty was a sturdy woman with the appeal of a truck driver. The only way you could tell she was a woman is by the endless yards of drapes that were covering every inch of her body except for her manly, muscled arms and her stern, angular face. After the release of this poster, bond sales began to sag.

When the next version of the War Bonds poster was released, Liberty had become less manly and she was actually a bit sensual. A year later, by the time the fifth "Buy Bonds" poster was released, Liberty appeared quite feminine and was scantily clad. She looked like she had been dressed by the staff at Trashy Lingerie instead of in the first poster where it appeared she had been outfitted in a drapery shop. While her breasts were by no means large, they were taut and had an erotic edge. You had to look twice to see if any material from her nearly see-through gown was covering them. By the end of World War I, Uncle Sam had learned what it takes to sell war bonds.

Twenty years later, during the second World War, American soldiers consumed six million copies of *Esquire Magazine*. Perhaps this is because it showcased paintings of women who were known as "Vargas Girls." Vargas Girls had massive, gravity-defying breasts. They were painted by the famous pinup artist Alberto Vargas.

It was during World War II that pinup girls became famous, both in paintings and in photos. The women who prepared the pinup models for photography shoots would stuff the models' bras with layer after layer of felt pads. They felt this would help lift the soldiers' morale, among other things.

Birth of the Bra

For several centuries, the corset was the undergarment that supported the weight of women's breasts. The first brassiere wasn't patented until the time of the Civil War and it didn't appear in the marketplace until the late 1800s. It would be another twenty years after the end of the century before the brassiere would win widespread acceptance among American women. Several elements needed to converge for the bra to knock out the corset.

According to Jane Farrell-Beck and Colleen Gau in their excellent book *Uplift—The Bra in America*, here are some of the changes that needed to occur in women's lives for the bra to become popular:

 During the early 1900s, there was a large increase in the number of women who became involved in physical activities such as bicycle riding, golf, tennis, and swimming. It is difficult to do these kinds of activities while wearing a corset.

 There was a major increase in the number of women in the workforce. For instance, there were virtually no female telephone operators in the 1880s. But by the 1920s, with the explosion of telephones, there were huge numbers of female operators. These operators needed to reach across large switchboards to plug in cords to complete each call. This would have been difficult to do while wearing a corset with bones sewn into it.

 The kind of materials that are necessary make bras feel comfortable did not exist during the late 1800s. For bras to fit better, they needed have adjustable straps, they had to fasten more easily, and they needed to have soft cups with underwiring to help lift and separate the breasts.

 In 1910, brassiere visionary Madeleine Gabeau introduced the new look in bras where women's breasts were separated. This clashed severely with the monobosom or monobreast look of the day. The monobosom look made women appear as though they had no defined breasts or cleavage. It was the bodice equivalent of wrap-around sunglasses. So there



The corset has a rich and interesting history. Contrary to what you often hear, very few women who wore corsets did a practice known as “tight-lacing.” Tight-lacing is a fetish where the person wearing the corset laces it up so tight that his or her waist becomes unnaturally small. Many women in the early 1900s were hesitant to give up wearing corsets. For them, switching to a bra or “bosom supporter” might have been like a woman today going from wearing granny panties to a thong.

suddenly needed to be significant changes in women’s fashion for the bra to nose out the corset.

🕒 Women would need to start wearing ready-made clothing rather than having clothes custom made, and the price of the bra had to come down to fit the budget of the “new” working woman.

🕒 A further stumbling block to acceptance of the bra was the lack of a universal sizing code. It wasn’t until 1933 that a bra manufacturer proposed sizing bras according to cup sizes A, B, C and D.

World War II—Bad for Adolf, a Boon for the Bra

Before World War II, many American women had never worn pants. But once the men were sent off to fight the war and women were called upon to man America's War Machine, pants are what they wore. Most women were not prepared for this. Articles began appearing in women's magazines giving tips and suggestions for how to wear pants. With the changes brought about by World War II, American women weren't just wearing pants and bras casually; they were punishing them while doing industrial labor.

