

HISTORY OF  
MEN'S UNDERWEAR  
AND  
SWIMWEAR

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## PREFACE

For many categories of dress, such as underwear and swimwear, survey level texts on fashion and costume history have neither the scope nor the space for much detail. Especially lacking with survey level texts is the examination of the socioeconomic drivers of style trends. Increasingly, though, during the past few decades, the study of dress has expanded to include many specialized studies. Detailed and lavishly illustrated books have been devoted to specific categories of clothing or to the dress of certain periods of time; others have centered solely on a single classification such as women's shoes or men's neckties. Of the numerous books published since the 1980s on underwear, some are academic studies like *Unmentionables: A Brief History of Underwear* by Elaine Benson and John Esten (1996); some are humorous entertainment like *A Brief History of Shorts* by Nicolas Graham (1995); and some are coffee table pictorials like *Underworld* by Kelly Klein (1995). For the most part, though, the majority of the recent specialty books on underwear have focused entirely or principally on women's styles, either omitting men's varieties completely or including only a cursory mention, at best.

The earliest attempt to detail the history of underwear was produced by C. Willett and Phillis Cunnington in 1951. Their *History of Underclothes* includes women's and men's undergarments from the late Middle Ages through the 1930s. "It is perhaps sufficient for the authors...to claim, as doctors, that they approach the subject in a scientific spirit, surveying impartially the various aspects of this subsidiary—though important—element in the art of costume," wrote the Cunningtons.<sup>1</sup> Their disclaimer to be "scientific" belied their concern that "today we are still in the backwash of Victorian prudery," and since the topic of underwear "is so generally associated with eroticism, often to a pathological extent,"<sup>2</sup> the result of their work is primarily a catalog of garment types in chronological order with minimal assessments of socioeconomic factors. Such a rigidly pedagogic approach is certainly understandable, given the conservative culture that particularly dominated England and America in the post-World War II era. Hence, although the Cun-

ningtons acknowledge that underwear has “an important psychological interest,” in particular an “erotic purpose,” they avoid examining the influences of eroticism in the development of underwear styles beyond a brief acknowledgment in the introduction. Indeed, for masculine styles, they even insist that “Man has never used provocative underclothing; its plain prose has been in singular contrast to the poetical allurements worn by woman.”<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, even more recent texts on the topic have only skirted the sociological and cultural influences on stylistic developments in men's underwear. In 1991, Gary Griffin's *History of Men's Underwear from Union Suits to Bikini Briefs* somewhat helped fill the sixty-year gap since the Cunningtons' study. Although portions of the text and many of the illustrations are directly appropriated from the Cunnington text, Griffin's overview provides some more recent historical anecdotes but little substantive cultural analysis. Some periodical articles on men's underwear have succeeded in combining garment history with social critique, but these have been narrow in scope. For example, in 1992, Richard Martin wrote “Jockey: The Invention of the Classic Brief” in *Textile and Text*, which credited, for instance, the advances in French men's swimwear designs in the 1930s with the development and mainstream marketing of the new underwear style.<sup>4</sup>

Texts on swimwear, however, have been more successful than those on underwear in presenting the socioeconomic and popular culture influences on style development. *Making Waves* by Lena Lencek and Gideon Bosker and *Splash!* by Richard Martin and Harold Koda are fine examples that blend the history of swimwear with social history, fashion trends, and marketing methods of each era. As with most studies on underwear, though, these swimwear texts also focus predominantly on women's styles. For the researcher of menswear, the gleaning of information on men's swimwear requires diligence.

On the other hand, quite a number of books tailored to men's studies include analyses of the sociological and psychological significance of dress, including underwear and swimwear, as it has related to the evolving ideas and ideals of modern and postmodern masculinity: *The Male Body* by Susan Bordo (1999); *Uneasy Pleasures: The Male as Erotic Object* by Kenneth Mackinnon (1997); *Men in the Mirror: Men's Fashion, Masculinity and Consumer Society* by Tim Edwards (1997); *Don We Now Our Gay Apparel* by Shaun Cole (2000); *Male Impersonators* by Mark Simpson (1994), to name a few. But because these socioeconomic analyses largely omit details of the historical development of garment styles, the vital clarity of which came first, the style change or the social change, is seldom clear.

Thus, this study undertakes three primary objectives. First is a combination of these two “bare necessities” of masculine dress into one study with individual chapters on the chronology of the development of men's underwear and swimwear styles. Second is a look at the marketing of men's underwear and swimwear, especially the evolution of visual representation and the written message in the post-Industrial Revolution era of mass production and mass communication. Third, interwoven within each of these chapters is an examination of how underwear and swimwear reflected society and inexorably influenced social change, especially notions of masculinity, modesty, and erotic exhibitionism.



