



The Story of Lingerie

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ISBN: 978-1-78310-745-2

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Muriel Barbier - Shazia Boucher

The Story of Lingerie





Corset by Axfords.

Contents

[Preface](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Underwear and fashion](#)

[Lingerie, corsetry and hosiery](#)

[How underwear began to allow the silhouette evolve](#)

[From Ancient Greece to modern woman: what have they been wearing under their clothes?](#)

[European women in the 15th century](#)

[Renaissance women](#)

[Women in “1900”](#)

[Materials](#)

[Colours](#)

[Underwear and Society](#)

[Stages of life](#)

[Rites of passage](#)

[Baptism](#)

[First Communion](#)

[From childhood to adolescence](#)

[Marriage](#)

[Mourning](#)

[The trousseau and its reflection in Society](#)

[Women’s work](#)

[The rise and fall of the trousseau](#)

[Caring for linen](#)

[Care of raw materials](#)

[A Woman’s private life and clothing](#)

[The nightdress](#)

[The negligee](#)

[The bedroom and private life](#)

[Underwear according to the season and social status](#)

[Clothing for children](#)

[Contradictory arguments about trousers for women and the corset](#)

[Trousers or bloomers](#)

[The corset](#)

[Sports underwear](#)

[Horseback riding](#)

[Cycling](#)

[Swimming](#)

[Dancers](#)

[Eroticism, seduction and fetishism](#)

[The eroticism of women's underwear](#)

[Seductive and sexy underwear](#)

[Fetishism and women's underwear: from private clubs to the catwalk](#)

[Economics](#)

[Lingerie manufacturing](#)

[How fashion was distributed](#)

[The current lingerie market](#)

[Distribution networks](#)

[Motivation to purchase](#)

[Communication](#)

[Advertising goes too far](#)

[Marketing](#)

[Some current directions for lingerie](#)

[The youth market](#)

[Underwear on top](#)

[Technological contributions to lingerie](#)

[Sportswear at the beginning of the 21st century](#)

[Sexy lingerie](#)

[A perfect marriage of lingerie and lace: an interview with Olivier Noyon, President of the Board of Noyon Dentelle](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Glossary](#)

[1. TECHNICAL AND GENERAL TERMS:](#)

[2. TERMS SPECIFIC TO UNDERWEAR:](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Index](#)

[Notes](#)



Chantal Thomass, ensemble in white lace.
Autumn/Winter 2001-2002 Collection.

Preface

Lingerie is very directly and strongly linked to a women's intimacy. For centuries, men have always believed that lingerie was created with the objective of seduction. There is no question that this aim exists. However, by choosing to put on pretty, seductive underwear, all women develop a slightly self-centred, even narcissistic, behaviour and attitude. In fact, lingerie contributes to a woman's sense of ease with her body and, in this way, she accepts and loves her body better, becoming more confident and showing real assurance. The reason for this is

very simple. Surprisingly, even though nobody can see her underwear, it really accentuates a woman's figure and can sometimes shape her body to satisfaction.

Lingerie has too often been treated as an element of seduction. Men themselves created this phenomenon: a woman clad only in her underwear seems infinitely more sensual and sexual than a woman entirely in the nude. One could associate underwear with high heels. The latter have an effect on how a woman walks, making her more attractive, seductive and provocative. When combined with stockings, high heels have a certain charge, and an undeniable fetishist quality, as much for women as for men.

The perception and appreciation of the female form has undergone many radical changes. We could compare, for example, our early 21st century perception, to the 1960s and 1970s. In the sixties, when a woman got married, and even more so when she became a mother, her body was no longer meant to be seductive. Today this attitude is completely outdated and obsolete. In fact, women feel the need to be attractive at all ages, both before and after marriage, and even during their later years. This can be illustrated by the fact that, these days, a grandmother can be a beautiful woman and wish to dress to her best advantage in alluring underwear which enhances her figure. This revolution in customs concerning underwear is linked directly to innovation and technical considerations in the design of undergarments, and is subject to historical events. The history of lingerie deserves to be studied here. Lingerie, as opposed to the world of fashion, is a state of mind. A woman can love lingerie and wish to enhance her figure from the age of 15 to 75! Ready-to-wear fashion is a completely different universe from that of underwear. Clothes are always aimed at a distinct age group: fashion for a 15 year old girl is different from that of a woman of 30. Underwear, meanwhile, is much more a question of attitude and how a woman feels: a larger woman can be happy with her body, accepting herself as she is, and wish to enhance her figure with beautiful underwear. So lingerie should meet all aspirations and suit every kind of woman. As a designer, my work is focused in this direction. In order to design underwear which satisfies many types of woman, I like to observe those around me: my daughter, my assistants and women whom I encounter in the street. I can also be inspired by behaviour I have noticed in films.

