

Inventory of the archive of ladies' bras and undergarments Pio Vall "Corsés María" and "Confecciones María" (1915-1940)

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The woman, the enterprise

1 VENTOSA, Silvia: *Modelar el Cos. Treball i vida de les cotillaires de Barcelona*. Ed. Altafulla. p. 70.

Maria Verdaguer Massana was born in Tona in 1893. She married Pio Vall Amblàs, secretary of the Tona Town Council. They had five children. In April 1914, she got her degree as a teacher of *Fitting and Dressmaking* from the Central Martí academy, in Barcelona. In 1915, they set up *Pio Vall*, a company that manufactured ladies' undergarments, marked under the name *Corsés María* and *Confecciones María*. Following the tradition of this sort of family-run business, Maria Verdaguer designed the items, made the patterns and was in charge of the production workshop. She was aware of everything concerning quotes, orders and marketing, issues that her husband Pio Vall was in charge of.¹



Maria Verdaguer Massana surrounded by women she was teaching to sew with her Singer machine, which the family still has in the workshop. 1909. Photo: VALLHOM archive.



Sash/corset. COVALLHOM179.
Photo: R. Figueras.
[See detail.](#)

2 By 1919, this type of bra was already being made, as can be seen in the *Mariver* dossier. VALL (2017).

3 The official website of the Spanish Patent and Trademark Office [<https://bit.ly/3aR8qT2>] shows an invention patent held by Maria Verdaguer with number 66403 for improving on corsets dated 11 February 1918.

4 The family archive includes a letter from 1937 in which Maria Verdaguer asks to have her passport renewed because she would like to travel to Paris, as she had done previously, to find out what was going on there, to benefit her business. The letter is accompanied by one from her husband, Pio Vall, confirming her desire. FIGUERAS (2018).

5 VALLHOM archive. Pio Vall to representative Juan Buxaderas, 1926. FIGUERAS (2018).

The fabrics were imported from France, silk, tulle, blonde, and combined with lace, appliqué and embroidery. They patented different models of bras, including the “globus”², as well as a new system to make better, more hygienic corsets³. She was up to date on the latest fashions, travelling several times to Paris, where she visited fashion boutiques to get inspiration for her pieces.⁴

At a time when undergarments were custom made, by the customer, seamstress or corset-maker, Maria Verdaguer’s company was a pioneer in making pieces in different sizes, which were sold wholesale and distributed to shops. As her family explained, among the Catalan textile impresarios, “*Maria was considered a pioneer in manufacturing bras and corsets.*”

In a document from 1926, Pio Vall told Juan Buxaderas, the company’s representative in Melilla, “*There are bras that, in addition to the measurement, have another size, which is 1, 2, 3, etc. and this is the size of the breast.*”⁵ The company had representatives all over Spain, including Madrid, Valencia and Barcelona, and also exported its wares to Cuba, the Philippines and Shanghai.

The Spanish Civil War disrupted business. We can consider the time before the war to be one period and the rest, after, when the company gradually reinvented itself, marketing its products under other brands, including *Mariver*. The collaboration of their children was invaluable to this process. Here we will look at the early days of the company.

Inventory

Given the Vall Hom family’s interest in raising awareness of Maria Verdaguer and, by extension, the company, which was in business for over 70 years, we took a first look at the pieces that were still in the old workshop on Carrer Major in Tona. The contents make up an interesting archive, which includes the family’s documents. This first approach to the material showed that there were

6 My sincerest thanks to Silvia Carbonell, director of the Centre for Documentation and Textile Museum, and Mercè López, museum curator, for their unconditional help.

7 Corsets refers to pieces that were closed in the front with buttons or hook-and-eye closures and laced up in back, as well as those that were laced up through eyes on the back. Corsets is *cossets* in Catalan and *corpiños* in Spanish. In contrast to what could properly be called a bra.

orders placed by representatives, to suppliers, invoices, drawings by Pio Vall and Maria, among other information.

After screening the material, this inventory focused on the first pieces from the samples Maria Verdaguer herself had saved under the name: “... *peces d’abans de la guerra* ...” (pieces from before the war). These pieces are dated between 1915 and 1940. There are 246 in total. The study was done at the Centre for Documentation and Textile Museum of Terrassa.⁶

The inventory included labelling each piece with a reference number, taking note of the measurements and writing a description, with the type of materials and state of preservation. This information was compiled in a database. Each piece was documented graphically in three images. After this process of entering all of the pieces was complete, they were put into boxes lined with special paper in order to store them in the best possible conditions. In total, there are 246 pieces that have been studied, including 215 bras, 21 corsets⁷, 4 chemises, 3 girdles, 2 suspender belts and 1 pair of stockings.

Seen as a whole, the fabrics include: cotton, blonde, organdie, satin, silk, taffeta, knit, tulle, etc. There are also pieces made with entredeux.