Figure 1. Although beyond the scope of this study, the history of EuroAmerican men's underwear might even include body-shaping garments and attachments such as corsets, braces, and padding for shoulders, calves, and buttocks. Above, cartoon by George Cruikshank, 1818; right, Padded Butt Boxer Brief from Undergear, 2010.



With regard to the chronology of underwear styles discussed in chapter 1, this study is more focused than some other texts on the subject. Certainly, dress history is full of a wide assortment of clothing and body-shaping attachments other than the drawers and undershirts that served as men's principal undergarments, including garters, hose, socks, suspenders, corsets, girdles, body braces, and padding for shoulders, calves, and buttocks. (Figure 1.) The Cunningtons include shirts (and detachable collars) as undergarments given that, until the twentieth century, a man was regarded *en dishabille*, or incompletely dressed, without a suit jacket. Likewise, sleepwear and loungewear are viewed by some researchers as undergarments, since technically, such forms of clothing are intimate apparel and are somewhat concealed by outer garments like robes, housecoats, and smoking jackets. By extension, then, suit vests and, as Lawrence Langner suggests, neckties might also come under the header of undergarments.<sup>5</sup> (Note that in British texts, suit vests are "waistcoats" and undershirts are "vests.") Perhaps a more ambitious work on the topic of underwear might also include forms of dress that are specifically erotic in purpose and designed solely to be concealed, such as some types of sex gear, pierced jewelry, tattoos, and even suntan lines and "manscaping" (body hair



Gentlemen's Pneumatic Bathing Vests  
and Ladies' Life Preserver Corsets

are light, neat and comfortable. Contain air enough to support the body in the water without an effort, **thus enabling the wearer to become an expert swimmer.** Should always be carried by those traveling on the water, as they are absolute life preservers. We make a specialty of **Children's Safety Swimming Garments**, which, when worn, will prevent drowning. Stamp for catalogue. See May issue for Ladies' Corsets.

PNEUMATIC VEST & CORSET CO.,  
8 West 14th St., New York.

SHOWN UNDER SUIT. SHOWN OVER SUIT.

Figure 2. As with the many forms of undergarments that are beyond the scope of this study, swimwear includes a myriad of specialized types and accessories that exceed the purposes here. Pneumatic bathing vests ad, 1897.

grooming). This study, though, is limited to those undergarments worn to protect and conceal (and later, enhance) the genitals and, since the post-Industrial Revolution era, the torso: drawers, union suits, boxers, briefs, jockstraps, T-shirts, and athletic undershirts. Similarly, the designs of swimwear discussed in chapter 2 are limited to styles developed primarily as recreational wear for the masses and, to a lesser degree, for the competitive athlete. Specialized forms of swimwear, such as neoprene scuba suits, protective underwater gear and safety equipment, and accessories such as flippers, snorkels, face masks, diver's watches, and caps are also beyond the scope of this study. (Figure 2.)

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### Preface Notes

1. C. Willett and Phillis Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes* (London: Michael Joseph, 1951), 11.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 16.
4. Richard Martin and Harold Koda, "Jockey: The Invention of the Classic Brief," *Textile and Text* (Winter 1992), 20–21.
5. Lawrence Langner, *The Importance of Wearing Clothes* (New York: Hastings House, 1959), 237.

# INTRODUCTION

## *The Development and Function of Men's Underwear and Swimwear*

### **Men's Barest Necessities of Dress**

For centuries, historians and, more recently, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, ethnologists, and even economists have written about the purpose and origins of dress. As early as the seventeenth century, antiquaries societies included topics of costume and fashion history in their symposia and publications.<sup>1</sup> By the late twentieth century, scholars began to segment their research of dress into ever more narrowly focused studies that examined in detail the cultural as well as historical traditions of dress. Chief among the motives generally acknowledged by researchers for the development of clothing are protection, modesty, decoration, and social communication. The latter encompasses a broad array of human intents ranging from an outward visual communication to an inner sense of self: as an outward projection, dress can communicate tribal identity, social status, gender, age, sexuality, political affiliation, sports team preference, occupation, and club or business membership, among others; as an inner sense of self, dress may reinforce a pride of place or status, feelings of virtuous modesty or the shame of immodesty, and even mood.