This is the first time in history that welders, riveters, and ship builders wore bras, or admitted to it anyway. So bra design needed to radically evolve to accommodate the range of motion of the new female workforce. Yet the supply of bra-making materials such as rubber, cotton, metal, and rayon was now rationed and in short supply.

It required 1,000 pounds of rubber to build an airplane, 1,750 pounds of rubber to build a tank, and 150,000 pounds of rubber to build a battleship. Worse yet, America's main supply for rubber had been through Asia—a trade route that evaporated with the beginning of hostilities. Without rubber there was little elastic available for making bras. Bra manufacturers had to be very inventive to make it through the war.

One bra manufacturer was even given a secret contract by the government to produce special vests that carrier pigeons could wear. The vests, which employed much of Maidenform's bra technology, allowed paratroopers to parachute while holding the pigeons. The pigeons were used for communications when radio silence was essential, such as right before D-Day. Along with making pants a part of women's wardrobes, World War II also gave the bra, with its increasingly pointed cups, a new name: the Torpedo.

Foundations Start to Shake & Bras Become Sexy

By the end of World War II, actresses started sprouting pointed breasts. It was as if the sultry Vargas Girl drawings were suddenly hopping off the pages of *Esquire* and coming to life. Books like *Peyton Place* were bringing small-town sleaze into the public eye, and the Kinsey reports on the sexuality of Americans shocked and intrigued the masses. Sex was in the air!

Shortly after World War II, "The Sweater Girl" started to appear.

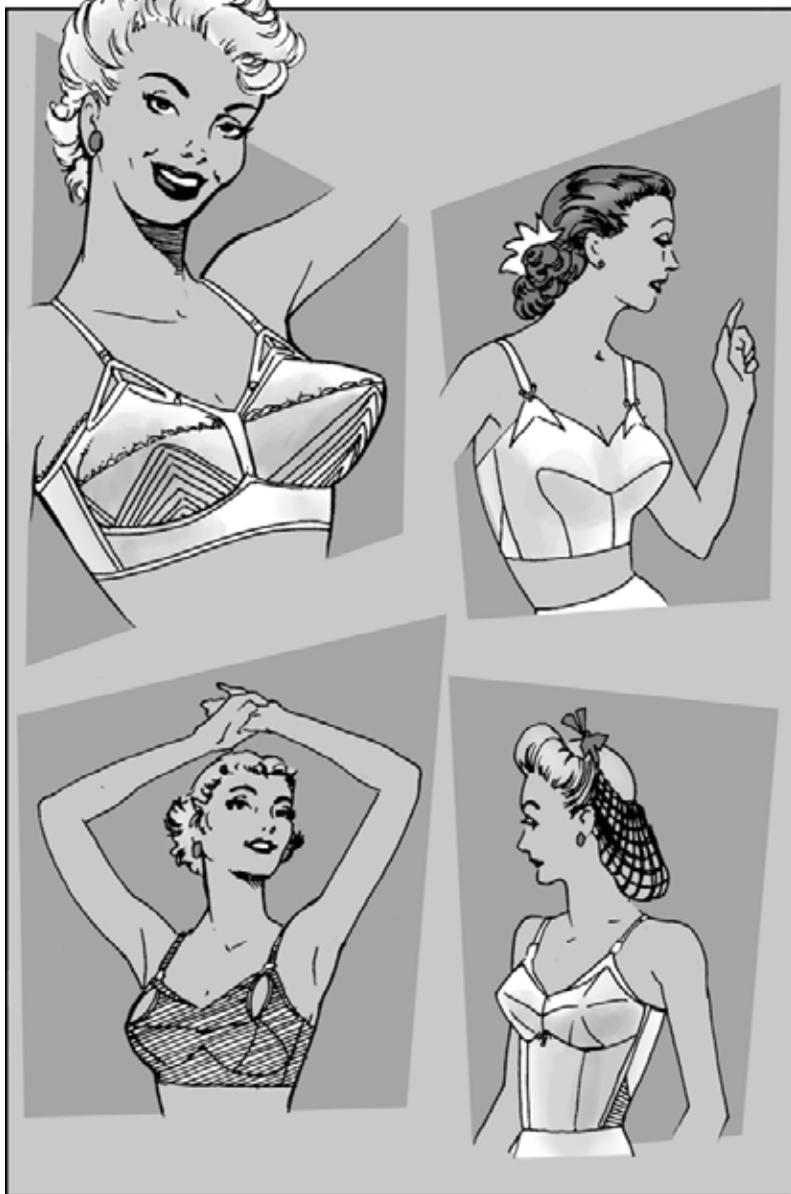
When viewed from the side, the breasts of Sweater Girl actresses came out at a 90 degree angle. This was achieved by wearing bras which were the latex equivalent of the Golden Gate Bridge. A two-cupped engineering marvel called the "Bullet Bra" sold in the millions.