In this period, colour was beginning to appear on undergarments. Previously, the dominant colour by far was the natural tone of the fabric, to which colours like pink and beige were added. Later on, there came blues, salmon and yellow. In this inventory, pink and salmon were dominant. The rest of the pieces were natural, beige, blue, cream, nude, light brown, purple, black and flower print.

The collection includes necklines with scallop stitching with open-stitch embroidery, finished with the same fabric, with a thin line of stitching, welt, tulle edging, zigzag, etc. The sides normally use the same system. The bottom of the pieces is often finished with a sateen band, or several rows of stitches, but there are also pieces with simply finished edges, with backstitching or a thin strip of backing inside. Many have one thing in common, the straps are made of passementerie tape in satin, silk or any other sort of fancy fabric.

Most of the bras have elastic hook-and-eye clasps, and mother-of-pearl or bakelite buttons, as well as fabric hooks. Some of the older pieces have metal or thread eyes, which were laced up, as we also see on some of the chemises.

As these pieces were used for displays, many have the pattern number on a tag, which are: round metal attached with a pin or cardboard with a metal eye, on the older pieces, and adhesive labels, labels pinned on or sewed into the piece. Sometimes, when there isn’t a label, the pattern number is written in blue or red ink or in pencil. They usually have additional information, such as the price per unit or dozen and even in some cases the colours available. This made it easier for the representatives.



Example of “globus”
bra. COVALLHOM046.
Photo: R. Figueras.

“Globus” bra

This type of bra, as the family explains, was made from 1919. We know it was patented. The company regularly patented bras and other dressmaking elements in this period. The pattern for the “globus” bra was very simple. It was normally composed of four symmetrical pieces, one round piece that encircled the breast with darts to make it puff out, which would be the cup, and a long band. They were made in all possible variants.

We can say that nearly 99% of the pieces are in excellent conditions. The few issues found include: loose stitches, openings in the fabric, holes and small stains. Their conditions are surprising, in fact, as they are between 78 and 90 years old.

Selection and dating

Documenting the pieces in this inventory also gave us more precise dates, from the note Maria Verdaguier herself had left saying they were “...*pieces from before the war...*”.

The company’s first years coincided with the first bras, simple with the purpose of hiding, flattening the breasts, in line with the fashion of that time, and the chemise-pants that would later become slips. The lowest pattern numbers, on the labels, are found on the oldest pieces. The main fabrics are poplin (H), batiste (B)⁸ and tulle. At this point they are corselets, with double claps in front with fabric eyes and mother-of-pearl buttons and eyes in back. In some cases, they have boning and the simple pattern of the bra has a sort of open-stitch embroidery to decorate the piece or is finished with scallop stitching. There are models that use the “globus” type pattern to highlight the bust: bras, corselets and chemises from the 1920s. The colours are mainly natural, pink and salmon is beginning to be introduced.

⁸ “...La tela popelín se indica abreviada con una H, y la batista con B...” (Poplin fabric was abbreviated with an H and batiste with a B) Pio Vall explained to his representative in Melilla, Juan Buxaderas, in a documented dated in Tona on 23 May 1926. FIGUERAS (2018).

► Corselet. COVALLHOM001.
Photo: R. Figueras.



▲ Band-style bra. COVALLHOM070.
Photo: R. Figueras.

► Shirt/trousers. This used the same system improving on corsets to remove the boning, making it easier to wash the item. COVALLHOM213.
Photo: R. Figueras.



Shirt/bodysuit with open back,
dated 1934. COVALLHOM215.
Photo: R. Figueras.



9 GAVARRÓN, Lola: *Piel de ángel*. Tusquets ed. p. 218.

In the late 1920s, around 1928, stockings move upward and garters were replaced by suspender belts⁹. The inventory includes two examples that curiously were worn with bras made of the same type of passementerie: in green print crepe with a grosgrain ribbon.

As the 1930s advanced, the bra patterns became more complex yet also more polished, finished with quicker solutions: the fabric eyes were replaced with elastic ones, the bottom finished in sateen ribbon, which is much easier to put on. The corselet gradually disappeared. In addition to basic fabrics like cotton and tulle, at this point the most noteworthy types were: knit, blonde, satin,



► Model patented in 1931.
COVALLHOM041.
Photo: R. Figueras.

► Model registered in 1940.
COVALLHOM024.
Photo: R. Figueras.



as well as some pieces in crepe, with every possible combination. There are bras that could have been inspired by those of the Kestos brand, shaped like a triangle with crossed bands. Bras made with entredeux, very common at that time, and a chemise/bodysuit labelled 1934 with an open back. This was when dresses with open backs became popular.

The inventory of these 246 pieces gives us a first look at the undergarments that were worn between 1918 and the 1930s. At that point, both inner and outerwear changed radically. Corsets and shifts began to disappear, giving way to other types of undergarments that were more suited to the outerwear of the time. Lighter, more appropriate for the needs of women in those years. ●

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