At different times and in different geographic regions, specialized garments like men's underwear and swimwear have developed with varying combinations of these motives. For instance, the neck-to-knees swimwear of the Victorian male was foremost a modesty garment that, in its most conventional form, even included a long tunic with a "modesty skirt" to conceal the crotch. By the same token, the manufactured swimsuit projected a sort of tribal identity when EuroAmerican tourists and colonialists wore the bathing suit in distant lands. And when worn at homeland resorts and beaches, the costume proclaimed a socioeconomic status,

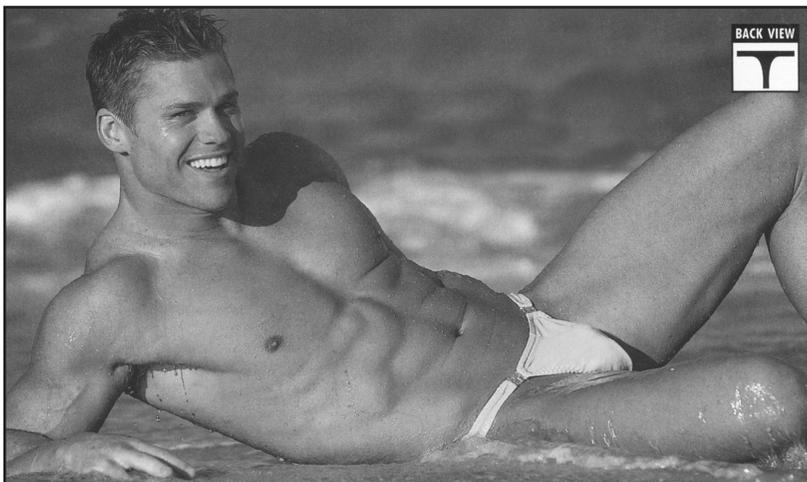


Figure 1. With the introduction of new, formfitting knit fabrics and the increasing brevity of designs that began in the 1920s, swimwear became imbued with the motive of erotic exhibitionism, which undermined the original purpose of modesty. Clip thong from IM Sport, 2003.

since only the middle and more affluent classes could afford superfluous seasonal sports wardrobes, let alone the leisure time to enjoy seaside and resort vacations. A century later, though, the purpose of men's swimwear was still primarily concealment in public—although just barely—yet tribal identity and social status were no longer relevant since the standardized brief or boxer swimsuit was common around the world. Instead, a new motive, erotic exhibitionism, became a consideration for the swimsuit wearer when the modesty skirt was abandoned and ever briefer styles made of formfitting stretch knit fabrics evolved, culminating in today's thong bikinis. (Figure 1.)

### **Protection**

Protection against the elements was unquestionably one of the earliest reasons for the development of clothing. Based on artifacts discovered in Paleolithic graves and dwelling sites, there is ample evidence that, more than 30,000 years ago, prehistoric humans possessed tools that were used in the construction of warm, protective clothing. Stone scrapers for preparing hides, antler awls for punching stitch holes, and bone needles are in abundance around the world. In addition to clothing worn for protection against the cold of Ice Age winters or the blazing sun of equatorial climates, certain forms of dress were also developed to protect against injury, particularly the exposed genitals. Moreover, other types of clothing were devised to protect against the supernatural and were made of textiles woven, imprinted, or stitched with mystical symbols or embellished with amulets or appliques to ward off perceived evils.

