

Intimacy. The fragility of an ever-evolving concept

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The history of undergarments is necessarily linked to changes in fashion and aesthetic trends, advances in technology and the development of new fabrics, but it is perhaps more fundamentally tied to the evolution of society and the prevailing mentalities of each era. It is difficult, for example, to understand the popularisation of now rudimentary items like the brassiere or tights without first considering the context in which this occurred, with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Similarly, to fully appreciate the rejection of traditional aesthetics by younger generations, which extends to the use of underwear, we must take into account the social revolution and shift in values represented by the hippy, pacifist, feminist and gay rights movements, among others, which emerged across the Western world in the wake of May 1968.

A glance at recent history shows that the appearance and disappearance of common items of underwear coincides with significant economic, political, social and ideological happenings. It is this premise that provides the foundation for the exhibition *Intimitats. Roba interior del segle XIX al XXI*, created by the Badalona Museum in association with the Barcelona Provincial Council's Cultural Heritage Office. The exhibits, first unveiled at the Badalona Museum on 26 February 2015, will travel to various sites in the network of provincial museums until the end of 2017.

In the exhibition, underwear is the platform for a detailed examination of social evolution and changes in our understanding of the concept of *intimacy*, a term that has always borne a relation with *intimate* clothing. It is social convention that draws the line between public and private, that determines what we may share and exhibit without upsetting social mores and codes of civil behaviour.

From the bourgeois capitalist society of the early nineteenth century through to the present day, the six areas of the exhibition chart the events that have helped to shape our collective mentality and our views on underwear. Above all, they demonstrate how the concept of intimacy has evolved. For a lady in early nineteenth century society, secrecy and privacy began at the ankle; leaving even this part of the body exposed would have been considered immodest and



Illustration from the Spanish magazine *La Moda Elegante* (MB).

Peu: Advertisement from 1913 for the brand *Dr. Rasurel* (MB). Men's undergarments were primarily designed with protection and hygiene in mind.



caused considerable social awkwardness. This now seems disproportionate, verging on the ridiculous, and is far removed from the levels of exhibitionism that we see in the twenty-first century, when displaying parts of the body or flashes of underwear has become largely the norm. The various conceptions of intimacy and the local and social distinctions apparent at the end of the nineteenth century bear no relation whatsoever to the uniform, globalised concept that has spread through contemporary society, aided by social media. This new concept marks a substantial change in mind-set, which has narrowed the scope of what we consider intimate to such an extent that very little now remains. This begs a number of questions: What has happened over the centuries? What are the reasons behind such a radical transformation? What do we understand to be intimate?

Portrait of a woman wearing a crinoline, from the year 1868. Badalona Museum. Josep Maria Cuyàs Tolosa Archive.



The corseted intimacy of bourgeois society

Until relatively recent times, fashion — whether for outerwear or underwear — was the exclusive preserve of women, and major changes in attire were closely linked to the shifting role of women in society.

The first signs of change can be found in the late eighteenth century, at the time of the industrial revolution. The protagonists in this new model were the bourgeoisie, who had risen to prominence with the introduction of new forms of government (parliamentary democracy), new systems of production, new means of distraction and a new style of dress. A strict social etiquette emerged that dictated the appropriate behaviour and appearance for each occasion, and the moneyed classes developed a taste for changing their outfits through the course of the day (wealthy women had dresses for the home, for social calls, for afternoon strolls...) as a means of parading their prestige.

While the mentality of the new elite could be considered progressive in many respects, it was far more conservative regarding the role of women, whose activity was limited to the home. In this new society, women were solely responsible for the family's image, its aesthetic reputation, a role that had previously been shared by both sexes. Bourgeois gentlemen chose to dress comfortably and functionally — wearing long trousers, underpants and undershirts — so as not to impede their work, whereas ladies were expected



Although hoop skirts and crinolines gradually fell out of favour, at the beginning of the twentieth century ladies' underwear was still a complicated and uncomfortable affair. The photograph shows a mannequin with undershirt, corset, corset cover, pantelets and tights, from the exhibition *Intimitats. Roba interior del segle XIX al XXI* at the Badalona Museum.

Advertising for Persil detergent for tights, from the 1920s. Tights were among the items that changed most dramatically after the First World War, as skirts grew progressively shorter.



to be resplendent in luxurious and constantly varied wardrobes, condemning them to florid, uncomfortable and highly impractical attire. This was the era of hoop skirts, crinolines, bustles, petticoats and, above all, corsets, which were the cornerstone of female aesthetics throughout the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth. A great variety of new undergarments became available, intended to safeguard the wearer's virtue, and it was around this notion that the concept of intimacy was constructed.

