

Feature



Bust Support Comes of Age: The Bra in the 1920's and 1930's **Carol Wood**

During the 1920's and 1930's, the bra evolved from a home-made garment into an industry. Here is the inside scoop.

In fashion, underwear and outerwear tag team change, and for the brassiere this is no exception.



Lovely Dance Sets. Sears, Roebuck and Co., Spring and Summertime, 1930. [8]

Women's under-fashion might seem to have evolved from the constraining corset straight to the flapper's bandeau and then the starlet's bullet bra.

Innovations, however, are not sudden events, but rather the result of layers of experiments over time that, if persistent and widespread, result in permanent change.

The history of the bra in the 1920's and 1930's is just such an example. Its

development is exemplified by false starts, dead-end patents, and a lot of sore mammories from as early as the early 19th century. And then there were the successes, the materials that didn't reek, and the items that didn't end up around your neck while you were dancing 'til dawn. Somewhere in between there is a hugely complex story full of intrigue, competition, and some very satisfied customers.

To put the fledgling bra of the '20s and '30s in context: before the bra there was the corset.



Low corsets of the teens do not constrain the bust. [19]

From the mid 19th century, the fit and shape of the corset had been gradually moving down the torso. By 1900, the bust had very little support from the corset itself (right) and by the early teens, breasts were allowed to virtually hang loose (left) constrained only lightly by other garments such as the camisole or a bra-like article.



Woman in "S"-curve corset. La Vida corset ad, 1900. [26]

The bust point was, for the most part, at its natural location, but one could not discern the shape of the bust due to the "unibust" fashion of not separating the breasts. Blouses and bodices with fitted backs but loose-fitting and full fronts further unified the breasts into one single, large mass making every woman look top-heavy.

During the teens, women's fashion was on the cusp of revolutionary change that would forever alter clothing expectations, self-perception, and mobility. Change was afoot in all arenas of life, but most specifically science / technology and societal mores. Some of these changes are depicted well in Anne Fontaine's recent film about fashion designer, Coco Chanel, "Coco Before Chanel" (2009) in which the actress playing Chanel (Audrey Tautou) watches with interest women attempting to move about in constricting corsets. Chanel then proceeds to alter the way women perceive themselves, their possibilities, and others' expectations of them by replacing the corset with loose-fitting, flowing garments.

If only the story of the bra were that simple. Each author who tells the story of the bra attributes its invention and acceptance to one major event, when in fact there were many events, reasons, accidents that had been occurring for decades before "she" wore her first bandeau in the 1920's.

The 1920's Ideal: La Garçonne

"The history of the chest is as much about its suppression as it is about its augmentation" (Koda p 52).

The ideal of the decade was a wisp of a



Clara Bow with her typical pouty lips. 1926. [21]

girl with tiny, if not invisible, breasts under a sheath garment, whether it was a tubular dress or unshaped blouses and sweaters. Clara Bow exemplified this boyish ideal in her films (left).

This narrow silhouette was a natural progression from the narrowing skirt and blouse of the teens (right) with one big surprise for this decade: Legs! Skirts rose from ankles to knees for the first time in memorable history in a matter of months and they were THE sensation. Focus was diverted from the torso down the body to the shapely legs adorned



Long, narrow skirt, 1919. [12]

with fine silk stockings and fabulous footwear. However, clearly not every woman had the legs or the torso to pull off 1920s fashion successfully. So, how did the aspiring *garçonne*, or flapper, achieve "it"?

First, she started with smart



Narrow from shoulders to knees. 1920s silhouette. [5]

corseting. Indeed, there was little attempt at sizing and no attempt at separation or uplift, the prerogative of the next decade.

The corset might have been set aside by some, but was not

underclothing that fit under her new sheath dresses (left). Heading into the 1920's, the bra was not a garment of much support. Its sole purpose was to contain and restrict breast movement (below). It was, however, less bulky than mom's old corset. For the new figure, gone was Victorian waist shaping achieved by



Very simple, just enough to cover, 1925. [7]

One Story of the First Bra

"Here is [Caresse] Crosby's version of the invention of the bra: One night [in 1913], while dressing for a New York debutante ball, the eyelet embroidery of Crosby's corset 'kept peeping through the roses around my bosom.' So Crosby summoned her maid, Marie, and ordered her to fetch two pocket handkerchiefs, some pink ribbon and a sewing basket.