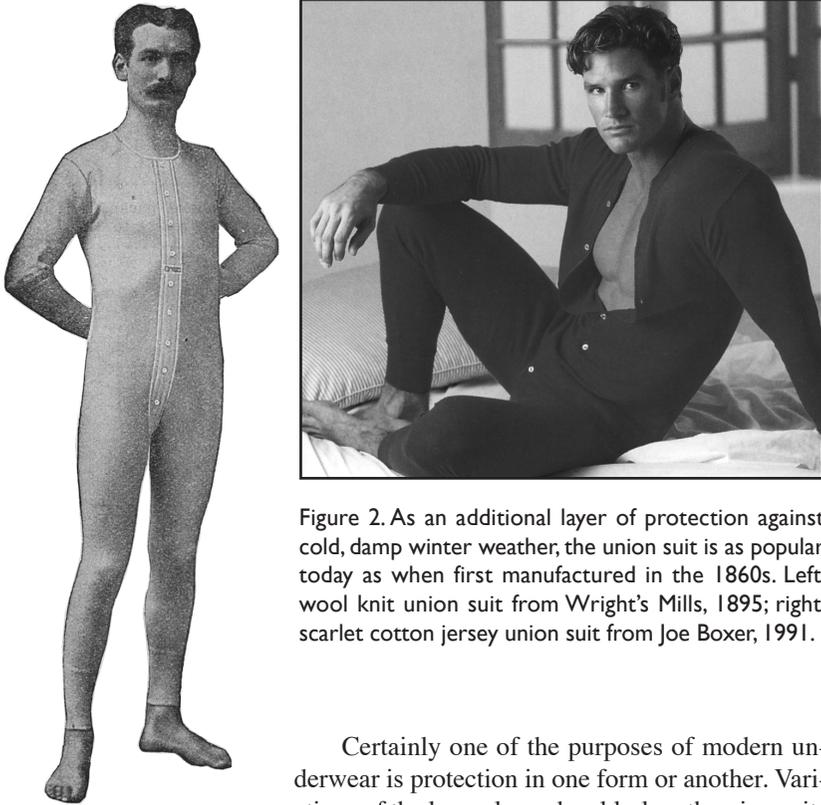


Figure 2. As an additional layer of protection against cold, damp winter weather, the union suit is as popular today as when first manufactured in the 1860s. Left, wool knit union suit from Wright's Mills, 1895; right, scarlet cotton jersey union suit from Joe Boxer, 1991.

Certainly one of the purposes of modern underwear is protection in one form or another. Variations of the long-sleeved, ankle-length union suits of the nineteenth century are still worn today in winter for warmth and protection against damp, penetrating winds as men work or play outdoors. (Figure 2.) The linen drawers of the eighteenth century that were developed as a protective lining against chafing by the internal structures of breeches and hemlines of shirttails have their descendants in modern boxers and briefs. Linen drawers also served to protect the expensive fabrics of clothing against soiling from the body, particularly given that bathing was infrequent prior to the twentieth century. And although a daily shower is compulsory today, underwear is still worn to protect clothing; for instance, men still layer a cotton T-shirt under dress shirts, and even short-sleeved sports shirts, to prevent perspiration stains showing under the arms, despite the additional warmth generated by the extra layer on a summer's day. Protection against injury is also a function of some forms of underwear, notably the jockstrap, which has been a standard protective garment for athletes since the 1880s.

Unlike underwear, though, swimwear did not originally develop as a form of protective clothing. Although men's swimming garments designed solely for the purpose of modesty when in public were introduced in the nineteenth century, protective swimwear like the neoprene foam rubber wetsuit of deep sea divers, surfers, and triathletes was not developed until the 1950s.

## **Modesty**

The emotions of modesty and shame can be derived from a number of social and physiological factors. For more than a century, researchers have studied the notion of modesty, mapping out cause-and-effect analyses that range from the “primitive animal gesture of sexual refusal on the part of the female” to “the development of ornament and clothing, concomitantly fostering alike the modesty which represses male sexual desire and the coquetry which seeks to allure it.”<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the primary interest with modesty here is as it relates to the development of EuroAmerican underwear and swimwear. As a purpose of underwear, modesty is far less important than hygiene and protection. For swimwear, though, modesty was the sole purpose of its origin. Swimming in the nude was easier and far safer than being encumbered with binding garments that caused drag in the water and added significant weight when saturated. Yet concealment of the body when swimming in public became a social demand in order for the sexes to enjoy each other's company. And even as social mores changed over the decades and the miniscule string bikini and thong were introduced in the 1970s, concealment of the genitals, even at such a minimum, remained a social (and legal) demand for swimming in public—one that persists today.

## **Decoration**

The idea that the earliest motive of dress was decoration—an even more ancient intent than protection or modesty—has been a long-established view among scholars and scientists. In 1832, Thomas Carlyle suggested that “the first purpose of clothes was not warmth or decency, but ornament.”<sup>3</sup> At about the same time, Charles Darwin wrote of his encounter with the naked inhabitants of frigid Tierra del Fuego (at the southern tip of Argentina), who, upon being given some red cloth to make warm cloaks, instead shredded the fabric and tied the vibrant colored strips around their bodies as ornaments.<sup>4</sup> In the decades since Carlyle and Darwin speculated on early humans' priorities of dress, archaeologists and anthropologists have verified humankind's prehistoric penchant for decorative forms of dress. Field researchers have excavated numerous Paleolithic burial sites dating as early as 25,000 BCE that contained assorted ornaments once worn by Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons as ring decorations for various parts of the body.

Given that the earliest humans first emerged in the hot climate of central Africa perhaps four million years ago, the development of dress for purposes other than warmth and protection seems more plausible. As many researchers have theorized, sex attraction was likely the original intent. Dress as decoration developed first, wrote psychologist J. C. Flugel in 1930, “largely through the desire to enhance the sexual attractiveness of the wearer and to draw attention to the genital organs of the body.”<sup>5</sup> (Figure 3.) Among the numerous early scholars who subscribed to this theory are Havelock Ellis (*Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, 1898), Edvard Westermarck (*History of Human Marriage*, 1891), and Hiliare Hiler (*From Nudity to Raiment*, 1930).

