

A History of Women's Swimwear

Swimwear is loosely defined as a category of garment often worn when participating in aquatic activities, such as swimming or bathing. Exploring the history of female swimwear, tracing how it has evolved through time and across continents, not only gives an insight into fashion trends and technological advancements in materials and design, but also an exploration of female liberation.

18th Century

In the eighteenth century, sea bathing became a popular **recreational** activity. It was believed that there were considerable health benefits to bathing in the sea, thus it was encouraged for both women and men. However, immersing oneself completely was discouraged. This was **deemed** particularly important for women as activity in water was not seen as sufficiently feminine. For bathing, women would wear loose, open gowns, that were similar to the chemise

19th century

In the 19th century, the popularity of recreational aquatic activities surpassed the desire to bathe for health benefits. With this, the loose-fitting chemise gowns became increasingly fitted and more complex, replicating the silhouettes of women's fashion. The number one priority for women who took part in water-based activities was to maintain their modesty. Bathing outfits would consist of a bathing dress, **drawers** and **stockings**, often made of **wool** or cotton. These fabrics would become heavy when wet.

An alternative female swimwear garment, popularised towards the end of the Victorian era, was the Princess suit. These were one-piece garments where the blouse was attached to the trousers. On top, women wore a mid-calf length skirt which diverted attention from the wearer's figure. The garments tended to be dark colours, which meant onlookers could not tell if the garment was wet.

Early 20th century

Following the First World War, women's swimwear trends began to differ across continents. In America and Europe women wore knitted swimwear which replaced the bathing suit. In America, women favoured a practical and sporty look whilst European women opted for **sleeker** swimsuits which cut closely to the body. Women's swimsuit fashions were accessible to a very large middle class in America, whereas in Europe there were clear class divisions on what women could or could not **afford** to buy for wearing to the beach. An affluent woman could set herself apart by wearing a silk jersey swimming suit, instead of a knitted one

During this period, swimwear began to feature in magazines as fashionable **garments**. The 1930s gave way to the health and fitness movement which favoured fit and healthy female physiques. To maintain their figures, women were encouraged to participate in exercise. Swimming was one of these exercises, which also gave women the opportunity to experiment with **tanning**. Towards the end of the 1920s, tanned skin was no longer a marker of the working class, but instead became fashionable and conveyed that one **holidayed**, and was therefore **affluent**. So much so, in 1932, Elsa Schiaparelli patented a backless swimsuit with a built-in brassiere for the sole purpose of avoiding tan lines from swimsuit straps whilst sunbathing. The boyish silhouettes were a thing of the past as women sought more shapely figures.

1945-1999

Lastex yarn was invented in 1931. This was a **game changer** for swimwear once it was regularly used in production. Typically knitted swimsuits were made from wool which would lose its shape when wet. The introduction of Lastex **yarn** into women's swimwear meant the garments would hold their form in and out of the water. Lastex would often be combined with artificial fibres resulting in a stretchy and shiny fabric. Swimsuits could now be produced in a much larger range of colours and prints. Furthermore, at the end of the 1940s, Christian Dior launched his New Look accentuating the female form. This exciting design shifted the trend to feminine and hourglass figures for women, including in swimwear.

One of the most significant moments in the history of women's swimwear was the creation of the bikini in 1946. Louis Réard, an engineer turned designer's skimpy design, consisted of only four triangles of material that were held together with string. The rise of the film industry and Hollywood glamour, which celebrated the female form in its entirety, had a big impact on the swimwear industry. These appearances brought the bikini into mainstream media, thus beginning the garment's transition from outrageous and shocking to everyday. According to *Vogue*, by the mid-1950s swimwear was seen more as a "state of dress, not undress", illustrating how liberated fashion trends were gradually being accepted, even if society was not quite ready for the bikini.

Towards the end of the twentieth-century, women's swimwear became increasingly bold and colourful, a reflection of the fashion trends at the time. Bikinis and swimsuits were still the **go-to** swimwear, which now featured high-cut legs, strapless bandeau bikini tops and even matching sarongs

Fiona Ibbetson, fashionhistory.fitnyc.ed, Sep 24, 2020

recreational : leisure – **deemed** : seems as – **wool** : *laine* – **sleeker** : *plus ajusté, près du corps* – **afford** ; be able to pay, to possess – **garments** : clothes – **tanning** : *bronzer* – **holidayed** : people who went on holidays – **affluent** : be socially more important – **game changer** : pivotal – **yarn** : *fil* – **go-to** : most fashionable