

Bathing Suit Fashions in the 1920s

As in our own time, styles did not change overnight from one day to the next between the 1910s and the 1920s. Bathing suits popular during the second decade of the 20th-century disappeared in the 1920s by degrees as they were worn out or their owners decided to replace them with new, up-to-date designs. The photo to the right, of contestants in Galveston's first Beach Revue in 1920 shows the variety of swimwear styles popular at the time. The exuberance of the 1920s was manifested in the array of colors and applied decorative details that abounded on bathing suits, especially at the beginning of the decade.



1920 Contestants in Galveston's First Beach Revue
Image: Galveston Historical Foundation

Despite increasingly liberal attitudes in the 1920s the battle to liberate women, and to a lesser degree men, from conservative legislation that restricted how much of their arms and legs they could display on the beach was far from won. As noted in an article that appears on the *Rare Historical Photos* website, "In the early 1900s, modesty laws were very strict and required most women to wear long one piece garments as well as stockings. Even the men without shirts were banned from the beaches in Atlantic City, New Jersey, the reason being that the city didn't want "gorillas on our beaches'." As seen in the photos presented to the left police were charged with enforcing laws, and would arrest offenders if they failed to comply with restrictions.



Original title: Col. Sherrell, Supt. of Public Buildings and Grounds, has issued an order that bathing suits at the Wash[ington] bathing beach must not be over six inches above the knee.

Source: National Photo Company Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Eventually, changing mores, and pressure from the public, resulted in the repeal of outmoded modesty laws. At the same time a long held belief that bathing at the sea was mainly for health purposes gave way to an acknowledgment of the fact that it was truly a leisure activity. People went to the shore to have fun.

The first alteration in bathing suit design was related with the disappearance of the arms on swimwear. This was followed by a drop in necklines from the throat to the top of the bosom. Finally the length of the suits grew shorter, rising from the knee to mid-thigh.



In Chicago a woman is being arrested for defying a Chicago edict banning "abbreviated bathing suits" on beaches. 1922.



Parasols, Head Coverings, and Shoes

In the 1920s the parasol became an indispensable accessory for fashionable women at American coastal resorts. Although elegant fabric parasols were used commonly in the 19th-century, to shield ladies from the effects of the sun, a type new to America, made from bamboo and paper or silk, and imported from the Far East, came into vogue at this time. These parasols were affordable, colorful, and versatile. Available in a range of sizes, they were adorned with paintings of flowers, butterflies, peacocks, mythological beasts, and geometric patterns. They appeared everywhere; in fashion photographs, on posters and magazine covers, in the hands of silent film stars, and in innumerable casual snapshots.



The function of the parasol began to change during the 1920s. Rather than serving primarily as sun shades, their role became increasingly decorative. This evolution was an outgrowth of a trend that is supposed to have begun with the chic, French clothing designer, Coco Chanel. Always on the vanguard of style, Chanel popularized tanning among women. In sharp contrast to the past when a complexion untouched by the sun was viewed as a symbol of upper-class refinement, the warm, bronze skin tones that gained acceptance among both men and women in the 1920s became a mark of the leisure class that partook of healthy outdoor athletic activities like golf and tennis. Concurrent with the new attitude toward tans resorts, which had formerly served as playgrounds for wealthy patrons escaping from cold northern climates during the winter months, became popular summer destinations for celebrities and wealthy clients.



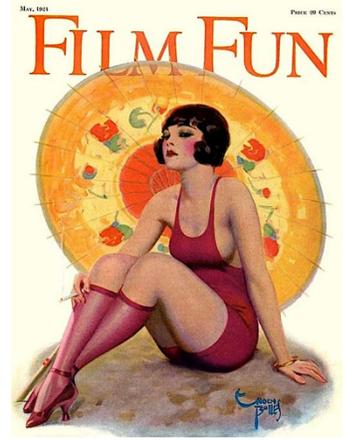
In the 1920s women traded in the dowdy mop caps, and other less fashionable beach hats worn in previous decades for berets, fitted caps, and the ubiquitous headscarf. In order to make sure that they wore their scarves properly to achieve the most flattering effect, instructions like those appearing to the right about how to tie them appeared in publications during the period.