"Caresse Crosby (actually, she was born with the more pedestrian name of Mary Phelps Jacob and reinvented herself as 'Caresse' after she married Harry Crosby) pinned the handkerchiefs together and directed Marie to stitch the pink ribbons along the bottom edge. Crosby tied the two ends of the handkerchiefs behind her into a knot. Marie pulled the pink ribbons taut and fastened them to the knot." (Riordan p64)

Some accounts are of her receiving dozens of orders that very night from admiring ladies, others say she patented the invention and sold it to Warner Corset Company for \$1,500.

discarded altogether. The corset industry was still producing long-line corsets for its older clientele, those more generously endowed, and those less inclined to the modern look. Even though a bust supporter or a form of brassiere had been worn by some from the beginning of the century, it was often in conjunction with a girdle or

even an underbust corset that shaped the waist and hips substantially.

In fact, corselettes (bra-girdle combos) have never stopped being produced. But the corset of the 1920's had morphed from the teens into an implement of smashing the bust and hips, reducing everything to one solid rectangle to conform to fashions of the 1920's.

By the late teens / early 1920's, the fashion industry had achieved what had arduously been sought after. "For a long stretch, from the 1860's to the 1930's, dozens and dozens of inventors struggled with the same momentous design challenge: how to free up the waist to give women the ability to move easily while also supporting and shaping their busts" (Riordan p69).

For those who wanted it, there was at last a liberating undergarment for the torso that could be worn on its own, without girdle if so desired, and a woman could still feel respectable and not frumpy. Not only did the fashions of the time cry out for this freedom of movement at the waist, women's activities did so as well (left).

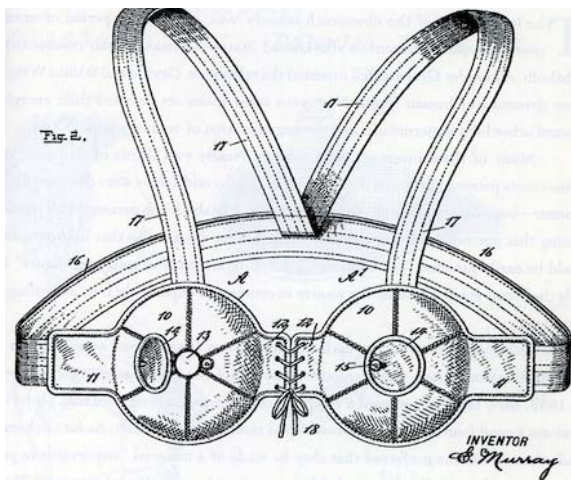


Smartly dressed women in the 1920's. [12]



Pale green 1920's bandeau-style bra. From author's collection, [11]

There were nearly 200 patents for bras and corselettes between 1918 and 1929. None were as bizarre as those from the previous century (below), but all innovative in their way. The biggest advances in the business were the beginning of sizing and selling to a wider clientele than just small-busted young women.



"Breast Shield." patent. Ebenezer Murray, 1899. [18]

The washing machine was not yet established as a household appliance, so most clothes washing was still done by hand. White, therefore, was not as smart as colored undies, so bras were manufactured in soft tones: peach, tea rose, and pale green (left).

As early as 1923, there were experiments in converting the bust flattening bandeau with different types of bust darts and center front pinching to a bandeau with uplift and contouring, especially for larger women. Essye K. Pollack received a patent in 1923 for her bra with a center front band of fabric separating the breasts and Elvira Campa McKeefrey created cups in her 1926-patented bra by a center front shirring cord.



The Spring/Summer 1925 Altman catalog offered lovely bandeaus, even strapless. [1]

Advancements in materials helped the bra industry a great deal. Developed in the late 19th century, rayon (also known as

artificial silk and viscose) was manufactured from 1910, but only used for clothing after the 1920's. It virtually democratized lingerie: the “appearance of luxury was for the first time available to women of modest means” (Fontaine p104).

The first decade of the 20th century saw



Very elaborately decorated “set” in pale pink. [14]

the innovation of dyes that were wash resistant. This meant not only that fabrics could be laundered more easily and more often, but also that women could be more active in their colorful new underthings without fear of colors running when women did.

Impacting corsets as much as bras (at a later stage) was the improvement of steel production in 1858. Henry Bessemer’s process of producing large quantities of steel from pig iron cheaply made underpinning components more affordable. Contributing even more to a cost savings in steel production was the more fuel efficient

Regenerative Furnace invented by Sir Carl Wilhelm Siemens.