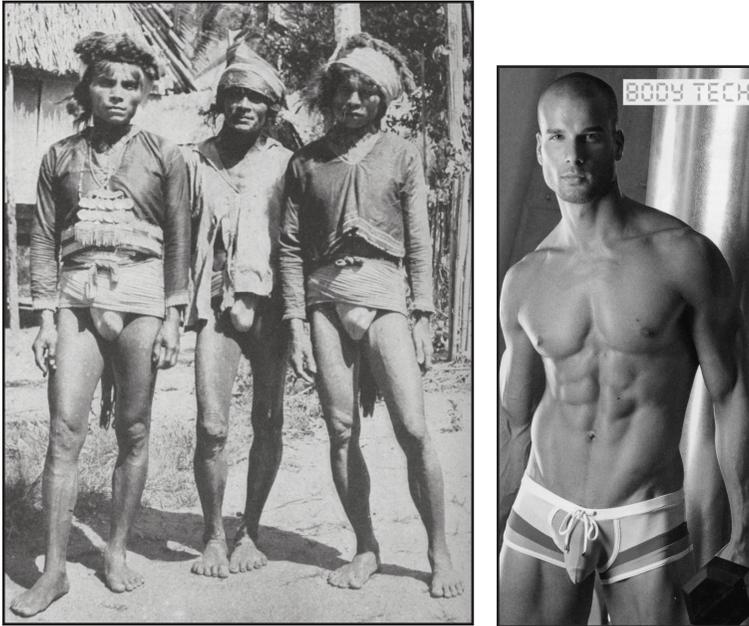


Figure 3. Social scientists hypothesize that the earliest forms of dress and body enhancement were decorative, initially developed for the purpose of sexual attraction. The legacy of that motive for modern man is a myriad of sexualized clothing that both conceals and yet emphasizes the genitals. Shown above, the primitive mountain men of the Philippines wear thong-like loincloths to protect and conceal the genitals, but shirts are cropped short and hip-wraps are raised to display the genital bulge and bare buttocks. EuroAmerican men of today similarly conceal yet enhance their genitals with engineered underwear and swimwear. Left, young Tingian men, Apayao, Philippines, 1912; right, Body Tech Locker Room brief, 2009.

As a first impression, the idea of dress as decoration for ancient peoples might be limited to what the modern fashion industry calls accessories: necklaces, bracelets, earrings and pierced studs, finger and toe rings, armlets, anklets, belts, sashes, hair ribbons and combs, fillets, and other similar ring ornaments and piercings. In fact, the first forms of decorative dress are thought to have been body modifications ranging from changeable paint to permanent tattooing and scarification. One of the oldest types of documented male body modifications, dating back more than 5,000 years in ancient Egypt, is circumcision, a cultural tradition of hygiene and aesthetics that even the lowest castes, often living and working completely naked, underwent as a youthful rite of passage just before puberty. The penis was thus regarded as more inviting to the opposite sex in two ways. It not only appeared cleaner than in its sheathed uncut state, but the exposed glans replicated a perpetual, ready erection.

As applied to modern underwear and swimwear, dress as decoration for the

purposes of sex attraction is undeniable: underwear primarily for intimate, private display, and swimwear for public exhibitionism. When and how EuroAmerican men's underwear and swimwear evolved to function as forms of decorative dress to enhance sexual attraction is explored in chapters 1 and 2.

### **Social Communication**

Dress as communication extends over a broad array of socioeconomic purposes. In his book *Fashion as Communication* (1996), Malcolm Barnard states that principally dress is a “unifying function” that “serves to communicate membership of a cultural group both to those who are members of it and to those who are not.”<sup>6</sup> (Figure 4.) This point is also echoed by Alison Lurie in *The Language of Clothes* (2000): “Long before I am near enough to talk to you on the street, in a meeting, or at a party, you announce your sex, age, and class to me through what you are wearing—and very possibly give me important information (or misinformation) as to your occupation, origin, personality, opinions, tastes, sexual desires and current mood.” These elements of communication through dress are conveyed, Lurie says, by a vocabulary “as large as or larger than that of any spoken tongue, since it includes every garment, hair style, and type of body decoration ever invented.”<sup>7</sup> In addition to draped and tailored body enclosures, dress as communication also includes handheld objects that have greatly varied era to era, such as walking sticks, fans, handkerchiefs, business cases, and, in the twenty-first century, perhaps even cell phones and other electronic gadgets, or symbolically, items like a monarch's scepter or a bishop's crozier. Some researchers are even more granular in their view of dress as communication and include non-visual forms such as scent—which has the intent of sexual allure but could just as easily miscommunicate to others if too much cologne has been applied, or if scent is perceived as offensive odor such as that caused by garlic breath or cigarette smoke clinging to clothing. Similarly, sound as related to some forms of dress might conjure various feelings ranging from nostalgia upon hearing jingle bells attached to hats, gloves, belts, and boots worn by Christmas carolers, to a sense of urgency from the chimes of a wristwatch timer, and even to eroticism from the unzipping of a dress or trousers.