The bourgeois model was notable for extending across the social strata, being based not on lineage but on individual talent and capabilities. Until this time, the manners and customs of the privileged classes had been theirs alone, imitated by those who wished to do so, but the new social norms were applicable to everyone, and imitation became a required practice.

Moving into the second half of the nineteenth century, growing industrialisation, rising production, the birth of a salaried working class and the incorporation of women into factory workforces created a new social phenomenon: mass consumption. The bourgeois lifestyle was now accessible to all, with a wide range of products available at reasonable prices from shops and department stores. The accompanying aesthetic — now well into the realms of fashion — was popularised on the pages of illustrated magazines, and everyone — particularly women — endeavoured to keep up, however uncomfortable some of the outfits turned out to be. Women who dressed practically for their jobs on the factory floor tried to maintain a more fashionable appearance in public, as can be seen in numerous portraits from the period.

Posters advertising the Kestos bra, from the 1930s. The American brand was the first to use shaped cups for support, volume and firmness.



The public intimacy of the twentieth century

Cumbersome and over-adorned undergarments fell out of favour as the static and ornamental model of femininity that they represented disappeared from society. Nevertheless, a crisis of the scale of the First World War was needed to make this change possible. With most men away at the Front, women were required to take on greater responsibilities, which saw them become a more active and more visible part of society. With these responsibilities, however, came a need for greater comfort. There was no longer any place for long skirts, nor was it feasible to wear a corset. The most basic component of a respectable lady's attire had become a hindrance, impeding movement and limiting the wearer's capacity for action. In addition, corsets were made using certain materials, such as steel, that had become vital to the war effort, and in 1917 the American government publicly called for women to stop wearing them in order to shore up the country's steel reserves. The measure was a success, enabling 28,000 tonnes of the metal to be collected for the manufacturing of armaments and munitions. The opportunity that this scenario presented — to move away from the restrictive sartorial model of the past — was seized gratefully by many.

The disappearance of the hoop skirt was much more than a change in aesthetics, it also marked a moral shift. Wearing a hoop skirt was synonymous with decency; a lady could neither dress nor undress unaided. By rejecting the hoop skirt, women regained not only their freedom of movement but also the freedom of their own bodies, and this departure from convention naturally

► Franco was keen to restore sewing as part of the required preparation of future housewives. Pictured is a group of girls on the way to a sewing class at Ca La Teresina, on Carrer de Cadis, Badalona, in around 1950. Badalona Museum. Image Library. L'Abans archive. Vives Ribó family collection.



► Illustration by Peter Cribben from 1953, titled First Mate.





Gay rights demonstration
in New York, 1976.
Photograph: Warren K. Leffler.
United States Library of
Congress.

extended to underwear. For men, many more years will perhaps be needed before the foundations of the traditional male stereotype start to give way.

In later years it was largely women whose freedom would be increased or decreased by successive changes in the social, political or economic climate, causing a constant fluctuation in the control they exerted over their bodies and appearances. For example, while in the United States a new, more sensual and eroticised female image emerged, reinforced by cinema and the birth of the star system, in Spain the opposite was occurring. For some 40 years, the male-dominated and deeply conservative doctrine of the Franco regime, rooted in national Catholicism, relegated women to the home, driving them out of work, education and leisure and subjecting them to a rigid moral code that would dictate both their behaviour and their appearance. Undergarments were a clear reflection of the wearer's *milieu*, and this remains the case today, with the distinction that the new norm is absolute tolerance and permissiveness. Moral qualms have been put aside, although new factors have emerged that are more powerful and decidedly more lucrative, such as consumerism and the cult of the body beautiful.

Male mannequin at the end of the exhibition *Intimitats. Roba interior del segle XIX al XXI*. In recent years men have become more engaged with underwear, and a far wider range of items is now available, including lingerie sets, bras and bodies.



The male world, which has evolved very little in its use of underwear beyond a gradual shift towards shorter underpants and the disappearance of one-piece garments, underwent a significant transformation in the 1960s. The general air of revolt and social demands (conscientious objection, sexual freedom, etc.), fuelled particularly by the homosexual community, changed the male stereotype forever, and men began to take a more active part in the world of *intimacy*. This allowed them to escape the confines of the narrow role society had drawn for them and find a new freedom of action that was also reflected in their choice of underwear, which was no longer merely functional apparel. Men have acquired, then, the right to be different, but, like women, they remain in subjection to consumerism.

On one level, fashion is capable of transforming ideas from the street into sophisticated outfits, but it also has the power to override male reticence, as we see in the growing number of fashion devotees in this age of globalisation: men and women of all ages and backgrounds, from countries across the world, prepared to flaunt or feign intimacy to the beat of the latest trend or social media obsession. ●