Apart from my entourage, which plays an important role in suggesting new pieces to me, materials also inspire my designs. Textiles are essential. Since lingerie is closest to the female body and in intimate contact, the fabric and lace have to be soft, but this is not the only criterion. Today lingerie has to be comfortable and practical. In fact, although only 30 years ago French women (as opposed to Americans, for example) did not baulk at wearing and hand-washing very fragile undergarments, often lace-trimmed, sometimes needing ironing, today this would no longer be acceptable. Lingerie must be able to withstand machine -washing, be non-iron, and combine comfort (essential) and beauty in each piece. We cannot overlook the development of different textiles in the design and manufacture of underwear.

Going beyond materials, colour also plays an important part in lingerie. Black and white are always extremely flattering to the skin. Black (more particularly) can also diminish the defects that we all have. Warm colours (pink, red, raspberry) also help enhance the figure. On the other hand, lingerie in cool colours is harder to work with. Green and blue are beautiful, but are too often reminiscent of swimwear.

Lingerie should be associated with pleasure for a woman. The element of seduction remains,

especially with certain undergarments: some of them are fascinating and inevitably inspire attraction. Stockings and suspenders make a woman extremely attractive, even bewitching. Bustiers, waspies and brassieres can be worn under a transparent shirt. The effect of this is bound to be equivocal, ambivalent and extremely fascinating when seen by others, and very flattering for the woman dressed this way.

I can distinguish two types of lingerie. On the one hand, the underwear that one wants to show off (particularly waspies, suspenders and stockings) and on the other hand, underwear just for the woman herself. This last category should be nice to look at but also comfortable. With regard to tights, for example, I particularly like to make attractive, lovely tights so that they can be worn everyday and so that they can maintain, in spite of what they are, an air of seduction when they are removed in the presence of one's lover.

The essence and attitude of lingerie is all in suggestion. Three terms can be applied to lingerie today: elegance, seduction and comfort. These three ideas have to be combined when designing underwear, and any vulgarity has to be ruled out. To avoid this, underwear has to be humorous and fresh.

The world of lingerie affects everybody: women, who are wearing this underwear, as well as men, who believe women were wearing it merely to seduce them. The story of lingerie, as well as its history, deserves some attention.

Chantal Thomass



Chantal Thomass, long socks.
Autumn/Winter 2004.

Introduction

There are already a considerable number of works that have been written on women's underwear. So why produce another one? The idea of this book is to share several facts: on the one hand, the attraction of underwear, the mystery which surrounds it and the fantasies it evokes, and on the other hand, the function of underwear and how it reveals the conditions of women, the development of its place in society and its status regarding men.

Even the term underwear itself brings to mind its function: being underneath, and therefore

hidden. There can be numerous types: shaping underwear, revealing underwear, enticing, provocative, prudish or erotic underwear. Women's underwear is erotic without a doubt. From Grecian times to the most modern micro fibre bras, women's underwear has been sensually charged, as much for the woman wearing it as for the man (or woman) who removes it. What is the reason for this amazing power of seduction? The fact that underwear is hidden? And rarely revealed? Perhaps because it is in intimate touch with a woman's body? However, eroticism is not the only matter of interest in women's underwear.

During the development of western clothing, lingerie and corsetry have had a fundamental role. It allows one to structure one's shape, modify the figure and change following the flights of fashion. Underwear itself follows constantly changes with the latest fashion. It is designed using shapes, materials and colours which correspond to the tastes of the time: even if we can say that women's underwear is created in the image of fashion, it is not actually that simple, and shapes, types of undergarments, and the choice of materials and colours very often have a social context.

