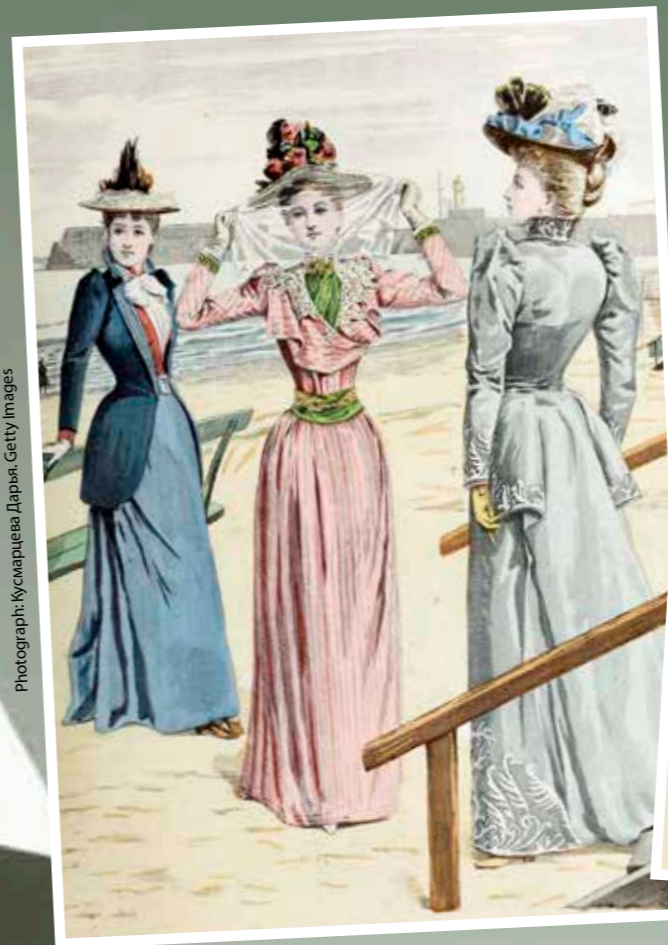




# The evolution of the Swimsuit

From a time of toe-dipping to Olympic swimmers, **Michelle Rowley** dives into the history of the garment making a splash

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Whether it's to wear for simply lazing in the sun (in my case) or for chalking up the lengths at your local pool, most of us have worn a swimming costume of some description in our lifetime. I can still envisage the bright yellow all-in-one swimsuit I wore for primary school swimming lessons, which horror of horrors went see-through on contact with water! Thankfully today I'm in control of the swimwear I wear and as I sew it myself, I know the fabric, fit and coverage are exactly to my liking. For many women over the years, the accessibility of a comfortable and practical outfit for swimming hasn't always been so easy.

## CHANGING TIMES

Like all areas of fashion, swimwear has evolved with the changes in societal practices, expectations and demands. As our relationship with swimming and holidaying has changed over time, so have the clothes we wear to enjoy these activities. The notion of swimwear didn't exist when people were only publicly entering the sea to dip their toes, with women simply slightly lifting their dresses to do so. In the 18th century the

health benefits of exposing the body to the shockingly cold waters of the British seas were heavily promoted. With the advice that the icy chill would promote blood circulation and stimulate the body and soul, bathing in the sea became fashionable: leading to the need for something to wear. Bathing costumes of the 1700s were loose wool or flannel gowns, accompanied with bloomer style trousers and stockings. Unsurprisingly, these cumbersome outfits became incredibly

*Costumes of the 1700s were wool or flannel gowns with trousers and stockings*

heavy in water and served better to protect modesty rather than be conducive to swimming. In recent years, we've seen a resurgence in the popularity of cold-water swimming for health benefits. Fortunately, those participating today have advances in heat-tec fabric technology and streamline design to make the activity much more manageable. The dry robe, designed for use after cold water swimming but now

Above **The notion of swimwear didn't exist when people were only dipping their toes. But as bathing become popular costumes evolved.**

ubiquitous on school playgrounds, football pitch side-lines and even the high street, is the perfect modern-day example of how pastime trends influence fashion.

## SEASIDE HOLIDAYS

The popularity of bathing in the sea continued into the 19th century, now not only for health but also for fun. The coasts had become more accessible, thanks to the new transport links of the industrial revolution and so began the seaside holiday. However, holiday or not, swimwear still needed to meet the Victorian standards of modest dress. Besides shorter sleeves to aid more freedom of movement, little else changed for women's swimwear until the end of the 1800s. By this point, the outfits themselves had also become shorter and sometimes the stockings were gone. "Women's bathing suits were usually of wool or cotton jersey in blues and reds with jaunty sailor collars, maritime piping and the occasional anchor motif. The basic design consisted of all-in-one combinations with buttons which held an attached wrap around knee length skirt in place," explains fashion historian Lucy Adlington, in her insightful



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book *Stitches in Time*. “Victorian bathing costumes are a sight to behold, but must have been a nightmare to swim in,” Adlington remarks.

### GROUND-BREAKING DESIGNS

As the early 1900s became more liberal, it paved the way for clothing manufacturers to make advances in fabric technology, which alongside a global event revolutionised swimwear. The event? The 1912 Stockholm Olympic Games. For the first time women were allowed to compete in swimming and did so in one-piece swimsuits which exposed the arms and finished mid-thigh. They somewhat resemble the unitards, currently popular on fast fashion websites, that my young teenage daughters want simply for walking around in.

*In the 30s film producers included as many swimwear scenes as possible*

### DEMAND GREW

In 1913 Jantzen, originally the Portland Knitting Company, became the first company dedicated to making women’s swimwear. The company produced rib-stitch swimsuits which weighed eight pounds when wet. While at the time these were much lighter than previous swimwear options, that’s still the weight of a new-born baby!

