

# The development of the brassiere essay sample



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The brassiere is perhaps the secret touch of exotica in every woman's wardrobe. Throughout history this piece of clothing has been an object of seduction, glamour, or oppression depending on one's stance. Women have always tried to enhance their female figures by squeezing themselves into restricting uncomfortable garments. Waists have been reduced and bust lines have been increased, decreased, flattened or spread out, depending on what is fashionable. Far from being an imposition, the brassiere has emerged in the twentieth century as a major component of clothing for the modern women.

By becoming a material and social artefact the brassiere has developed into becoming the focal point of a multimillion dollar industry which will be examined in this essay. The brassiere has played a practical, as well as aesthetic role and it was during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that this caused bitter arguments. The traditional view, that tight fitting corsets were beneficial to women's moral character and physical stance were challenged by the Pre-Raphaelites, with their un-corseted aesthetic dress.

Janey Morris was one of the leaders of this Artistic dress movement in late nineteenth century England. She and her circle preferred loose, drapery styles, coloured with vegetable dyes and decorated with embroidery ( Farrell-Beck 1). Contrary to Morris's beliefs some of the women who wished to shed the corset were undoubtedly deterred by the social opprobrium of being " loose" un-corseted women which had an all too close association with prostitution. Another factor hindering the switch to brassieres during its early

stages has been contributed to the financial costs of switching from the traditional customary dress of corsets.

Nevertheless, in 1910 brassieres rather than corsets had become the source of increased business in department stores. The New York Times trumpeted about the opening of Macy's new brassiere department. The softening of women's dress silhouettes and the reduction in the weight and bulk of their clothing helped pave the way for the acceptance of brassieres. The case for the brassiere was furthered by the expansion of women's work, recreation, and public roles.

Within this period two phases were evident firstly during the years 1890 to 1905 brassieres were sold by mail order reaching consumers in often far flung parts of the country, secondly between 1906-1917 brassieres began to be manufactured in various sizes distributed by retail chains, catalogues, and department stores ( Farrell-Beck 15). The two main mail order companies at this time were Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward. Both these companies provided a potent challenge to the often expensive general stores which at this time were the centre of communities ( Woodward 16).

Montgomery Ward targeted farmers and their families while Sears went after patronage of the low income, each catering their catalogues to these niches. Although their target markets varied both these companies were headquartered in Chicago, making it a mecca for companies that made brassieres. Chicago was a booming city with over 1 million inhabitants. Such a vast labour pool was a vital prerequisite for any needle trade. Chicago also

offered the convenience of being a railroad hub from which goods could easily be transferred.

The windy city contributed for many decades as being an important center for brassiere manufacturing until yielding pre-eminence to New York and Newark, New Jersey in 20th century. Another great phenomena in the development of the brassiere were fitters. Alliances between producers and retailers were effective for training fitters. Fitters were hired to analyze women's figures then steer them toward the most appropriate and satisfactory brassiere. Stores such as Sears Roebuck, Macy's and J. C Penny clearly had the bottom line in view when employing fitters.

Returned merchandise and adjustments on sales accounted for merely 12 percent of gross sales in US department stores in the mid 30's ( Fontanel 56). Fitters helped maximize returns by ensuring that the customer had a comfortable brassiere before they left the store. In effort to woo customers fitters often went beyond technical know how and made it a point to know names and kept a file on each customer's preferences and size specifications. Another factor contributing to the development of the brassiere were health concern issues.

Many American women during the nineteenth century had yearned for better health care. With the support of prominent women, broad sweeping reforms were made such as allowing women to study medicine. Responding to this movement toward more healthful choices in dress, inventors continued to patent ideas for breast supporters. Health care further disposed women to trade in old style corsets for brassieres. Of great social significance was a

patent secured in 1918 for a surgical breast substitute to be worn with their regular brassiere by post mastectomy patients ( See Figure 1).

Devised by a fellow Canadian nurse Laura Ethel Mailleue this prosthesis for mastectomy patients signalled a nurses desire to help women cope with physical changes and psychological discomfort resulting from the amputation of a breast ( Farell-Beck 54). As time went on physicians diagnosis of breast cancer became more accurate and the number of mastectomies increased. Doctors prescribed and women sought special brassieres after treatment. Mastectomy patient's complicated the task for designers as they had to provide a balanced and natural feeling prosthesis while simultaneously supporting the remaining breast.