A woman wears underwear that varies according to her circumstances. From the beginning to the end of her life a woman experiences physical change and changes in her social status, and her underwear reflects this.

It becomes emblematic of the times and of each woman's role in her society and class. In addition to this, throughout life, daily activities require different underwear, such as for sport, a day's work or the evening. The most tantalising underwear is, of course, for love.

Sophisticated underwear with the purpose of seduction had, and continues to have, a symbolic role in western Judeo-Christian society. Whether idolised or demonised, women's underwear symbolises taboos and sexual prohibitions lead to numerous fantasies, erotic ideas and even to fetishism.

Underlying the existence of these fashion objects and erotic dreams is the world of business and industry, whose origins go back in history to linen maids, corset makers and hosiers. The sale and distribution of women's underwear is a well-organised and rapidly expanding machine, dealing with such diverse retailers as chic lingerie outlets, mail-order catalogues and sex shops, where every woman can find what she desires. Advertising is aimed at attracting both men and women with lace, satin and embroidery modelled on voluptuous models.

The world of women's underwear, whether hidden or on display, is a rich one. Underwear was originally designed for hygienic reasons and to enhance intimate parts of a woman's body, but it is now aimed at much more than provoking desire. In particular, during its development over the years, it has shown the progressive liberation of the female body as well as her position in patriarchal western society.

So let us enter this lace-trimmed history whose aim is to inform and titillate the reader. Our studies were based on bibliographical research, but the work does not refer to scientists or experts. The aim of the book is to please and charm the reader.



Yaël Landman, ensemble.
Autumn/Winter 2003.

Underwear and fashion



Iron pair of stays, first half of the 17th century.
Leloir Fund, Musée Galliera, Paris. Inv. 2002.2.X.



Nicolas-André Monsiau, *The Lace*, 1796.

Engraving, vignette for the works of Rousseau. 21 x 14 cm.
Maciet Collection, Bibliothèque des Arts décoratifs, Paris.

Lingerie, corsetry and hosiery

Underwear is varied and prolific, whether it is hidden or displayed, discreet or provocative. There are three usual ways to classify this multitude of garments: lingerie, corsetry and hosiery.

Lingerie's main role is that of hygiene. It is positioned between the body and clothes, and it protects the body from outerwear made of less comfortable textiles while it protects the clothes from bodily secretions. Because of this, it is generally made from healthy materials

which have varied according to the times. In this way lingerie is really about feminine intimacy and hygiene. In fact, the first linen that was in contact with the female body was used for menstrual flow and is the precursor of our sanitary towels.[1]

The term body linen is also used for lingerie. We use this term to talk about certain undergarments such as petticoats, chemises, bloomers, long johns, briefs, vests and slips.

In families of modest means, or in wartime, certain undergarments have been made from worn out household linen, often old sheets. Materials used for body linen are similar to those used for household linen. Comfort is the first thing they have in common, with cotton being the most popular, as it is soft, light and hygienic. Other materials of all types of luxury are used to make lingerie: linen, silk, relatively light synthetic weaving, such as cloth, satin, jersey, lawn, muslin, percale or net. Sometimes these fabrics are embellished with ornamentation and, very often, with provocative decoration. Because lingerie is not limited to a protective role, it is also an elegant part of clothing. We often see lingerie “coming out on top” as it is revealed or is completely displayed for reasons of seduction, fashion or provocation. It also presents frivolous ornamentations such as lace, embroidery and ribbons. Depending on who is wearing it, colours can vary according to the age, social position, taste, or the effect required by fashion of the wearer. But it is rarely completely revealed as it is associated with nudity, as can be seen in Georges Feydeau’s play *Mais n’te promène donc pas toute nue!* (“*You are surely not going out completely naked!*”) where Ventroux takes his wife Clarisse to task when their son sees her in her chemise. “We can see through that like tracing paper!” he says but she, in turn replies that wearing one’s daytime chemise is not like being naked.[2] This episode shows that a woman feels that lingerie covers her while for a man it draws attention to the nudity beneath.

Because of its contact with the skin and its closeness to the female form, lingerie has always been the object of male fantasy, a fact which is judiciously played upon by woman and their lingerie. Catching a glimpse of petticoat frill in the 18th century, as in the 19th century, had an impact on the observer’s imagination in the same way that detecting panties or a G-string under a girl’s jeans would have today. Lingerie has an erotic charge because it is the closest clothing to the private female form.