With the improvement of postal service delivery in 1914, and parcel post service two years previously, women could now more easily receive mail ordered bras, and magazines inviting readers into the glamorous world of movie stars and the latest Paris fashions. The magazine trade increased tremendously in the 1920's with such popular women’s titles as *The Delineator*, *Vogue*, *Pictorial Review*, *Ladies Home Journal*, etc. (Farrell-Beck p25).

More magazines were being produced and sold due, in part, to the increase in mail service, but also because of a smart innovation that made magazines more affordable: Paid advertising (right). Women all over the country could now mail order sewing patterns or actual garments from magazines as well as from the ubiquitous mail-order catalogs, like Montgomery Ward, Sears, Roebuck and Company, and B. Altman & Company.



Maiden Form ad from 1927. [18]

Employment also changed the way women dressed. During and after World War I, many women were employed in physical

labor jobs, such as manufacturing and farming. Indeed, the rate of employment for women over the age of 10 increased from 14.69% in 1880 to 18.1% in 1910. It decreased in 1920 to 16.5% relative to other years, but in absolute numbers it increased due to the post-war population increase.

Whereas women in 1890 were employed in physical jobs, domestic and personal service, manufacturing and mechanical jobs, by 1920 women had moved to the office and the department store. They held jobs meeting the public and were required to look well-groomed. (Farrell-Beck p27)

With the increase in women working outside the home and decrease in learning to sew, the Woman’s Institute for Domestic Arts & Sciences and other dressmaking schools, took advantage of this by creating a correspondence course for sewing with accompanying fashion magazines from which students could order sewing patterns and materials.

Their *Inspiration* (published 1917-1929) and *Fashion Service* magazines (published 1920-1932) had a rolling



Smart Welly Sisters outfit, 1928. [12]

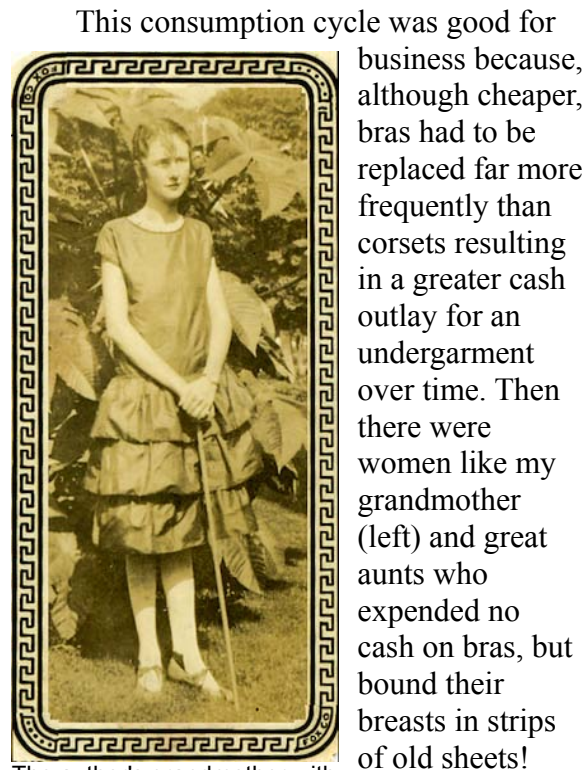
business in providing both their own sewing patterns as well as those from top-rated sewing pattern companies. If she didn't have the money to buy ready-made bras, the fashions of the 1920's made it easy for a woman to make her own.

Not only was access to fashionable clothing easier by mail, retailers were expanding and becoming more conveniently located. The first shopping center opened in Illinois in 1916, the second in Kansas City in 1922. Main stores in these shopping centers opened up satellite stores in outlying areas to reach a greater portion of the population (Farrell-Beck p53). The automobile industry was booming with 7.5 million cars and trucks in the US in 1920, in California that meant 6 people for every car on the road, which meant that women could more easily travel to those stores.

The cost of the bra was also attractive. Mail order was the cheapest option, and you could procure a bra for well under a dollar. The winter 1925 *Pictorial Review Fashion Book* advertised sewing patterns for bras for \$.25 and a bra and bloomers set for \$.35 (the magazine itself cost \$.35). The price of a ready-made mail order bandeau or corselet style bra from the Sears, Roebuck Catalog for \$.29 to \$.60!! In the shops you'd pay several dollars, especially if the garment was semi-custom fit (i.e. pre-made, then fit and altered to your figure). Compare in-store prices to the bulky corsets sold in the Sears Catalog for \$1.29 to \$3.69. A young lady just starting off at an office job could afford

a bra or two which she would also launder more often than the stodgy old corset, especially since the proliferation of wash resistant dyes.