1947 was the year when Frederick Mellinger opened the first Frederick's of Hollywood store and created his Frederick's of Hollywood catalogue, which was the Amazon.com for lingerie. Millions of Americans were suddenly seeing his sexy magazine ads and receiving his Frederick's catalogue. Frederick's teased and titillated customers with their Peek-A-Boo brassiere and the new half-moon stick-on brassiere.

By 1949, Maidenform had begun its Dream campaign, which showed women wearing bras and flowing skirts saying, "I dreamed I danced all night in my Maidenform Bra" or "I dreamed I won the election in my Maidenform Bra." One of the Maidenform ads from 1962 showed a sexy young woman wearing only a bra with a bare midriff, a long tight skirt, and elbow-length gloves. She was standing next to a large bull with one hand sensuously stroking one of the bull's big horns. The caption read, "I dreamed I took the bull by the horns in my Maidenform Bra." Only the blind would have missed the sexual innuendo of the ad. Today's feminists would have concerns about this notion, saying that it implied women's power was dependent on their sexuality or sexual allure. But like their gutsy mothers who built our planes and tanks during World War II, the Maidenform bra-wearing women of the 1960s were a force to be reckoned with.

The 1950s also gave birth to the inflatable bra, which offered women the option of pulling a tube out of each breast cup and filling it up to the desired level of allure. This was also helpful if the woman was flying in a plane and it went down over the ocean.

In the late 1970s, Victoria's Secret emerged to grab the sexy-bra baton from Frederick's of Hollywood. Frederick's had started to be perceived as sleazy, while Victoria's Secret screamed "classy and elegant." Victoria's Secret quickly worked its way under women's blouses and into their pants. American women no longer needed to blush or make excuses to enter a Victoria's Secret store as they had in the later Frederick's years. And if the thousand-or-so Victoria's Secret stores weren't enough, millions of Victoria's Secret catalogues have been read by American women and men from coast to coast. Unfortunately, there has



been a price to be paid for the new elegance and allure—a bra from Victoria’s Secret often costs two or three times as much as a similar design from Walmart or Target.

Because of what it covers, the bra has achieved a kind of fetish quality for both men and women. This reached new heights during the 1980s when rock icons like Madonna started wearing designer underwear on the outside rather than on the inside. Foundations were shifting once again.

Crossing Your Heart from 1920 to Today

Bra and breast fashion has yo-yo’ed over the years, from having boy-like breasts to Torpedo breasts and back again. In the 1920s, the flat-chested look was in fashion. By the 1930s, the full-busted look was back. It wasn’t until the 1940s that people started calling the brassiere a “bra.” Since the 1970s, cosmetic surgery has come into play, with some women using it to achieve the Torpedo Bra look, while others have had the size of their breasts reduced.

During the first wave of 1960s feminism, the popular saying *Burn Your Bra* came into being, as if bras were a ball and chain placed on women’s chests by male jailers. Yet women hold almost half of the bra patents that have been awarded. Women have owned a number of bra-manufacturing plants, and there’s never been a glass ceiling holding women back from the higher ranks of corporate bradom.

Far from holding women back, the bra was designed to hold parts of them up. (Given that breasts weigh from eight ounces to ten pounds, some women have had to rely on bras way more than others.)

The First Falsies

Insecurity about the size of body parts is not a newly-acquired disease. Before there were padded bras, there were foam inserts called falsies. Some of the first falsies could be ordered through the Sears Catalogue in the late 1890s. They were called “bust pads” and were described as helping to “plump up the bosom.”

