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CULTURAL STUDIES

When Did Skivvies Get Rated NC-17?



Norman Y. Lono for The New York Times

A new wave of men's briefs designed to accentuate every contour has made underwear departments, like the one at Macy's, resemble sex shops in the old Times Square.

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John Lei for The New York Times

The days of grabbing a three-pack near the power tools are over, as stores like Saks, carry sexier underwear by makers like 2(x)ist.

freshpair

PRESS COVERAGE

LET it be noted that there was a time when buying a pair of men's underpants was a simple matter of grabbing a three-pack of something in one's waist size from a shelf near the hardware department at Sears. What little decision was required involved simple choices between boxers or briefs. In the days before Calvin Klein came along to seduce men into becoming unwitting consumers of personal lingerie, there was little reason to think about stuff like microfibers or combed pima cotton, forget skivvies engineered along the lines of the push-up bra.

That was all a very long time ago. Anybody who hasn't visited the men's underwear section of a department store lately may be in for a shock. Where once there were limited, discreetly shelved selections of what Victorians termed "unmentionables," there is now a welter of choices offered in displays so unabashedly raunchy they practically call out for some form of ratings system or, at the minimum, parental controls.

There are briefs and boxer briefs and "action bikinis" and "athletic strings" and shorts with breathable mesh pouches or waistband condom pockets, and even a new brand called C-IN2 with patented "sling support" designed, in the words of its manufacturer, to "lift, project forward and improve the wearer's profile." And, alas, there are thongs.

That the men who model for the packages containing these garments seem universally blessed with the proportions of pornographic film stars suggests that there may be more customers than one had imagined for those e-mailed spam messages offering "masculine enhancement."



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times
2(x)ist.



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times
Adam + Eve poses some models on its packaging not wearing any underwear at all.

"Something it is important to mention with tact," said Claudine Gumbel, a spokeswoman for 2(x)ist, one of the more successful recent brands of designer underwear, "is that 2(x)ist models are very well endowed." 2(x)ist, Ms. Gumbel added, is "a very manly collection of underwear and the director thinks this is an important element."

Indeed it appears to be. What began modestly enough in the early 80's, when Calvin Klein first photographed men in ways that made it acceptable to use sex to sell Y-fronts and incidentally gave Americans permission to ogle the male physique, has expanded to an almost comically lurid degree.

The proliferation of new products not only from upstarts like 2(x)ist and Baskit but also more traditional brands like Hanro and Hugo Boss compete furiously to pitch their goods by using voluptuous lighting and moody graphics to delineate men's behinds and other anatomical contours as though they were features in a heroic landscape. It is no exaggeration to say that there are underwear boxes out there that make a man's crotch look as monumental as an Ansel Adams picture of El Capitan.

"Sex-oriented underwear is probably a fairly small proportion of the market nationally," said Arnold Karr, the executive editor of the men's wear trade publication DNR, referring to the revealing styles. Their impact on the \$13-billion-a-year underwear market is nowhere near as substantial as white cotton basics like Hanes and Fruit of the Loom. Nevertheless, at the department store level their presence is overwhelming and their market share, said Mr. Karr, correspondingly large.

The reasons are simple enough to comprehend. In the decades since the first Calvin Klein ads, men have been substantially feminized and also have genially adapted to their transformation into objects of an erotic gaze.

"That early Calvin ad was the first time you really saw that guy in packaging and advertising," said Sam Shahid, the art director responsible for orchestrating Mr. Klein's early campaigns. "That hot, athletic, very physical and sensual man really hadn't been seen before."

Mr. Klein first hired Bruce Weber in 1982 to take the American Olympic pole vaulter Tom Hintnaus to the Greek island of Santorini and photograph him posing in a pair of white briefs against a white wall, his legs spread wide. In doing so, Mr. Klein was marking the beginning of both major changes in the conventions of masculine presentation and an overall democratization of desire.

Some may find it surprising to learn that it was not always commonplace to see buff guys flashing on reality TV or seminaked men with six-pack abs looming

above Midtown. Such people probably do not remember that before Mark Wahlberg became a mediocre film actor, he was a mediocre crotch-grabbing rapper whose Calvin Klein billboard in Times Square presented him as a himbo Colossus of Rhodes.

Imagery that used to see limited exposure, mainly under brown paper wrappers or in the XXX sex stores that defined Manhattan's tenderloin, has migrated without any particular fanfare to the main selling floor of department stores. Or at least that is the impression to be gotten from a visit to those stores as they begin stocking their new fall merchandise on the eve of National Underwear Day, which is Aug. 11.