The garment industry was pleased because that cheap rayon they used to produce the bra was less abrasion resistant than silk and the garment. This meant that a bra would wear out much quicker than a sturdy corset that was more costly for producer and consumer.



The author's grandmother with bound bust in her fancy 1920s frock. [11]

reason to switch to a bra... "The New Woman could smoke, drink, vote, and even

This consumption cycle was good for business because, although cheaper, bras had to be replaced far more frequently than corsets resulting in a greater cash outlay for an undergarment over time. Then there were women like my grandmother (left) and great aunts who expended no cash on bras, but bound their breasts in strips of old sheets!

And then there was that OTHER

hold down a job. Moreover, she was sexually independent as never before. And what did the bra provide for the veriest schoolgirl that a corset did not? Easier access during the 'petting parties in the purple dawn.'" (Riordan p91).

The 1920's was the decade of decadence: An era of sex, drugs, and more social freedom than women had ever experienced. Women had received the right to vote in the US in 1920, more women were working outside the home than ever, and life moved fast, fast, fast.

Thanks to Margaret Sanger, the U.S. birth control advocate in the teens and 1920's, who introduced the American woman to the diaphragm in 1916, women had greater access to contraception information than ever before. Prohibition was enacted in 1920, which made alcohol very attractive as the forbidden fruit. Not only did women utilize automobiles to access retailers, they also used it as a "bedroom on wheels" (Riordan p91).



The age of the automobile brought more benefits than previously imagined! [12]

Support in the 1930's: And Then There Were 2



French ad for a 1930's bra, or "soutien-gorge." [24]

"A number of technical innovations in materials took place in the 1930's and 1940's, including man-made fibers and durable elastics. These coincided with the fashion world's impulse to shape the bust. The rapid shift from the bust suppression of the 1920's to the unencumbered and pendant bosom of the 1930's was followed immediately by a dramatic introduction of brassieres with structured support" (Koda p59).

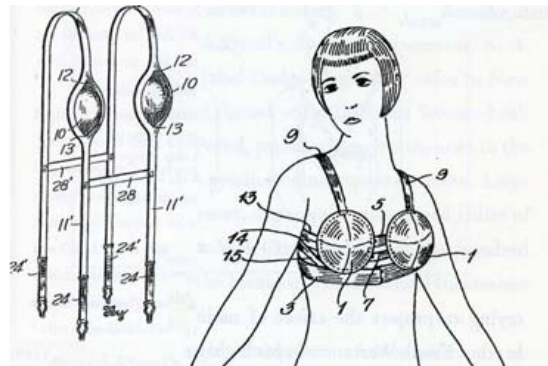
If freeing the waist and flattening the bust was the ideal of the 1920s, uplift and separation of the breasts characterized the 1930's bra. By the end of the 1920's, designers had begun to focus attention more on the upper torso by way of collars, shoulder flanges, cowl drapery, and intricate pleating and tucking at the neck (Farrell-Beck p61).



Frills, flounces, and collars in the '30s! [6]

At the beginning of the decade, hems had dropped significantly drawing attention away from legs and making way for a renewed interest in raising up the bust. As a result of the emphasis on a supported and emphasized bosom, the waist was once again an area of attention. Bias draping ruled the decade, softly cupping every curve of a woman's body. The bra had to keep up with this change in fashion.

Style was dictated not only by Paris and New York designers, but also by the movie stars who wore those designs in film and were plastered all over women's magazines. Although the Hays Code restricted nudity and sexually explicit content from 1934, women's fashions were still quite form-fitting and revealing, making bra design quite the challenge (below).