Many such patients were physically and emotionally scarred, sensitivity training was given to fitters to help restore back patients sense of femininity and beauty. Fitters ensured that the needs of mastectomy patients like any other customers were met before they left the store. The brassiere environment was clearly changing. Economically speaking expansion in the US although far from universal put more money in the pockets of some Americans. During the years of 1922 to 1927 several industries prospered notably those producing housing, electrical appliances, cars, and banking also thrived.

The economy grew at annual rate of 7% for six years. More women entered the workforce. Firms that supplied woman's apparel and personal care items including brassiere manufacturers could turn a nice profit attracting even modest purchases from women with there own incomes ( Steel 98). The flip

side of such expansion was inflation. The Consumer Price Index doubled during these years nevertheless brassiere companies maintained relative price stability in part by reducing hand labour, building large demand to reduce unit costs, and using standardized components.

Prudent manufactures also heeded calls for a limited variety of products in a push for rationalization that began during the late war years and gained force through 1920's. Alert brassiere manufactures recognized and responded to radical fluctuations in women's fashionable silhouettes, between 1918 and 1924. The favoured body type went from flat to flatter, skirt lengths almost touched ankles at end of WW1 rising to just below knee by 1924-1926. Ida and William Rosenthal went into business as the Maidenform Company in the 1920's as a protest against the notorious flat cheasted flapper girls of the Roaring 20's ( Westfall 1).

During this time many brassiere companies went out of business by failing to offer multiple styles varied materials or new designs, but the successful ones sported all types of enticements, including lace, embroidery, and dainty fabrics of thin silk or sheer cotton. One such entrepreneur was a New York socialite by the name of Mary Phelps Jacob. Mary's new undergarment complimented the new fashions introduced at the time and demands from friends and family were high for the new brassiere. She sold her product to upper class clientele by giving her product an aura of exclusivity over mass manufactured brassieres.

In spite of her success running a business was not enjoyable to Jacob and she soon sold the brassiere patent to the Warner Brothers Corset Company

in Bridgeport, Connecticut, for \$1, 500 ( Bellism 1). Warner was to go on and make over fifteen million dollars from Mary's bra patent over the next thirty years. Companies that were able to occupy such niches were the ones that survived. Changing fashions inventive zeal and clever marketing only partially accounted for success of the brassiere in the 20th century.

As it evolved brassieres released women from the vicelike grip of corsets providing greater physical flexibility and a modicum of comfort in paid employment in which increasing women were engaged. The US involvement in war offered women more opportunities while requiring more practical clothing than the homebound women of the 1800's. Despite shortcomings by 1917 brassieres had moved from minority fashion to the mainstream. This was prompted by simplified and systematized production and merchandising arising from wartime exigencies and enthusiasm for scientific efficiency.

In addition to struggling with shifting styles, manufacturer had to cope with the new technology of lingerie fabrics. Manufactures such as Kop Brothers, who had worked exclusively with heavy materials, scrambled to adjust machinery and production methods to accommodate sheer textiles, laces, and ribbons ( Steel 12). Fibres choices were also expanding, in 1920s rayon entered the market which had previously been dominated by naturals usually silk or cottons. Rayon performed quite differently from silk though the two had a superficially similar appearance.

Rayon's virtues were softness, absorbency, ready acceptance of dyes and comfort in wear ( Hawthorne 124). Sheer knitted textiles for fine lingerie was another novelty in the 1920's rayon, silk tricot, swami, milanese appeared in

brassieres and panties. A clear shift occurred during WW1 and the stock market crash with retail customers beginning to demand aesthetic appeal in fashion in apparel and home furnishing that had been previously been slow changing staples. By 1920s these items were brought for their pleasing styling with serviceability being taken for granted.

Department stores realized that they had to change their way of buying and presenting apparel in order to survive. Although hundreds of women had worked to support themselves before the great war or entered business industry at urging of government, when the First World War ended these women lost there jobs to returning soldiers. Brassiere manufacturers suffered many ulcers in early 40s as they had in 30s after nearly decade of coaxing women to spend part of their small clothing budgets on brassieres they grappled with problems of producing enough high quality brassieres to sell to newly flushed customers.

After eight years of slump factories were humming. Indeed the depression paved the way for speedy conversion to war production. Idle factories and workers were available aplenty. Long unemployment rolls melted away under the demand for manpower. In 1935 only 25 % had jobs in 1945 this figure grew to 36%, in total 19 million women participated in civilian or military workforce for some part of war ( Stoppard 99). During the war women complained that brassiere straps weren't sturdy or adjustable enough, intense physical activity also put stress on all parts of the brassiere shortening its life span.



