Beach Fashions in the 1930s

The stock market crash on Tuesday, October 29, 1929, and the subsequent deterioration in the value of business assets over the following three years, had a devastating impact on the economies of United States and the world at large. The high flying, care-free days of the Roaring ‘20s were over and with them went the risk taking and pushing of boundaries that characterized the lives of people during the decade. The Great Depression had begun and would continue for ten years.

Spending on luxuries declined as disposable cash became scarce and people grew more fiscally conservative. Concern about employment and their long term financial prospects became paramount as the atmosphere of the country became serious and sober. Businesses closed and jobs were cut by many companies due to falling demand for their products. This caused a domino effect that resulted in economic stagnation and the deep economic depression.

Fortunately the pleasures derived from time spent on the beach remained an affordable and welcome means of escape from the harsh realities of everyday life. The cover of the September 3, 1932 issue of The Saturday Evening Post presented above shows a rollicking image of life at the shore at the close of summer on Labor Day Weekend. The lifeguard sits calmly on his stand, eyes closed, while pretty girls preen, an amorous swain serenades his gal who is attired in the latest “beach pajamas”, boys play leapfrog, dogs bark, babies shovel sand into pales and bathers, both large and small, hold on to a rope to save them from being knocked over by waves. Days are sunny and times are good, at least at the seashore. Visitors flocked to Galveston during the decade and, and partook in the same activities, along with the age old guilty pleasure of people watching. The illustrations to the right, taken from the Glamoursurf website, present amusing images of envious glances on the beach during the 1930s.

Fashion felt the impact of a number of important influences during the decade. These included technological innovations in the production of swimwear, increasing acceptance of sunbathing and the loosening of modesty restrictions, and power on Hollywood on popular culture.
At the beginning of the 1930s the silhouette of bathing suits worn by men and women were very similar. Although this similarity diverged within a few years, in the early part of the decade there was an emphasis on men developing muscular, lean physiques. This was matched by a similar trend for women to enhance the slim boyish shapes popular in the 1920s with a more athletic figures and a fuller bust. Swimsuits were cut to show off more leg and more back skin than ever before. The thin straps also made the shoulders appear broader and more athletic. It became what we know as the swimsuit today.

Technological Innovation & Emulating Celebrities

Three of the top names in American swimwear all started out as knitwear companies. Portland Knitting Mills became Jantzen, West Coast Knitting mills made the Cole of California swimsuits and Catalina swimwear was produced by Bentz Knitting Mills, later to rename themselves Pacific Knitting Mills.

Despite the pre-eminence of earlier entrants in the field of swimwear, another company, Mabs of Hollywood, led the way in making knitted wool bathing suits a thing of the past in the 1930s when it began to fashion swimwear from Lastex, a woven satin finish elastic and silk material first used in the manufacturing of girdles could be made of cotton or Rayon. More comfortable against the skin, Lastex eliminated the stretching, sagging, and weight that were unavoidable characteristics of wet wool and it offered manufacturers the opportunity to build in support, in the form of bras and girdles sought by segments of the beachwear market. The other big swimwear companies followed suit and developed and patented their own forms of Lastex.

In a savvy marketing move Mabs ensured its success by making swimsuits for Joan Crawford, Loretta Young, and Jean Harlow, three of the movie industry’s leading ladies at the time. Young later modeled appeared in an advertisement for Jantzen. Not to be eclipsed by her competition on the silver screen Marlene Dietrich soon ordered a dozen of the Lastex suits in an array of colors. An adoring public, which followed developments in the lives of Hollywood personalities closely, soon learned about of the breakthrough in swimwear through photographs and stories about stars printed in tabloids and movie magazines. Anxious to emulate celebrities, in their figure worshipping bathing suites, the public clamored to buy swimwear made from the new material.
Beach Pajamas

Beach pajamas, like sun tans in the 1920s, were another innovation of the fashion icon Coco Chanel. Although they were designed by Chanel in 1922, these wide legged ensembles were worn almost exclusively by women while yachting until the following decade. After that they grew in popularity as “resort” wear until they appeared on beaches in both Europe and the United States. They were widely adopted by American women who wore them in imitation of their favorite movie stars, like Ann Southern, pictured to the right. Beach pajamas were frequently paired with open sandals, the ageless Mexican huaraches, and wide brim hats. These ensembles were cool and comfortable and provided an easy transition from the seashore or pool to social events. Although paper parasols remained common accessories at the beach they appear less frequently than they did in the 1920s. In addition, women’s footwear generally became more comfortable and stockings generally disappeared. A fashion sense, transferable to street wear, gained popularity during the decade.

The New Yorker cover from August 26, 1933, re-produced to the left, presents an image of contemporary life at a seaside soda fountain. It seems as contemporary as a cartoon drawn yesterday although it is nearly 80 years old.
Men’s Swimwear

In the 1930s men’s swimwear began to expose a good deal more skin than it had in the 1920s. The skirt that covered the shorts disappeared and the openings for the arms and head that had begun growing bigger in the previous decade became distinct cutaways that served to reveal the back, sides and upper chest. Ultimately a lean, muscular, athletic look became the ideal.

A big innovation hit the market in 1933 when Jantzen introduced its “Topper”, a men's swimsuit with a detachable racerback top, fastened with a zipper in the front that allowed the wearer the freedom to go bare-chested. It is remarkable how similar swimwear for men and women had become by this time. Although there was never any question of American women baring their bosoms, the photograph to the right of the actress/ingénue Mary Carlisle taken 1934, gives a clear indication of how nearly indistinguishable they were.

Around the same time that the Topper hit the market BVD, a maker of men's underwear, introduced a line of men's swimwear designed by Olympic swimming champion Johnny Weismuller. The new BVD suit was a tight-fitting one piece with a top made of a series of thin straps that exposed much of the chest, while still remaining within the legal guidelines.

In the summer of 1936 a male "no shirt movement" led many men to protest chest-covering requirements. Although topless men were banned from beaches from Atlantic City, New Jersey, to Galveston, Texas, they eventually swayed the legislature, and by 1937 it was legal for men to appear in public wearing only swim trunks. The photograph below of tennis star, Fred Perry with actress Marlene Dietrich, shows Perry sporting the new topless look soon after it became legal.

Traditional one-piece and Topper swimwear went out of vogue in the late 1930s. The decline in popularity of these old fashioned suits coincided with the adoption of fashion accessories by men that included beach shoes and robes in flannel or terry cloth. The robes were manufactured in solid colors, stripes, and tropical prints. Men’s shoes generally took the form of espadrilles, with tops made from canvas and flexible soles made from rope. Footwear like this was to remain popular for some time while the robes would ultimately be replace in the 1950s with matched ensembles of trunks and tops named cabana sets.