Anniversaries predicated on boosting consumer spending are often occasions to put forward charmingly empty statistics, and the second National Underwear Day shall be no exception. According to a survey conducted by Freshpair.com, an online retailer of undergarments, 82 percent of women have tried on men's underwear, 31 percent of men have tried on women's and married men change theirs twice as often as single guys.

There are no statistics, really, to quantify our cultural obsession with male genitalia. But if anything can be extrapolated from the recent Internet frenzy surrounding nude scenes from Colin Farrell's new film, "A Home at the End of the World" — apparently excised because the actor's member distracted from the narrative flow — it is that the percentage of people who dwell on these matters is considerable.

"You know, I don't think any of us ever consciously said, 'We're going to display genitals,'" said Bob Mazzoli, who has been the chief creative director of Calvin Klein underwear since the product's inception. "It just seems right for us."

It seems right, too, for Adam Lippes, the former creative director of Oscar de la Renta, who left the company two years ago to establish a designer underwear start-up called Adam + Eve. It seems right for Melody Fuhr, the former design director of Banana Republic, who left that job last year to take over as creative director at 2(x)ist, a wildly popular underwear brand that started as a gay niche product nearly 15 years ago and has become a mainstream phenomenon, with sales of more than \$30 million last year. It seems right for Gregory Sovell, the designer who built 2(x)ist, then sold his stake in the company and recently found himself drawn again by the irresistible lure of sexy underclothes.

"When I started 2(x)ist, the selection of what people were provided was really basic," said Mr. Sovell, whose new company is C-IN2, which sells briefs with extra-low waists, high-cut legs and an adjustable elastic strap in the crotch

designed to do for male genitals more or less what the Wonderbra did for breasts.

Mr. Sovell first understood the bar had been raised on male display four years ago on a trip to Barcelona. The peacock habits of young Catalan men caused him to assume, he said, that the entire male population under 30 was gay.

"They were taking such chances with with fashion, with what they were wearing, with showing off how much they were working out that I just assumed. . . ." the designer said. "But then they all had girlfriends with them."

Like so much else in mainstream culture now, a taste for racy undergarments can probably be traced to a certain segment of the gay population. Thongs, bikinis and those curious experiments in crotch engineering were formerly the stock in trade of catalogs like International Male. But the borders of this territory have blurred a lot in recent years, as anyone who has ever heard the name David Beckham can attest.

"Sex display is across the board," Mr. Sovell maintained. "Guys have a lot more confidence in what they're wearing, and they don't worry about what people think."

They care less, apparently, about assumptions regarding their sexual orientation than being able to fill out a pair of low-slung jeans from companies like Diesel and G-Star. "You have to give it all to Calvin Klein," said Mr. Lippes of Adam + Eve. "He raised underwear to another level and added sex."

Mr. Lippes left de la Renta to produce designer underclothes at competitive prices (\$18 is the average for a pair of designer briefs, but some brands cost as much as \$150). Only secondarily did he consider his new brand's sexual component, he said. "I got into it searching for a luxury T-shirt and underwear, meaning beautiful, high-quality construction, not at an insane price point," he said. "Still, today in the underwear market, you have to draw them in and packaging is the first step."

So luxuriant and glossy is the packaging for Adam + Eve, which is sold at 60 specialty retailers and at department stores like Saks Fifth Avenue and Bergdorf Goodman, that a consumer might become seduced by the box's unorthodox oblong and fail to notice the cover models are posed, on certain products, wearing no underpants at all. The photographer chosen by Mr. Lippes to define his brand is Matthias Vriens, a former art director and fashion photographer, who is better known these days for his artfully raunchy gallery work: photographs of naked hustlers and porn stars mostly, often tumescent and wearing women's wigs.



PRESS COVERAGE

If Bruce Weber's was the woozy soft-core aesthetic that once characterized male eroticism in the mainstream marketplace, Mr. Vriens's is the vision likely to define sales-floor Eros today. The Adam + Eve packaging is so ostentatiously tasteful that one almost forgets what's inside. "There's a quality about it, something that turns you on but you can't exactly say what it is," said the former Calvin Klein art director, Mr. Shahid, who also designed the Adam + Eve campaign. "You see these kids on these boxes, and you can't touch them, but you'd die to kiss each one."