Due to price controls and social pressure wartime inflation remained in check, brassiere prices held steady in 40s with the average price for a brassiere being \$1. 50 ( Stoppard 57). War wages increased but just when women had wages to spend manufacturers were hard pressed to make acceptable brassieres. Unfortunately companies that had kept brassieres in women's wardrobes during the depression could not relax and enjoy their growing prosperity. War had erupted in Europe and American isolationism was slowly giving way to the realization that sympathy for countries invaded by the Nazis would eventually have to be matched by material help.

Preparedness became America's watchword; sobriety and stringency began to constrain the makers of brassieres ( Laurent 83). For the legions of US companies that manufactured armaments, vehicles, food and other necessities for troops, 1940s were palmy days indeed. But for brassiere manufacturers discontent as the War Productions Board severely taxed their patience and adaptability by curtailing allocations or completely commandeering metal, natural rubber, cotton, and even rayon.

The industry supported WPB as any other citizen as they counted Jews among their owners and employees. They couldn't renege when the lives of millions of their European counterparts were in grave danger ( Farrell-Beck 82). Elastic use was reduced by 50% in bras in 1942 with the WPB specifying that straps could only contain two and a half inches of elastic, rubber yarn was used instead. Metal was an also sufficiently precious. Companies began using ladders of cloth to form the eyes in brassiere bands attempting to limit metal only to the hooks ( Hawthorne 117).

Supplies of metal became so tight that department stores were coxing women to salvage and turn in the metal from worn out corsets and bras to be melted down for re-use ( Hawthorne 156). Textiles also began to run short due to both demand and price controls that made extra production unattractive even when fiber was available. Cotton rayon and yarn that were desperately needed for bras went into tents, tarpaulins, uniform linings, parachutes, and tire components. Hampered by WPB regulations and allocation bra manufacturers did their best to fill there orders however many materials were no longer available.

Indeed producing non- brassier items for military saved the livelihood of manufactures because at least govt supplied the cotton textiles for parachutes, tents, cartridge belts. Some firms took military involvement even further. After the war MaidenForm boasted that they had been commissioned by the US government to design produce and test vests for carrier pigeons so paratroopers could carry the birds safely to earth ( See Figure 2). Carrier pigeons were required when radio silence was observed as it was before the D-day invasion ( Farrell-Beck 94).

Many elements of a brassiere's curved shape were incorporated into the design. The brassieres role clearly had evolved. This evolution continued even after the war. Displaced women of World War Two had now exchanged their uniforms for maternity clothes. The baby boom brought several challenges, demand exceeded supply by wide margins, those able to provide buyers with reliable supply succeeded where their less organized competitors failed. Customers often had to search for maternity clothes.

Once peace was declared gone were the stern calls to duty replaced by blandishments to look beautiful. Bras sported sexy plunges, embroidery lace and colour. The V for victor motif was touted by the Poix Company (Hawthorne 79). While the public was celebrating peace manufactures had hangovers. The Office of Price Administration stayed active until the end of 1946 forcing producers to maintain steady prices while input costs increased. But nylon became exempt from price restrictions.

Catalogues sales also maintained strengths throughout the ar. They were convenient for wartime employees who worked long hours, strict gasoline rationing discouraged needless shopping forays. By the 1940's Hollywood and the movie industry were becoming a major social force in influencing attitudes about everything from household appliances to sexuality. Movies had kept their appeal as affordable entertainment even in grim times. By the fifties the Hollywood sex queen was an established icon and American women were being influenced heavily by Hollywood dress, custom, and attitudes.

The bullet bra also hit the scene in the fifties as did the buxom starlets of Hollywood lore. Marilyn Monroe one of the icons of this period helped to renew the emphasis on feminine sexuality. Of all the revolutions affecting women the sexual revolution had the greatest implications, access to reliable contraceptives, declining birthrates, freed from the fear of accidental pregnancy some women expressed their sexuality more openly by wearing provocative apparel, making sure cleavage was maximized (Bellism 1).

The latest fashion designs from the runways of New York and Paris also responded to this trend by continuously finding clever ways each year to expose more of the female breast. Manufacturers also began to produce brassiere designs that would harmonize with these body revealing di?? colleti?? styles. Even the famous engineer Howard Hughes got involved. Hughes used his aeronautical engineering knowledge to take an unknown starlet, Jane Russell, and turn her into an overnight star. Hughes designed a bra that took Russell's chesty assets and put them fully in the face of all gawking America.