"Louise Antoinette Sherry's 1922 bra relied on tension between the shoulders and the stockings to hold up the breasts." This design also used in the 1930s. [25]

Despite unemployment in the 1930s fluctuating between 8% and nearly 25% (1933 being the worst,) bra sales were higher than they'd ever been. The 1935

Bra-Cabulary

Bandeau: a type of brassiere that hooks at the back and minimizes shaping

Bosom Friends: padding worn to increase the size of the chest or to add warmth

Brasselette: a strapless, garterless bustier

Bust Bodice: a late 19th century term used to describe a covering for the bust that had straps and was slightly boned in the front and on the sides to give the breasts a mono-bosom effect

Bustier: a bra that extends to the upper waist and often has detachable garters

Cambria: a bra in which the area between the cups is joined by a piece of fabric that makes the bra look like the top of a camisole

Camisette: a bustier designed to hug the figure rather than shape it

Cookies: removable pads placed in the lower portion of cups in padded bras

Corselette: a one-piece garment combining brassiere and girdle

Cuties: a 1950s term for false breasts

Demi-bra: a bra which does not cover the upper part of the breasts; intended for use with low necklines

Falsies: removable bust pads

Long-line bra: a bra that extends to the waist and is often used for figure shaping

Minimizer: a bra that reduces breast size by one cup size

Push-Up Bra: a bra with a low-cut front, removable pads, and underwire support

Singlettes: a bra-chemise combination garment

Soutien-Gorge: French word for "bra"

Wings: material that runs along back and sides of torso for extra support for large breasts

Adapted from Bardey p184-190

Sears, Roebuck sold bras mail order for as low as \$.14 (in context: day dresses sold for \$1 to \$5). Perhaps this was because the purchase of a bra was so much easier on the pocketbook than that of a corset (selling for \$4 to \$6 in the 1935 Sears).



Swing dancers of 1936. [10]

The heyday of dance halls was in the 1930s like at the enormous Savoy Ballroom in New York and the Avalon Ballroom on Catalina Island. Everyone was dancing to the latest big band music, and this was NOT your grandmother's Fox Trot. Social dancing moved away from the already challenging Charleston and Cakewalk, sedate exercise compared to the 1930's Lindy Hop, Swing, Shag, Jitterbug (above), etc. Clothing had to keep up with these activities and that meant garments had to move with the body.

Interesting innovations took the stage as both day and eveningwear required soft,

yet strong support. Manufactured knits were used to create both outer and underwear. Circular knitting machines were able to create girdles without bulky fasteners and even knitted bras were available briefly. With the sophisticated knits, bias cutting technology, and improved elastics of the 1930's there was no end to the form-fitting elasticity available to fashion innovators.

In the 1840's, Charles Goodrich (yes, the tire manufacturer) discovered a process to improve rubber. In its uncured, state, rubber is sticky, brittle when cold, and has little elastic recovery once stretched. Goodrich's vulcanization process turned natural rubber into a "wonder product", revolutionizing more than just the clothing industry (e.g. the diaphragm). And yet, even though rubber can be found in shapewear as early as the teens, not until the 1930's were bras and girdles manufactured with "Lastex." (left).

Lastex ad, French underwear trade magazine, 'Le Corset.' 1930s. [8]

This new product was a rubber extruded into tiny filaments that could be wrapped in cotton, silk, or rayon which meant the wearer would not sweat quite so

much and the product was comfortable on the skin with successful elastic recovery.

Although rayon had been in use for the past decade, a newer, cheaper yet stronger fabric was on the horizon: Nylon. Developed in 1927, but only commercially used in garments ten years later, nylon revolutionized the clothing industry, including the bra. It was first used commercially in 1938 as the bristles in toothbrushes and then most famously as stockings in 1940, but was used in between for bras and other underclothing.

The decade brought a number of lasting design innovations.

Among them was cup sizing. Previous to standardized sizing, bras sometimes had stretchable cups, expandable straps, and limited size differences. In 1932, Formfit Company



devised cups in sizes A, B, C, D and bands 34", 36", 38" etc. (above), and when Warner adopted this system in 1937, it stuck (Farrell-Beck p73). Custom and semi-custom bras could still be had, but

Long-line bra with sized cups from the author's collection. Back lacing with side hooks made it even more adjustable. [11]

standardized sizing made bras much more comfortable and affordable.

Other huge innovations included the 1928 “Kestos Bra”. Londoner Rosamond L. Kennedy of the Kestos Corset Company designed the revolutionary “Kestos” featuring two overlapping triangular cups shaped by small darts, and elastic in the straps which crossed over in the back to button in the front (below).



Kestos had a very strong advertising look. 1938, [4]

The Kestos came to the US in 1930 and became a must-have in women’s wardrobes, one step further than Crosby’s 1913 pinned-together ditty. This led to the inevitable knock-offs (right).