Corsetry also plays a part in the world of seduction. This garment is to clothing what a framework is to a building. But this framework is applied to an existing foundation; the female body. The role of corsetry is to shape the body and to impose a fashionable silhouette upon it.



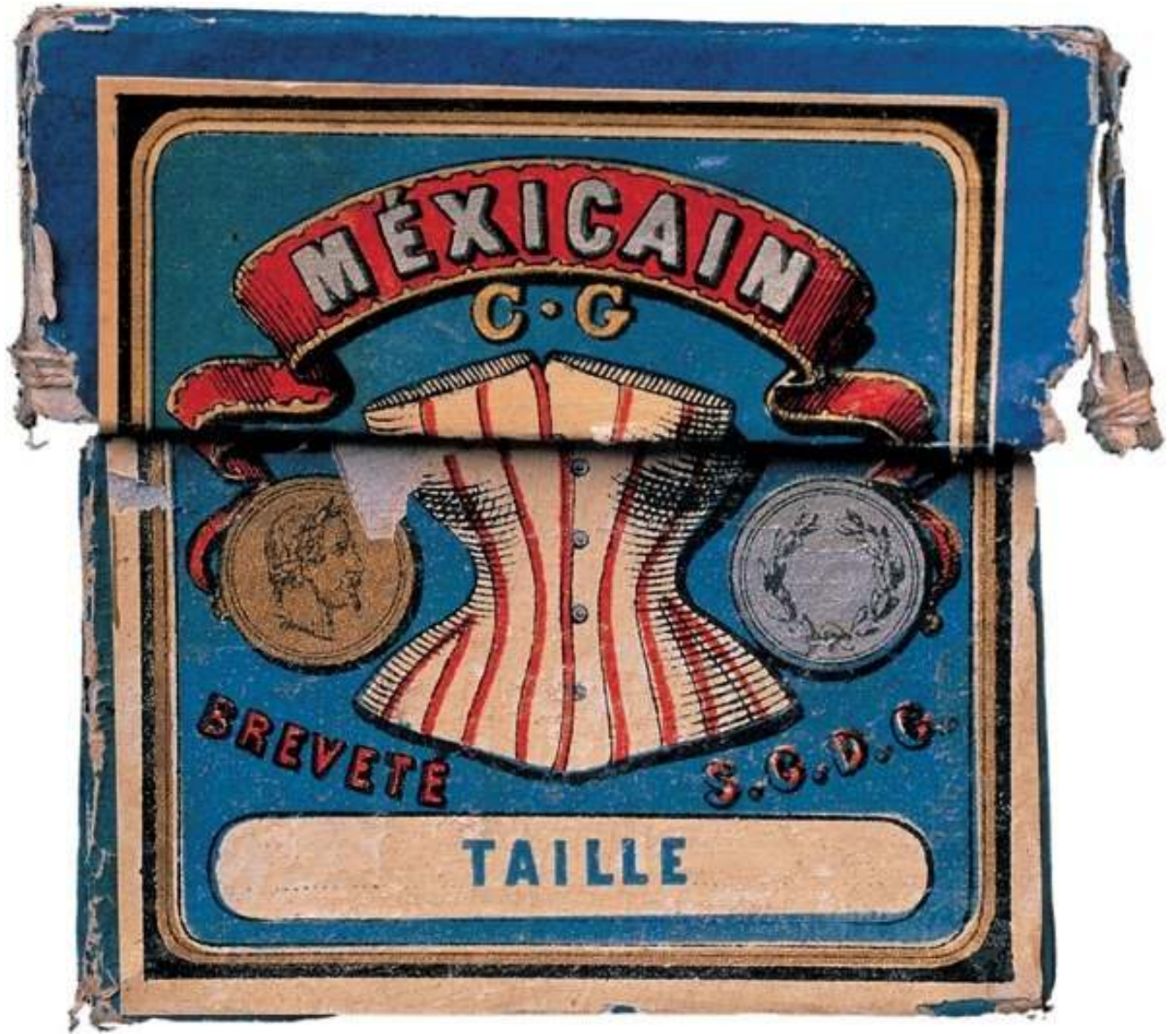
Body with whalebone, 18th century.
Fabric decorated with flowers.
Leloir Fund, Musée Galliera,
Paris. Inv. 1920.1.1856.



