



The history of lingerie

The word 'lingerie' comes from the Old French *linge*, that is linen, and it was originally introduced into the English language to mean scandalous underclothing. Lingerie as general underclothing has a long and elaborate history that witnesses the cyclic changes from a feminine to a boyish style, as well as the alternation of painful and practical ideas. From the laced corset 'wasp waists' and 'false buttocks' to the uplifted busts of the early 1990 supermodels, lingerie has always defined beauty and, at the same time, it has revealed a lot about a society's cultural and political values.

It is impossible to say exactly when the history of lingerie started, but the first record seems to come from ancient Egypt where women wore narrow tunics as undergarments that started below the chest, extended to the ankles and were supported by a crosswise shoulder strap. Some female terra cotta figurines were also found, wearing a garment which might be considered briefs and others depicting the first recorded corset-like bodice and crinoline.

In classical Greece, several female statues wore a crossed band over their shoulders and across the breast. We can find references to other types of garments in texts such as the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*: the *zoné*, a band of linen worn around the waist and lower torso, and others which appear to presage the bra as well as the corset.

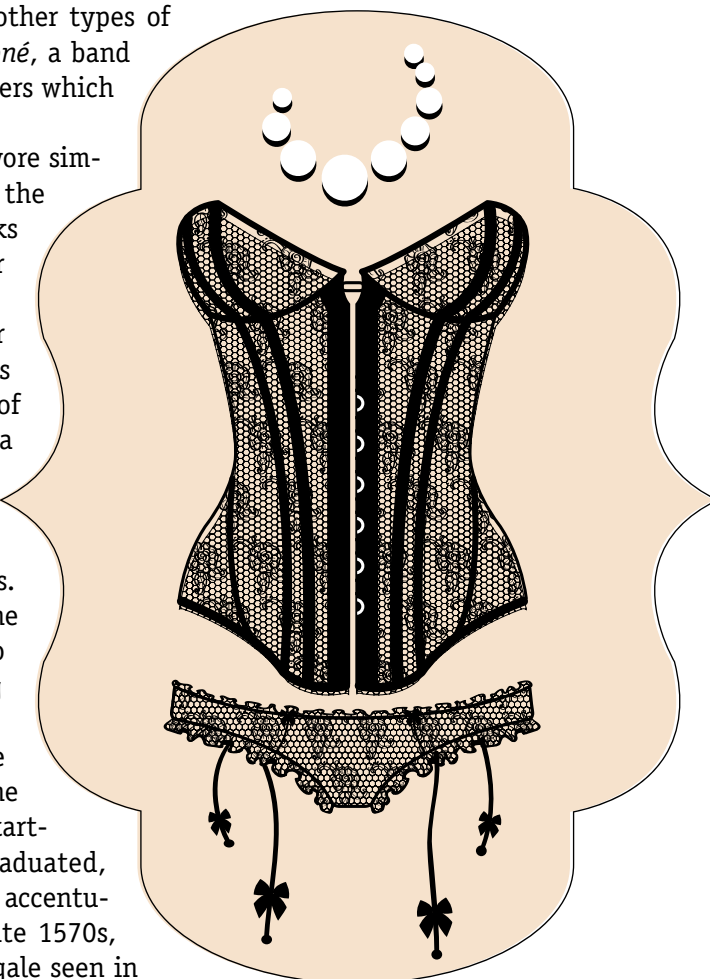
Roman women followed Greek fashion closely, so they wore similar items of underclothing: a *cestus* (a little wider than the *zoné*) and a *strophium* or breast band. For both the Greeks and the Romans, underclothing was mainly designed for functional reasons.

During the Middle Ages, nobility wore linen clothes under expensive outer dresses to protect them from dirty bodies and to provide warmth. They introduced two pieces of lingerie, the *chemise* (or smock) and later the *corset*, a tight-fitting bodice extending from the shoulder to below the waist and closely laced up in the front. Women (as well as men) began to use tight-fitting undergarments to manipulate the shape of their bodies. The *cotte*, for example, was a stiff linen that flattened the breast. Women used paste as stiffener between the two layers of linen to create a stiffer, harder bodice, creating the earliest form of the corset.