Century-Fox had cancelled the agreement for Hughes to allow them to release 'The Outlaw' (Westfall 1). Censors were having a fit about Jane's breasts being overexposed due to Hughes' wonderfully inventive brassiere improvements. Millions of dollars stood to be lost. Hughes had all his managers start a chain reaction of calling ministers, women's clubs and housewives telling them about the 'lewd picture' Hughes was about to release starring Jane Russell. They responded by protesting and wildly trying to have the film banned — just the publicity Hughes needed to turn around the entire profit system and have the most incredible publicity machine in full gear (Westfall 1). It was the bra that saved Hollywood. Brassieres were riding high in 1950s only to face potential extinction in the 1960s, resurgent feminism brought with it hostility toward traditional feminine trappings chief among these the brassiere. Some women tossed their bras never to wear them again while others merely went braless from time to time. Not surprisingly, male breast ogglers everywhere could hardly believe their good fortune.

Books such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* also helped provoke an explosion of feminist activism in 1958 ( Lippert 1). The bra and corset alike were considered tools of female oppression, object used to distort the female figure into men's sexual fantasy (See Figure 3). News reporters publicized several incidents of women publicly discarding feminine trappings giving rise to the expression bra burning. Actually the only bra burning incident was a staged one held in Atlantic City during the Miss America pageant which feminists said objectified women ( Farrell-Beck 141).

Reports of demise of brassiere were greatly exaggerated still women had become impatient with the obtrusiveness and discomfort of brassieres. Women's disdain for bras drove designers and manufactures to make their product less conspicuous and more flexible. A decade later the popular hippy culture emerged. Recreational drugs and eclectic fashion become the norm. Fashion minimalism yielded to riotous colors bold shapes, and delight in synthetic materials. The 60s tripped out on intense colours, and kaleidoscopic prints became popular in lingerie as well.

Prints in brassiere design ran from Monet inspired whirlpools, to Japanese nature motifs, and paisleys ( British 45). In the 1960s the introduction of a new style took as long as 9 months before the product was ready to go to the factory. This period has become greatly shortened today by the introduction of computer aided design and outsourcing becoming the norm for cost-effective companies. Such techniques helped to introduce new innovative products. In the early 1980s and 1990s two styles held reign: the sports bra and the push up bra. These models typified the dichotomy between the energetic and erotic.

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Women were expected to wear bras from one group or another with each being at the opposite end of the spectrum. Social and cultural norms also continued to transform the domain of the brassiere. Even the pop princess Madonna brought the brassiere into the spotlight with her blatant use of brassieres and corsets managing to defuse the eroticism of burlesque strip teases making them appear to be almost banal ( Steele 167). Victoria Secrets is another one of today's biggest name. The company was born in California where its mission was to take the erotic and hidden from bedroom out to the general public.

From the onset the company played on its pseudo English name by a giving fictitious London address on its bags ( Whitley 64). It's astonishing to think that the undergarment industry pulls in \$850 a year with Victoria Secrets being the best known and biggest contender in lingerie in America ( Whitley 65). What is on the horizon for brassieres then? A student by the name Kurst Falconer at the Royal College of Art in London has developed a techno bra which incorporates high tech protective electronics into a consumer friendly product ( British Council 98).

Realizing that with violence against women escalating women required protective underwear instead of fumbling for a bottle of mace. Falconer has developed a breastplate that can detect traumas as part of the design of the bra. The heart rate reacts in a totally different way to danger, Falconers bra is able to interpret this and send out a pre-recorded text message to a specified location bringing aid to the victim. Another exciting development is the C Bra which is able to detect breast cancer earlier and more easily than conventional mammography ( British Council 99).

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The bra is capable of being linked up to a PC, through which a connection could be made with a consultant at a local hospital. These are merely two of the latest innovations that are promising in the realm of the ever changing brassiere. In conclusion the last 40 years of the brassiere industry has seen more changes in the social order and corporate structure of the industry than in the product itself. Mergers & acquisitions have shaped the brassiere most powerfully but feminism and equal rights have also exerted an almost as pervasive an influence.

The brassiere has truly come full circle with its humble beginnings to its present day popular appeal. Women have and will continue to dress or fashion their bodies in ways that respond to the particular socio-cultural ideals of beauty, eroticism, status, conformity and other powerful sources of the time. The brassiere has simply become internalized as a transformational garment with no signs of demise in the clear and present future. Brassieres will continue to support, lift, and shape women throughout the world.