



Lingerie and Sexuality: Cultural Influences on the 1920s Woman

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This research explores shifting moral codes and changing undergarments for American women in the 1920s. As moral codes shifted, so did women's understanding of their own sexuality. Lingerie is the most intimate layer of dress, traditionally visible only to the wearer and her closest relations. It therefore plays a critical role in shaping and reflecting experiences and attitudes toward the body, sexual desire, and gender. Existing work in dress and social history of this period focuses on issues like hemlines and contraceptives (Cook 2004), but to date little attention has been given to women's lingerie. My study will include research from scholars in the fields of dress and women's studies, as well as magazine articles, advertisements, films and music of the period to fully capture how both lingerie and sexual matters were discussed and portrayed at the time.

By the 1920s, the first wave of feminism was already firmly entrenched in society. A new generation of feminists were entering society full of their own ideas of what the movement meant. The suffragists of the 1890s were displeased with these new feminists and their concepts of sexuality. Feminists of the nineteenth century privileged "self sovereignty" as the right to refuse sexual intercourse (Johnston 1992). The next generation promoted the right to control their own bodies by embracing sexual activity and pleasure, rather than turning it down. Sex was their form of liberation, whereas those who had come before them were focused on careers and securing political and legal rights.

Scholars of women's dress in the 1920s provide ample evidence of how shortening hemlines and the garçon style connect with shifting social norms regarding female sexuality (Cook 2004). Few address the role of lingerie in this critical period. One notable exception is Scarborough and Hunt-Hurst's (2014) study of the midriff and its development as an erogenous zone. Though focused primarily on dance and theatrical costumes, the discussion is relevant to a consideration of lingerie of the 20s and 30s, given that it too began to bare the midriff (though the question of audience and "performance context" differs significantly). Scarborough and Hunt-Hurst (2014) also mention the practical applications and reasons for the shift to separated undergarments, namely the increased participation of women in sports. My research takes account of this perspective, but makes explicit the link between freedom of movement, increasing sexual freedom, and separated undergarments (i.e. a brassiere and knickers). In short, messages about sex, freedom, and lingerie go hand in hand; all are important to understanding the 1920s woman.

The paper explores these intertwined discourses across visual, print, and performance media. I look at representations of lingerie in pre-color motion pictures. How costumers and filmmakers displayed lingerie uncovers a great deal about how lingerie was viewed at the time. I examine songs from the period to reveal ways in which people were comfortable dealing with and discussing sex. I also look at articles and advertisements for lingerie in popular magazines of the 20s to identify the language they used in relation to lingerie and underwear. Their words in part reflected the views of the time, but they also shaped the way their readers began to view various lingerie styles, their own bodies, and sexual desire. Studying those forms of media together can give a better understanding of the influences women encountered on a day to day basis, and could provide insight into why they might make certain decisions in regards to lingerie. Understanding the daily messages women received about undergarments will enrich our grasp of the complex lives of women in the so-called “roaring” 20s.

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