

ON FASHION

**Rod Hagwood**[Back to recent columns](#)**Undies, over and out**

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I'm not sure which government agency decides these things, but word has it the industry is petitioning for Aug. 13 to become National Underwear Day.

Why underwear? And why now?

Well, the now is simple: It's so hot in August that the only clothing we want to wear is underwear. Personally, I've been living in boxer shorts and tank tops since Independence Day ... but that isn't entirely helpful information, is it? Seriously though, we spend more than \$12 billion on underwear in this country. Why not now?

But the former question -- why underwear? -- is a larger issue. Foundation garments (as they used to be called back-in-the-day) leapt to the forefront of pop culture during the '80s.

And you can give most of the thanks to Calvin Klein and Madonna. Klein, through brilliant marketing, made it OK for men to care about their underthings (ultimately leading to the frenetic Joe Boxer line). Madonna took over from there, and the fashion world has been reinterpreting her mantra ever since: Make the unmentionable mentionable. Together Klein and Madonna showed us that dainty things could make a strong statement.

But pop culture didn't always do underwear a favor. For example, back in 1938, Clark Gable stripped in front of Claudette Colbert and revealed he wasn't wearing an undershirt in *It Happened One Night*. That chest-baring caused undershirt sales to plummet for two years. And for the first time, film influenced run-of-the-mill garments, rather than highfalutin designer dresses and elegant ball gowns.

For women, the radical change came in the free-lovin' '60s with the advent of denim jeans as America's major contribution to global style. Tricked-up, complicated, uncomfortable restrictive girdles and brassieres just didn't cut it with casual jeans and T-shirts. But it was still under wear. By the late 1990s you could see -- literally -- smallish more ergonomic hipsters, low-riders, thongs (OK, not always comfy), camisoles, tees, bralettes and sport bras.

And today, women's undergarments are a romantic redux mixed with sporty

sexiness. Mannish looks, minimalist styles and aggressive animal prints can stay at the bottom of the hamper. Vintage-looking florals in retro appliques or sheer patterns are what's hot down under now. Even boy-cut panties and unisex tanks have been femmed-up with pretty pastels and scalloped or ruffled edges.

Ironically and conversely, binding corsets are still a runway favorite, even though it has been two years since *Moulin Rouge*. There's something about the shape that they give (even when made of more forgiving textiles such as Lycra or spandex instead of whalebone) that keeps corsets fashionable generation after generation.

What other fashion item has survived from the Victorian age? Bustles?

I don't think so.

Teddies and T's trivia

- During the 1700s women and men wore chemises, an elongated shirt with short sleeves. Underpants were not common, even among the upper classes.
- In the late 1700s and early 1800s, long underpants were gaining popularity, but a shortened version, similar to what we now wear, wasn't developed until the middle of the 1900s.
- The term "drawers" originated from the drawstring that was sewn into underpants manufactured in 1791.
- The term lingerie comes from the French word *linge*, meaning linen.
- The modern bra was invented by a New York socialite named Mary Phelps Jacob back in 1913. She took two handkerchiefs, ribbon and some cord and devised a simple backless brassiere, which she patented in 1914.
- The first significant advancement in men's underwear technology was the creation of the Jockey Y-vent brief in 1934. This was the first time a truly functional vent was applied to boxers and briefs.
- Men spend about \$3.4 billion annually on underwear.
- Women spend about \$8.6 billion annually on underwear.
- Percentage of men who shop online for their underwear: 14 percent
- Percentage of women who shop online for their underwear: 21 percent
- Percentage of women who never attempt to keep their panties from showing: 57 percent
- Percentage of men who have tried on women's underwear: 73 percent
- Percentage of men who would like to wear g-strings, but never have: 45 percent

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