Corset. Pink silk, backed with linen, stiffened with whalebone and trimmed with pink silk ribbons. England, c. 1660-70, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Box "The Mexican Corset", 1869.
Musée de la Bonneterie, Troyes.



Box "The Mexican Corset", 1869.
Musée de la Bonneterie, Troyes.



Corset in red satin, yellow leather and whalebone,
with a steel hour-glass form, 1883.
Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Black and white silk slip, muslin stockings
with silk and lace. Commercial catalogue,
Grands Magasins du Louvre, Paris, Summer 1907.

Pieces of corsetry were used to transform the three main parts of the body: the waist, bust and hips. The new silhouette was constructed around these three points. In *Les Dessous à travers les âges* (“*Underwear throughout the ages*”), Armand Silvestre describes a “good corset” in the following terms: “the top must be sufficiently widely cut to support the breasts without crushing them, the armholes should be well-formed; the lining of the fabric should be fine, well-inserted and flexible [...] finally, it should follow the lower body and finish on the hips at a firm point of arrival and follow the natural direction of the woman’s side”^[3]. Corsetry enhanced the body’s curves and moulded it into new lines. It made the bust round,

uplifted, curvaceous or flattened; the waist could be larger or smaller, non-existent or well-defined; hips could seem slimmer or wider. Corsetry dictated the shapes of fashion and often worked against nature. While lingerie revealed a woman's private world, corsetry was made to create illusion. Corsetry was what made the woman wearing a certain dress fashionable.

The term 'corsetry' includes undergarments such as stays, corsets, girdles, waspies, bustiers, farthingales, panniers and crinolines*.

Corsetry was made of internal bones which compress and control the body. These bones were made from sturdy materials such as whalebone, cane, horsehair, steel and elastic fibres. Originally this underwear was meant to be worn over clothes, then over lingerie, so it would be less obvious that it was made out of more sophisticated fabrics than those used for lingerie. Sometimes pieces of corsetry were matched to the clothing or to certain types of lingerie, such as a petticoat.

In this way one can see that corsetry was more fashionable and followed trends because it is visible (in the Middle Ages particularly, corsetry was worn over the dress) and especially because it moulds the figure.

Because of this, corsetry has been criticised to a much greater extent than lingerie. The supporters of corsetry saw in it a symbol of female morality – a woman's body being maintained and reflecting her upright behaviour. Doctors, hygienists, and later, feminists, have accused designers and manufacturers of wanting to confine the female body inside a structure which is far from natural and that can damage the body. In spite of this criticism, women have accepted and put up with boning since, for them, it was simply a question of fashion: it was a way of disguising figure faults. The female body has long been considered weak, and extra support was considered necessary. 1932 *Vogue* testified: "Women's abdominal muscles are notoriously weak and even hard exercise doesn't keep your figure from spreading if you don't give it some support"[4].

In fact, corsetry is a woman's major ally (if she can bear a little suffering) as it allows her to hide any bad points and accentuate her good points! This is the case of Caroline, Honoré de Balzac's *Petites Misères de la vie conjugales* ("The Small Miseries of Married Life"), who wears her "most deceptive corset"[5]. Finally, like all lingerie, corsetry carried a significant erotic charge, as it accentuates the most emblematic aspects of the female body.

We would not have covered everything if we failed to mention hosiery here. This third family consists of the manufacture, industry and sale of clothing of knitted fabrics including stockings, socks and certain items of lingerie such as briefs or vests. Hosiery is characterised by the weaving technique which is employed when using materials such as wool, cotton, silk, nylon and today, micro fibre.

Hosiery completes the lingerie-corsetry family and has benefited from great technical advances as a result of improvements in trade and the industrialisation of the sector.

Today, the distinction between lingerie, corsetry and hosiery is rarely made as there is often an overlap between the various different domains (underwired bras, support tights, support briefs). The underwear which we wear today is the result of the development of these three families. Their hygienic, supportive and aesthetic qualities interlink in 21st century underwear.

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