As noted above, dress can communicate very specific information about an individual or group of people. Dress as tribal identity is as ancient as clothing itself. The earliest forms of clan and community dress identities likely developed from the resources at hand: body paint prepared from local vegetation, earth, and ash; constructed garments made from the hides of indigenous animals; ornaments crafted from available seeds and pods, or marine shells, or natural stones like amber and quartz, or animal tusks, fangs, teeth, and claws. Later, woven fabrics provided more options from prepared dyes, textile patterns and textures, and fabric treatments like the fringed garments of ancient Mesopotamia and pleated styles of ancient Egypt. During the Middle Ages, heraldic emblems embroidered or applied to clothing and accessories, hand-carried pennants, and horse and military accou-

Figure 4. The elements of our dress communicate a great deal about us. Our choices in clothing, hair styles, accessories, and even handheld objects provide a great deal of information about us, including sex, age, socioeconomic status, and sometimes personality and mood. Sony ad for pocket transistor radios, 1965.



trements identified members of specific noble households. Distinct silhouettes of garments also became important signifiers of tribe (and nationality): the Greek chiton, the Roman toga, the East Indian sari, the Japanese kimono, to name a few. Among today's most widely recognizable forms of dress as tribal identity are uniforms, whether that of the soldier, police officer, firefighter, mail carrier, or pro-team athlete.

Social status is another key purpose of dress that is thought to have developed with the earliest humans. As Lawrence Langner noted in *The Importance of Wearing Clothes* (1959), "A man's skin is usually similar to that of the members of his family, or his neighbors, and so confers no distinction upon him in the immediate society in which he is born. His skin is a sort of equalitarian uniform which he seeks to negate as rapidly as possible."<sup>8</sup> Presumably, then, certain members of Paleolithic tribes who possessed exceptional skills and demonstrated special value to the group desired to communicate their social superiority to all others on sight—individuals such as the sagacious chief, the most successful hunters or warriors, the shaman who was the keeper of mystic knowledge and medicine, and the master craftsman who knew metallurgy or tool making. These high-ranking individuals either adopted certain distinctive dress features or had forms of status dress and ornaments conferred upon them by peers or tribal leaders. As civilizations developed, forms of dress denoting social status became regulated by law. In ancient Rome, only the imperial family was entitled to wear garments all in murex purple; senators and ranking military officers were only permitted garments edged in purple, and everyone else was forbidden to wear the color on pain of death. By the Middle Ages, the nobility had devised complex and detailed sumptuary laws that prohibited socially inferior persons, regardless of their wealth, from wearing certain types of garments, which were reserved solely to visually communicate high social rank. (Despite these decrees, though, as tradesmen, guild masters, merchants, bankers, and others in the upper middle classes became more affluent, they ap-

propriated the clothing styles of the aristocracy, who in turn continually changed the types of dress that set them apart from the masses; hence, the development of “fashion,” with its changing trends and obsolescence.) Today, social status as communicated by dress lingers still in the distinction, for instance, of “white collar workers,” men with higher educations and executive jobs who wear Armani suits with pristine white dress shirts and silk ties to work in offices, versus “blue collar workers” who are “wage slaves” working in factories and service sectors.

Besides tribal identity and social status, dress can communicate many other messages, some nuanced and others blatant. From the Napoleonic era until the 1960s, gender was clearly defined by dress; even the most casual glance at a person walking away would register male or female because, as a rule, men wore pants and cropped their hair short and women mostly wore dresses and kept their hair long. Those standards changed during the Peacock Revolution of the 1960s when young men grew their hair long and many fashions became unisex—looks that have caused varying degrees of social miscommunication ever since. Age also was once readily communicated by dress. Through the 1930s, for instance, schoolboys wore knickers and knee stockings until their teen years, when they received their first pair of long pants. Communication of political affiliation, sports team preference, club association, or school membership requires distinct forms of dress, such as “vote for” lapel pins and novelty hats, jerseys imprinted with sports mascots, or blazers with embroidered school escutcheons. Occupations may be communicated by uniforms or equipment such as name badges, tool belts, hard hats and helmets, armaments, and safety equipment. Our choice of clothes can even communicate our mood of the moment, a point that has been emphasized in numerous self-help texts such as Charles Hix's *Dressing Right: A Guide for Men* (1978), Alan Flusser's *Clothes and the Man* (1985), and Birgit Engel's *The Twenty-four Hour Dress Code for Men* (2004).