The same Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalogue with the bust pads also sold “The Princess Bust Developer, a New Scientific Help To Nature, If Nature Has Not Favored You.” The Princess Bust Developer promised to enlarge and shape the bosom. It included a cream that was called “Bust Cream or Food, Unrivaled for Enlargement of the Bust,” and a pump



This is our illustrator's interpretation of a 1950s bra ad. It read like an ad for car tires: "Perma▪Lift, the lift that never lets you down! New, exciting, exquisite. Secretly processed Perma▪Lift cushioned insets. Achieve the permanent uplift."

that looked like a toilet plunger. At the same time that the bust developer programs started to appear, dozens of ads began to run in the *Police Gazette* during the 1890s for enlarging the penis.

No Room for Misfits

It is estimated that 80% of women aren't wearing the right bra. It's not that they accidentally put on someone else's bra, but they might as well have. It takes a concerted effort to get the right bra size. Bra cup sizes can range from A to H, with stops at B, C, D, DD, E, F, FF, G and GG. There are also numerous options for rib cage and back sizes.

If you compare the chests of two women who wear the exact same size of bra, their breasts can be shaped very differently. One woman's breasts might be shaped like eggplants, while another's are more like cones.

And just because you were a 36-B two years ago doesn't mean you are a 36-B today. Cup size can change with age. Also, some women's breasts undergo significant changes in tenderness and size during their menstrual cycle. A bra that might have fit fine on day one might be uncomfortable on day 27. Breast size can increase if you start using a hormonal method of birth control like the pill, and might decrease if you go off of it.

Bra shopping is not the sort of thing you should do by mail order, and you would be well-served to seek out a lingerie shop where the sales help has been fitting bras since the beginning of time. Avoid the sales clerk who is chewing gum and hasn't finished high school. Also avoid bras where there are bulges in the armpits, if the bra makes your breasts go out to the side or bulge along the top of the cups. And keep in mind that one company's 40-DD might be another company's 38-E.

These are just some of the reasons why purchasing a bra isn't something a woman should do on the fly, and she shouldn't try to do it with two small children in tow. A caring partner will make sure that a woman has plenty of time to try on every bra in the store if she needs to.

Whether breasts are large or small, they are attached to the chest by suspensory ligaments. These ligaments are not elastic. Once they stretch they don't snap back. In her *Breast Book*, Dr. Miriam Stoppard recommends that young girls be given good supporting bras to wear, and that a woman should not go braless for long if she does not want her breasts to sag. (This would be a hard sell in places like Papua.) So a bra has to support a woman in a way that keeps the ligaments in her breasts from stretching. Otherwise, there's not much point in wearing one.

And last but not least is the matter of longevity. Not only should a bra fit and feel great through a full range of body motions, but it needs to hold up to repeated washings.

Is the Most Expensive Bra the Best?

A Consumer Reports test compared a \$127 LaPerla Vintage bra, a \$45 Victoria's Secret Ipex demi bra, and a \$11 Gilligan & O'Malley padded demi bra from Target. Of the three, the \$11 bra from Target had better cup molding, more comfortable underwiring, fit well and held up better after three washings.

Highest Recommendation You will be hard-pressed to find a more interesting book on the bra than *Uplift—The Bra in America* by Jane Farrell-Beck and Colleen Gau, University of Pennsylvania Press. This book is the kind of marvel that should be—but seldom is—the staple of America's university presses. It is well researched, but it doesn't insult the reader with poor editing or incomprehensible sentences. For a good read about a fascinating subject, *Uplift* is a great choice.

If you are interested in more about corsets, consider the highly intelligent writings of Valerie Steele. Ms. Steele has managed to anger male corset enthusiasts because she calls their practice of wearing women's corsets a fetish. (Where would she ever get a silly idea like that?) Men who are strapping themselves into women's corsets are concerned that Ms. Steele is giving them an undeserved stigma. At the same time, she's angered some of the academic feminists because she has discussed how wearing corsets has had erotic associations and how this isn't the worst thing ever. Some of the feminists have claimed she's being an apologist for the "corset torture" of women. (Freedom of speech has become so restricted on college campuses that it's not possible to even write about corsets without it triggering someone or being a microaggression.)

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