The *farthingale* was introduced in the 1500s: this made skirts enormous. There were two types of farthingales, the Spanish and the French. The Spanish version probably started as a petticoat that was 'boosted' by a series of graduated, corded hoops made out of cane, wire, or whalebone that accentuated a woman's child-bearing attributes. During the late 1570s, the French version was introduced and it is the farthingale seen in many portraits of Queen Elizabeth I. It consisted of a vast horizontal hoop worn at the waist but tilted down at the front to accommodate the elongated front of the stiffened bodice.

The corset was officially introduced when women began inserting rigid materials such as whalebone into the 'busk' or 'basque' of cloth bodices in the late sixteenth century. The corset was often referred to as a 'stay', meaning 'support'; its function and role has been discussed over the centuries as it exaggerates the curves of a woman by making the breasts and hips protrude in an hourglass shape.

In the late 1700s, French women began discarding petticoats, corsets, and camisoles and favoured the 'un-corset', or a type of corset without stiffening. Women sometimes wore a band





wrapped around the body similar to the Greek *zoné*: they wanted to return to more freedom. The 1800s saw the return of the boned corset and this fashion again surged in popularity. Although this age was based on a strict moral code, Victorians were the great innovators of underwear: it is not surprising that today's most famous lingerie line, Victoria's Secret, is named after the era. Victorian England also introduced laced trimmings and embroidery, the frilled pantaloons, as well as the first silk underwear. The invention of steam moulding and dye also allowed lingerie to be coloured and ideally shaped.

Victorian fashion also highlighted a woman's body with exaggerated full sleeves, tiny corseted waists, and whalebone hoops and crinolines covered with much fabric and enhanced by bustles. In 1876, they invented the garters, hooked to women's stockings in order to hold them and prevent the corset from riding up. The invention of the bicycle and the walking dress also paved the way for the creation of knickers and 'drawers' that were attached individually to a deep waistband which fastened at the back. For the first time, women had a dual wardrobe and dual underwear, one for fashion and one for athletic pursuits. This trend continued throughout the early 1900s: women participated in more sports and vigorous dancing, they began to throw out their corsets in favour of more comfortable *brassieres*. In 1913, Mary Phelps Jacob invented the bra by tying two handkerchiefs together with ribbons. Bra is the short form for *brassiere*. This was soft, short, and gave a clear, natural separation between the breasts. She sold the patent to Warner Brothers.

In 1935, Warner Brothers introduced cup sizes, which acknowledged that women come in all shapes and sizes. The 'alphabet bra' consisted of four cup sizes: A, B, C, and D.

Because of short supply of materials to make undergarments during World War II, manufacturers started to use synthetic materials, which would eventually lead to Lycra, rayon, and Laster.

Hollywood and the film industry brought engaging and amusing bras in the 1950s: cone-shaped brassieres or even a bra designed by an aeronautical engineer. But the feminist and hippie movements of the 1960s and 1970s denounced lingerie as conformist and artificial. Bras in particular were seen as restrictive and uncomfortable: women burnt bras as a symbol of their liberation. This brought back the free, androgynous figure of the 1920s with women often wearing skimpy briefs and little else under miniskirts and jeans.

The late 1970s saw the introduction of intricate and mass-marketed lingerie, including the famous Wonderbra which gave a 'push up and plunge' effect. During the 1980s, padded and wire bras became top-selling items. Victoria's Secret and La Perla lingerie lines grew in popularity as women demanded a soft and sensual style.

Nowadays women have a very wide choice, as there is lingerie for all situations and intentions, including lingerie that is padded, gel-filled, air-filled, strapless, and backless. There are also G-strings, sexy thongs, teddy, chemise, and peignoir as well as a lot of everyday bras and panties.

(Adapted from *Gendered Fashion, Power, and Sexuality*, www.randomhistory.com)

ACTIVITIES

1 Answer the following questions.

- 1 What is the origin of the word lingerie?
- 2 When did the history of lingerie start?
- 3 What kind of garments resembled underpants and bras in Roman times?
- 4 What was the main purpose in the Middle Ages for wearing underclothes?
- 5 What was the purpose of wearing a farthingale?
- 6 When was the corset introduced?
- 7 What was the most important period for the innovations in underwear?
- 8 Who was the inventor of the modern bra?
- 9 What was the first bra made up of?
- 10 How were bras considered by the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s?
- 11 What is the Wonderbra?