Formfit corselet with Whirlpool stitching on underbust. From the author’s collection. [11]



Scandale made a Kestos knock-off with wrap-around, front buttoning band. [24]

In 1934, Hollywood-Maxwell introduced “Whirlpool stitching” which stabilized the cups (left). These concentric rings of topstitching became the staple of bra design through the 1950s (Farrell-Beck p66).

The last of the decade’s greatest innovations emanated from Ruth M. Kapinas who first experimented with Lastex fabric, then in 1937 eliminated the seam under the cup and used bias fabric to allow the tension of the bust in the cup to do the work. Her creativity resulted in a “comfortable brassiere that adapted to the size and shape of each breast,” thereby optimizing the decade’s lift-and-separate theme. (Farrell-Beck p79)

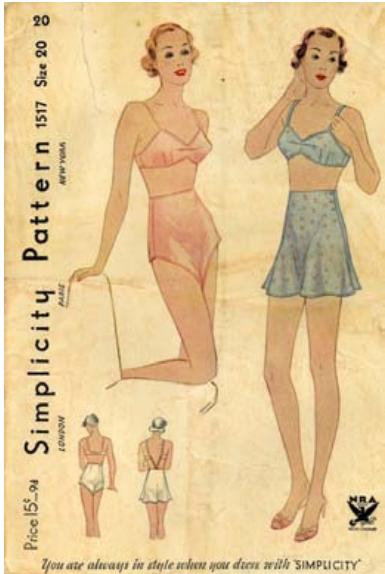
These new designs and modern materials paved the way for the next round of innovations in the 1940’s and 1950’s which, oddly enough, harkened back to the bygone days of corsets and firm torso support.

Recreating the Look: Resources and Suggestions

Wearing period undergarments can enhance the actor’s and re-enactor’s experience. For some silhouettes, it’s absolutely necessary to don appropriate underwear, such as corsets for the Renaissance, bustles for the 1870s, and a bullet bra for the 1950’s. Even the 1920’s flat-chested flapper silhouette requires some work, since today’s bust position – high and enhanced – ruins that look.

If you would like to try your hand at recreating a period bra from the 1920's or 1930's, one alternative for comfortable fit with accurate look is to recreate your favorite bra using the Burgess technique (see bibliography) and modifying the look of that bra based on period patterns or images.

Actual sewing patterns of the time can



Simplicity 1517, size 20.

be procured online, at estate sales, and at flea markets and they are also good resources. Most 1920's and 1930's sewing patterns were available in just one size per envelope and have minimal

instructions. Often the best thing about them is the cover art that shows you how the finished product looks.

Another is to use reference resources and patterns and make your own. The two Countryman and Weiss Hopper books in the bibliography include pattern drafts of period bras and corresponding drawers and slips. Note, however, that the patterns are in the size of the garment on which the pattern is based and that not all patterns have been fit

tested. A compromise is to use a commercial pattern for a bra or bikini top and modify it based on the Countryman and Weiss Hopper patterns or modify it by eye using period images.

Unless you are a slight figure, wearing period bras you make yourself or vintage underwear of the 1920's and 1930's might be a challenge. We are no longer used to feeling the loose-breasted look of those decades, so you might look into buying a new bra that will approximate the look.

For the 1920's, your best bet is to don a sports bra that will achieve the bound bust appearance. The 1930's look is somewhat easier, since separation and uplift are still the order of the day. Such bras may be reproduced, but today's brassiere technology enables bras that can pass as period 1930's bras (from under a blouse or dress) and still feel comfortable and secure.



Pale pink 1930's bra with lovely underbust topstitching in the author's collection. [11.]

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Carol Wood is a professional pattern maker and costumer. She has been researching, recreating and wearing historical garments for decades. Her work has been shown in galleries, appeared on stage and been honored with awards. Carol works as an assistant draper in SF Opera's Costume Shop and designs under her label Fannye Grace.

Fun Facts

Historical Names for “the Bra”

Flapper flattener
 Bust suppressor
 Breast flattener
 Bust extender
 Bust shaper
 Bust bodice
 Breast girdle
 Mammiform breast-protector

Product and Company Names

Configurateur
 Flattrettes
 Boyshform
 Foundettes
 Banjo
 Reducing Corsage
 Flaming Youth Brassiere

What's your size?

Interesting terms for the shape, relative firmness, and size of breasts before standardized sizing:

Pert
 Saggy
 Eggcup
 Teacup
 Coffee cup
 Challenge cup
 Nubbins
 Snubbins
 Droopers
 Super-droopers