1926, how to tie a scarf like a Turban
Linea Germanisa, "Hollywood, Scarves, & the 1920s" December 31, 2018 Jalyn Eaton



The illustrations on this and the previous page provide evidence that shoes and stockings continued to be popular on beaches during the 1920s. In the case of stockings they took on decidedly sexier overtones. Hard as it is to believe pumps were common as were flat cloth shoes and foot coverings resembling ballet slippers. Shoes would remain popular into the 1930s.



Men's swimwear during the 1920s became lighter due to improved knitting technology. When wet, however, their wool suits still weighed as much as eight pounds and could sag and cling with embarrassing results. Modesty was required of men as specified in the "Bathing Suit Regulations" published on May 17, 1917. According to these laws men's suits had to be worn with a skirt or have at least a skirt effect and the skirt had to be worn outside of the trunks. The other alternative available to men was flannel knee pants with a vest and a fly front.

One-piece suits prevailed. Shorts were attached to a tank-like top that covered the legs of the bathing suits. Swimwear took on a sleeker appearance than the bathing suits worn in the 1910s although they remained sober in terms of color and decoration. Occasionally bathing suits were "trimmed" in stripes at the bottom edge of the skirt.



As seen in the photograph to the left swimsuits worn by men and women, especially later in the decade, were essentially unisex in their styling. They stretched to the contours of the body as needed. The major difference between them was that the men's bathing suits was cut lower on the sides and in the back.

In 1930 the fashion photographer George Hoyningen-Huene composed one of his most famous works, *The Divers*, which features a man and a woman sitting on a diving board facing away from the camera. This

ageless image captures the essence of this unique moment in fashion history when unisex style swimwear was in vogue.



The Divers 1930 by George Hoyningen-Huene

Sunglasses

Ways to modify the glare of sunlight have existed for thousands of years. Prehistoric Inuits peoples living in the far north crafted flat walrus ivory shades to protect their eyes from the sun, and it is said that the emperor Nero viewed bloody contests in the Roman Coliseum through the cooling filter provided emeralds.



Modern, mass-produced sunglasses were marketed for the first time in 1929. Introduced to the public by a man named Sam Foster they were sold under the name “Foster Grant” at a Woolworth’s store on the boardwalk in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Foster’s shades soon became a hot fashion item and an indispensable accessory. Initially adopted by movie stars and celebrities, sunglasses became a “must have” on America’s beaches. The original version was unisex and featured round lenses. They retained this shape well into the 1930s.



Four winners of the Splash Sunday Parade Treasure Island, Galveston, Texas mid 1920s

Casual “snapshots”, made possible as a result of Kodak’s widely popular Brownie” line of cameras, provide us with innumerable images of people cavorting by the side of the sea. Except for their swimwear they look to beach goers today. They convey a casual ease and a sense of fun.

Magazines Covers in the 1920s

Illustrations related to the beach and summer, which appeared on magazine covers in the 1920s, present us with intriguing glimpses of male/female relationships at the time - at least in the way publishers chose to present them. These images, created by talented, perceptive artists, are often funny, tongue in cheek, commentaries on human foibles that also happen to provide us with pictures of sleek new beach fashions for women. *Judge* magazine (1881 – 1947), a sophisticated satirical weekly that included articles about current events, society, politics and culture led the way with a large number of issues that presented illustrations of young women on their summer covers.

The females presented are almost all beautiful, liberated sophisticates. They are portrayed as everything from sexy to serious. Far from being wide-eyed ingénues these women are athletes, vamps, coquettes, carefree flappers, and in one instance the victim of too much sun while working on her tan. Their bathing suits are colorful and form-fitting to show off their great figures, and their shoes, stockings, headwear, parasols and cloaks/beach towels provide perfect compliments to their swimwear. They are conscious of their sexual appeal and the power it gives them.

It is amusing to note that in two of the rare covers where men are shown as active players on the scene (they are muscular lifeguards), one from *The Saturday Evening Post*, and another from *Judge*, these males see immediately through the “helpless damsel in distress” ploy women have adopted to get their attention. The guys know the gals are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves. The women are not meek, shy, and retiring. They have simply identified something they want (the men) and they are out to get it. These women are strong competitive fighters. One cover, *Judge’s* “Prize Fight” issue of September 1923, shows a woman in a purple bathing suit wearing boxing gloves who has just decked a man. The caption under the illustration reads “The Wedding Ring”. It is clear who is in control.