Historically, styles of underwear have not functioned as a form of public social communication. Prior to the twentieth century, the great majority of men's underwear styles was viewed by consumers largely as a dress necessity, a bland commodity product usually without personality, akin to white pocket handkerchiefs and dark socks. Even in intimate circumstances, the selected audience that a man might permit to glimpse him in his underwear likely perceived no special messages from the ubiquitous plain linen drawers or mass produced woolen long johns except perhaps an indication of the preference for one form of underwear over the other. In public environments such as a men's locker room or military barracks, the choice of underwear style might communicate less about the man than would its state of cleanliness. As Lurie surmises, “When underwear has a grayed or yellow tinge, and an exhausted look about the elastic...it implies a dislike of one's own body, possibly of all bodies.”<sup>9</sup> Exceptions, of course, might include the coal miner or fireman who, upon changing for a shower after a day's labor, certainly would not risk opprobrium from his coworkers for the soiled state of his underwear (and everything else).

Today, though, as a form of communication in our postmodern world, the choice of underwear style makes a potent statement about the wearer in a way the



Figure 5. By the mid-nineteenth century, beaches, resorts, community pools, and other places for public swimming were commonly integrated by both sexes. When gender-segregated, though, men often preferred to swim naked, free from the discomfort of heavy, soggy woolen tunics and baggy trunks. Photo study by Thomas Eakins for *The Old Swimming Hole*, 1884.

earlier commodity styles never could. The understanding, nonetheless, is still one of private expression reserved primarily for a limited, usually intimate audience with whom a man shares this secret form of dress communication. The style options are vast, and the lifestyle cachet associated with underwear has been aggressively promoted by makers for more than thirty years (or some might say even longer, extending back to the introduction of the Jockey briefs in the 1930s, or even earlier to the “athletic” designs in sheer fabrics that were popularized by marketers in the 1910s). Whenever someone undresses before us for the first time, muses Lurie, he “reveals a new message written in underwear.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this message is a surprising contrast to the communication projected by exterior clothes—a hidden sense of whimsy, as in novelty print boxers or an erotic exhibitionism as with the engineered, enhancing styles from 2<sup>(X)</sup>ist (“to exist”) or C-IN<sup>2</sup> (“see into”); or perhaps the underwear simply reinforces the conformist personality communicated by a man’s surface clothing, as in the 1950s stereotype of the man in the gray flannel suit (older, white, heterosexual male), beneath which he likely wore plain blue or white woven boxers. As *Genre* noted in 2008, “Gone are the days when picking out underwear was as simple as Hanes or Fruit of the Loom. Now more in-

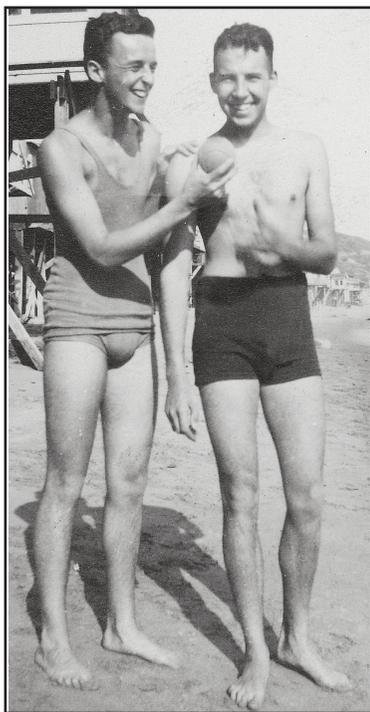


Figure 6. The purpose of the two-piece tank style swimsuit, with its boxy trunks and skirted top, was to modestly conceal much of the male body from chest to thighs. However, for the athletic male beach-goer, wet tops sagged, exposing nipples, and modesty skirts got pushed up by swimming and other activities, revealing the genital bulge. Photo c. 1935.

novative and arousing than any other fashion item we can buy, what's hidden beneath your Levi's will say as much or more about you than your outerwear."<sup>11</sup> More than ever, today's types of underwear communicate a sense of fashion and personal style about the man. And there is a significant double meaning in the editor's use of "arousing" — implying both a self-arousal for a man from the caressing, enhancing fit, coupled with the idea of sexually provocative underwear as well as the arousal of a partner to whom he exhibits his choice of underwear.

Swimwear, on the other hand, was dress as communication to the public. Prior to the nineteenth century, the sexes were segregated when using public bathing facilities, such as bath houses, resort spas, and beaches. To go "bathing" in public, women were encumbered with heavy linen or wool chemises or, worse, layers of voluminous garments, including stockings, shoes, and hats, that could cause the unwary to drown. Men, though, enjoyed the freedom of swimming naked. (Figure 5.) As social protocols began to allow an integration of the sexes when swimming in public, men were required to wear bathing attire designed for the sake of modesty at the expense of comfort and practicality. Early swimsuits, such as those described in chapter 2, were modeled on underwear styles, produced first by tailors and, by the late nineteenth century, by mass market ready-to-wear manufacturers. To differentiate bathing suits from underwear, makers edged the tunics and trunks with horizontal stripes, and added superfluous details such as belts, pockets, and additional lengths to swim shirts to serve as modesty skirts.