As swimming became more popular, thanks in part to heavy promotion of the

sport by Jantzen, the demand for comfortable and stylish swimwear grew. Such growing demand led to textile manufacturers competing to create innovative fabrics and designs and by 1925 Lastex, an elastic yarn, helped swimsuits keep their shape.

“Women’s fashions of the Twenties revealed more of their body than ever before; so did their swimwear,” says Lucy Adlington. Although still modest by today’s designs, the swimsuits had lower cut fronts, deeper armholes, no

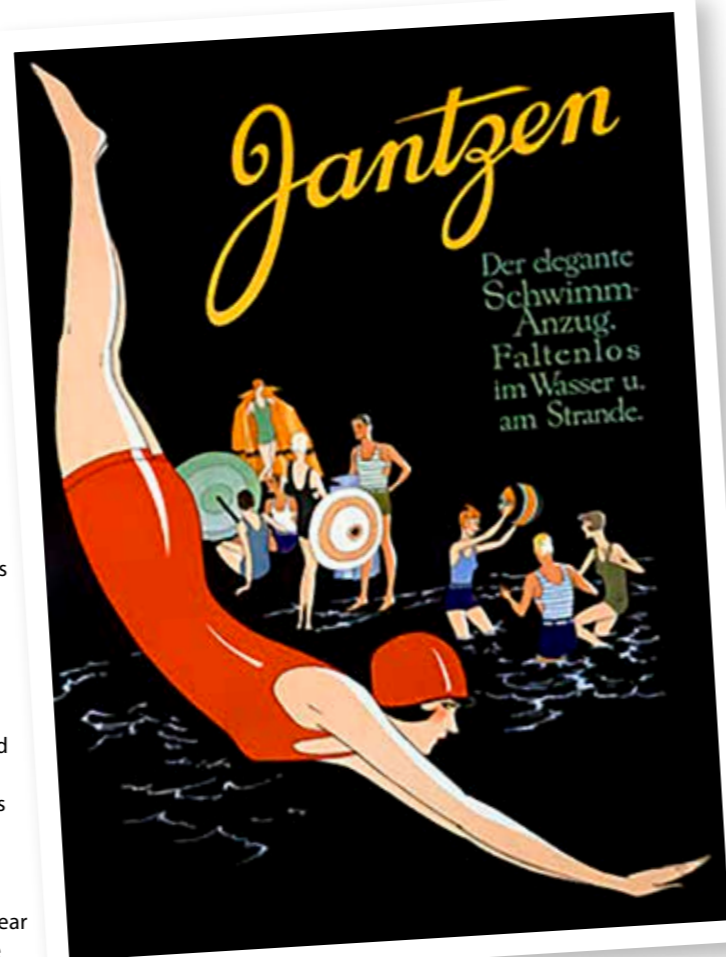
sleeves and shorter trunks. However, when Speedo Knitting Mills launched a swimming costume with narrow straps and a low back (racerback) it was

deemed too revealing, despite being no more backless than the gowns of the time.

### HOLLYWOOD STYLE

In the 1930s, with lingerie not permitted on the silver screen, Hollywood film producers and script writers included as many swimwear scenes as possible to entice cinemagoers. As the glamorous stars modelled ever more innovative, waterproof and figure-hugging swimwear designs, women desired to emulate the

Above left **The advancement of fabric revolutionised swimwear.** Below **In 1913 Jantzen became the first company dedicated to making women’s swimwear.**



screen idols. Swimwear began to be not only for swimming in but also for being seen in. Before the Second World War started to impact fabric supplies, swimsuits resembled the tight short dresses worn for a night on the town today.

### THE TWO-PIECE

As fabric rationing came into force, innovative ways to reduce the amount of fabric in swimwear were required, such as strapless sweetheart necklines and halter neck styles. Removing fabric from the midriff would save the most fabric and so the two-piece swimsuit evolved. Although still covering the navel, the sweetheart neckline two-pieces revealed more of the figure than ever before and became a staple of the 1940s pin-up girl’s wardrobe as they boosted the morale of soldiers. For those on a tighter budget, impractical home knitted costumes had to suffice.

*For those on a tighter budget, home knitted costumes had to suffice*

### SCREEN BOMBSHELLS

Hollywood remained the key source for swimwear inspiration in the 1950s, with swimsuits designed to accentuate the hourglass figures of the screen bombshells. “Costumes were heavily structured with pads, boning and elasticated panels to achieve such an ideal,” explains Lucy

Adlington. During this decade, advances in swimwear fabrics enabled swimming costumes to evolve both decoratively and performatively. Swimsuits could now be made in a wider range of colours and prints, for which there was a growing demand. “Bright prints reflected post-war optimism. Ethnic patterns reflected new opportunities for passenger air travel and cheap package holidays,” writes Adlington. Meanwhile, the new fabric nylon, with its shape retaining and quick drying properties, “created a swimwear revolution.”

### FABRIC DEVELOPMENT

The next fabric development to have such an impact on swimwear would be the introduction of elastane to swimsuits in the early 1970s, which reduced the

need for the internal shaping of the 1950s. Today fabric manufacturers continue to strive for ever better invisible shaping technology while thankfully also focusing on the arguably more important issue of sustainability. Regardless of the cut or fabric, a one-piece swimsuit has remained a classic. Those of a minimalist design in a solid colour (think Pamela Anderson’s iconic red *Baywatch* cossie of the ‘90s) look set to be the style of this summer. I’d just advise steering away from one made in transparent yellow!



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