Although the intent of the swimsuit was modesty, it gradually came to communicate sexuality. Beginning in the 1920s, men's swimwear gradually exposed more and more flesh while appearing to comport with decency mores and laws (particularly in America and England). "The swimsuit constitutes a barometer of standards of sexual and social morality," writes cultural historian Jennifer Craik. "The ongoing skirmish between protocols of modesty and sexual attributes in the history of the swimsuit correlates with the changing shape of the social body."<sup>12</sup> For

example, in the progressive Jazz Age of the 1920s, men's swimwear trunks climbed to the upper thighs and tops were shortened and reduced to little more than a narrow panel over the chest held in place by fabric straps at the sides and across the back. The result was that modesty skirts easily bunched about the hips, exposing the crotch; knit trunks rode high on the hips, lifting and pushing forward the genitals; and tops all too often sagged and shifted, exposing the nipples. Countless vacation photos of the era show men happily posing for the camera and unconcerned with how revealing their disheveled swimsuits were. (Figure 6.) Moreover, there is an undeniable element of exhibition-



Figure 7. Prior to the 1930s, athletic young men often turned down their swimsuit tops in public in defiance of community decency ordinances. Some men wanted a more even suntan, others sought to relieve the discomfort of wet, clinging fabric, and still others were simply youthfully exhibitionistic. Photo c. late 1920s.

ism with swimwear, even in spite of tank style tops and modesty skirts. “Does the swimmer thus dress in the twentieth century to swim or to be seen!” asks costume curator Richard Martin. “To be sure, we all know of those who dress for the beach or pool and for the eyes of beholders, never intending to get wet....Swimwear and spectatorship are indivisible in concept: in sublime form, the lithe swimmer revels in his or her grace in and out of the water.”<sup>13</sup> Among those countless beach photos from the 1920s are many in which young men have scandalously turned down their tops to display athletic torsos and even the navel, such as the young man in Figure 7. Inexorably, decade by decade, men's swimwear was reduced until by the 1970s, the micro bikini thong was introduced—as close to public exhibitionistic nudity as EuroAmerican puritanism would allow.

### **Sense of Self**

In addition to the many purposes of dress discussed above, we also derive a myriad of personal feelings from the clothes we wear. From our earliest days, Langner suggests, dress has provided us with a feeling of self-importance, “which clothing imparted to man in the wearing and the pleasure he derived from this, as

well as from the admiration of his fellow men....His new skin gave him a sense of security and importance such as naked he had never felt.”<sup>14</sup> In looking at the artifacts from millennia of civilizations—the ancient statues, bas reliefs, vase paintings, mosaics, frescoes—we can only imagine the sense of self our ancestors felt when donning clothes that reinforced the comfort of communal belonging, or pride of status, or feelings of virtuous modesty (or perhaps defiant immodesty). In our postmodern EuroAmerican cultures, everyone simply feels good about himself when he knows he looks good, whether this ebullient sense of self is effected by new clothes, a Botox treatment, fresh manscaping, removal of orthodontic braces, or losing weight.

A man's choice in underwear and swimwear also contributes to the various feelings of his sense of self. “What you wear under your clothes is just as important as any other part of your wardrobe, whether or not you are the only person who sees it,” advises the promotional copy for InternationalJock.com. “Underwear is probably the single most functional garment you put on every day and one of the most important factors in whether you feel comfortable in your clothes.”<sup>15</sup> That sense of self from underwear may also extend to feelings of sexuality and desirability when the style is selected with an erotic intent. Or the opposite may be the case—a feeling of chastity and non-eroticism, as with the archaic, utilitarian forms of underwear required within religious groups such as the Mormons and the Amish; or perhaps simply the comfort of conformity, clothing that reinforces a sense of belonging, as when the underwear is a form of regulation military dress.

Likewise, swimwear can cause feelings of exhilarating confidence or demoralizing anxiety, depending upon the individual's feelings about displaying his body in public. The gym rat whose body is fit and toned feels an inner satisfaction and pride with the results of his many hours of workouts; on the other hand, the skinny, ungainly adolescent or obese adult male often suffers from feelings of inferiority on the beach or poolside because EuroAmerican standards of masculine aesthetics value only the trim, athletic physique.

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### **Introduction Notes**

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